
Conversations in Theory

Rrevolutionnaire

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Rrrevolutionnaire:
Conversations in Theory, Vol. 1

Edited by Gregg Lambert and Aaron Levy
Afterword by Catherine Liu

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Selections from the Archives Series

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Julio Grinblatt's photographs (2006) of Slought Foundation in Philadelphia and Maria Chevska's painting *But Could You* (Oil on canvas, 2005) have been reproduced in this publication courtesy of the artists.

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For John Boskovich (1956-2006)
In memoriam

and for Abe and Pat Levy
with love and gratitude

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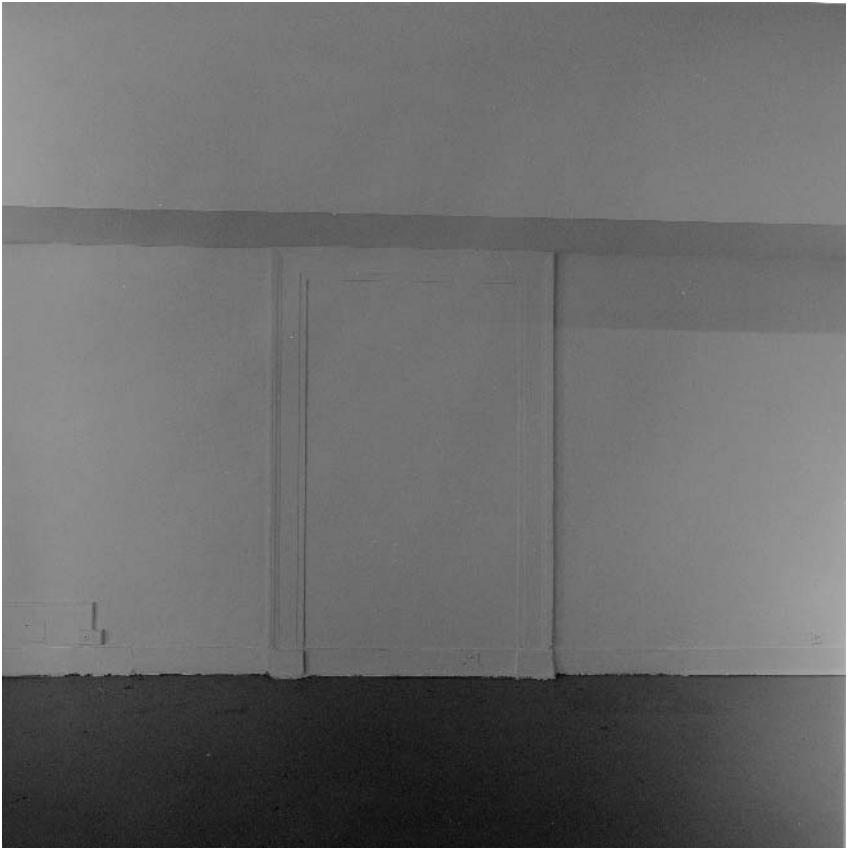
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Introduction to a Conversation
Gregg Lambert and Aaron Levy

But it is the future that is at issue here, and the archive as an irreducible experience of the future. —Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 1995

This publication is derived from conversations that were organized for the “Conversations in Theory” project, a dynamic and participatory event series about contemporary art and life featuring distinguished theorists and cultural critics. The series sought to broadly recast the role of the public intellectual while showcasing innovations in interdisciplinary scholarship. Audiences were invited to assume a critical orientation towards contemporary life, and to consider criticality itself as a source of enjoyment.

One of the first events in this series took place at Slought Foundation in November 2002 and featured Jean-Michel Rabaté and Gregg Lambert in a conversation on the future of Theory. Gregg Lambert’s characterization of current theoretical positions around “the event” as a repetition of the hysterical’s relation to authority, and Jean-Michel Rabaté’s insistence that there is an inherent critical productivity in hysterical questioning provide both the starting point for and the premise of this volume. Playing the role of a hysterical Socrates, Jean-Michel Rabaté argued for the need to question language and its relation to culture, and admonished the audience to think critically and inventively and to “launch processes without worrying where they will end.”

Consequently, the form of the conversation itself as an open-ended and dialogical manner of approaching the subject was maintained in all subsequent

events in the series, and topics were selected that bore a certain currency for both the participants and for prospective audiences. In part out of our desire to question overtly academic forms of authority and dissemination, we organized these conversations such that their implications could unfold over time without depending on a given institution to determine their significance. One of the ways that we made this possible was through multiplying the opportunities for interaction between audience and critic. These include interaction with the online recordings, and with the occasion of this publication, interaction with a larger reading public. It is our hope that the various forms of archiving and presentation introduced by this project—experiential, auditory, and textual—will expand to become structurally *dependent* upon each other and will serve to shape the unfolding ‘subject-in-process’ of the events themselves.

It is our intention that this publication also be understood as a new instantiation of the “Conversations in Theory” series, that is, in the form of an actual installation, or curatorial intervention. This is to say that we are interested in materially transforming these conversations by installing them in the form of a book, an object that bears the concreteness of an archival record of events now transcribed and presented in written form. Therefore, it is important that the reader not immediately perceive this volume through the normal conventions whereby certain forms of knowledge and authority are archived and reproduced, such as the collection of interviews with celebrity theorists, the proceedings of an academic colloquium, or even the technical discussion of a practitioner or an artist. Insofar as these conversations took place in a cultural organization, and not in a university, the institution of the gallery contributed in transforming the nature of the discussion, and often solicited different expectations from participants as well as a different composition of audience (or public) than one usually finds at an academic event. In order to highlight this difference, and to foreground the space of the gallery itself as an archival element, we have commissioned for this volume a series of photographs by Argentinean artist Julio Grinblatt documenting the physical space in which these conversations were staged.

Grinblatt’s photographs remind us of the ways in which the framing of a given practice affects and determines its reception. In these photographs Slought Foundation is always depicted as a series of empty interiors devoid of persons, such that we recognize the potential of any project to literally and metaphorically transform the space and the cultural institution in which it is situated. As these photographs document an existing site of production, the empty interiors also call to mind the many projects that have already been staged at Slought Foundation and the temporality of undertakings that were at one point notable for their immediacy and presence. The photographs not only celebrate the conversations, but also remind us of their ephemerality.

Archives are often arranged in such a way as to privilege concerns about material preservation and disavow considerations such as timeliness and ephemerality. In consequence, an experience of immediacy is often lost as archives come to bear the mark of arbitrary classification. We were attentive to this problematic in designing this volume, and thus it is not accidental that the immanence of each event in this publication to its original date may not be entirely visible to readers. We hope to raise questions about how temporality operates in the archive, and how certain forms of culture are archived and reproduced. Likewise, the series and this publication seek to question our understanding of the curatorial process as a passive staging of existing knowledge.

It is this very passivity towards the “living event” that has, moreover, become the obsessive theme of much recent theoretical scholarship. This is not by accident, nor is it absent from many of the conversations collected here, beginning with Jean-Michel Rabaté’s and Gregg Lambert’s discussion “The Future of Theory?,” and ending with the afterword by Catherine Liu on Theory and/ as the art of listening and thinking out loud. Perhaps because Theory has been understood primarily as a written form (especially following Jacques Derrida’s pronouncement against the “logo-centric” tradition of Western philosophy and his own insistence on the priority of writing over speech) we feel that this may have prejudiced its relation to the particular event it addresses or

invokes, which is always referred to as absent or once removed from the phenomenon of its own existence as living discourse. Thus, the timely engagement of each event in this series with a larger cultural and theoretical phenomenon was actively considered, and it profoundly shaped the direction and tenor of each discussion, as briefly noted in the acknowledgments section at the end of this publication. Avital Ronell's conversation on torture, for instance, took place in the wake of the Abu Ghraib scandal, while Rebecca Comay's conversation about the French Revolution coincided with and immediately followed the 2004 US presidential elections, with the advent of Christian evangelical fundamentalism in America and Muslim fundamentalism abroad. These events highlight a discourse on violence that runs through this series, and is related to the problem of violence in a global setting today. Branka Arsic's conversation on Samuel Beckett's *Film* explores the limits of perception, while Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's conversation on the death of Jacques Derrida explored the politics of mourning. These events contributed to a discourse on finitude and mortality, which is related more generally to the difficulty of proper mourning and memory.

The cover of this volume features a painting entitled "But Could You" by the British artist Maria Chevska (whose installation "Vera's Room" in the Slought Foundation galleries in October 2005 was accompanied by a public seminar by Hélène Cixous). Our use of her painting of the word "Rrevolutionnaire" is another example of the way this book has been conceived, physically and theoretically, as an installation or experiment. Just as Maria Chevska's works on canvas convey a certain performativity and rhetorical playfulness, it is our hope that this publication retains the richness and liveliness of the original conversations. The vibrant red lettering that she has scrawled against the black background of the painting suggests the immediacy of a revolutionary politics to come. Here, we seem to be offered a brief glimpse of the spirit of revolutionary upheaval that has so often attracted and eluded the historic avant-garde and been the subject of theoretical fascination. In this way, Chesvka's painting also affords us an opportunity to explore Theory's relationship to revolution and its fascination with cultural transformation. Against those who

would quickly dismiss Theory as a sterile form of inquiry unable to bring change about, it is our hope that this publication prompts a series of questions concerning the precise ways in which Theory is revolutionary and the relation of Theory to history.

In asking after the nature of the event that Theory often seeks to address, "the event" does not necessarily refer to a series of external transformations that Theory has concerned itself with in an exclusive, almost obsessive fashion, as the horizon of its own relation to history. In speaking incessantly of the event, perhaps Theory has been speaking of itself all along: of the inherent limit of its own powers to speak about something that has not yet taken place, of a future date that will make all the calendars obsolete and will cause them to be rewritten anew. And yet, the event in question is perhaps not so grandiose or "world-historical," but rather refers to "a conversation in theory." It refers to a series of conversations that took place on various dates, were recorded, and archived, and now take place again in a new form and before a new set of listeners, participants, and readers. We would like to think that, in this manner, we are following Jean-Michel Rabaté's earlier image of Theory initiating processes without worrying where they will end.



The Future of Theory?

Gregg Lambert

In Conversation with Jean-Michel Rabaté

Gregg Lambert: To begin with I want to recall a line from *Difference and Repetition*, which forecasts a style of philosophy for the future, regarding what Deleuze describes as "a bearded Mona Lisa and a clean shaven Marx." This line returned to me, Jean-Michel, as I read your account in *The Future of Theory*, particularly regarding your description of what you call "an hysterical Hegel." Now, I always thought Marx was the hysterical one in relationship with Hegel, but here you seem to be saying something different. In the book there is a very dominant thesis that Theory constantly risks becoming a little bit hysterical, or that its discourse itself is, in some way, hystericalizing. Can you talk a bit about your use of the term "hysterical" with regard to the discourse of theory?

Jean-Michel Rabaté: I love your question, Gregg. Yes. Let's begin with this image of the bearded Mona Lisa and the clean-shaven Marx. Having just read Williams's biography of Karl Marx—a really wonderful book—I learned that the last photograph of Marx was taken in 1882, while he was in Algiers. Of course, that period, for me, was interesting—Joyce had just been born—and this last photograph shows a bearded Marx, but since he was under the sun of Algeria, had later decided to shave his beard and get a very short haircut, although he was never photographed clean-shaved. This is the last Marx I would like to keep in mind—an unimaginably clean-shaven Marx, balding like Lenin! We have already seen the somewhat comic portrait of Freud shaved, which is as unorthodox as the beardless Marx. And here, of course, Deleuze sends us to the bearded Mona Lisa transformed by Duchamp. If Duchamp, the exemplary artist-philosopher-theoretician of art, could paint Mona Lisa with a mustache

and a beard and a goatee, which he signed L.H.O.O.Q. ("elle a chaud au cul"—there is no need to translate it), it was so he could later reprint the Mona Lisa without a beard, a reproduction of the usual Mona Lisa entitled: "Mona Lisa, Shaved." For me, this could allegorize what Theory does to canonical texts: first, it adds to the portraits of their authors a waggish beard or a funky mustache, then it lets them come out, as it were, "clean and shaven." As I suggested in the book—there will always be a "future of Theory" since "tomorrow you will get a free shave!"

I think that all of this has to do with the latent hysteria contained in Theory. The central question of hysteria in Lacan's account is ultimately something like: "Am I a man or a woman?" Here is one of the questions that Theory should start asking of us. Not just because I'm interested in gender theory, but because one can take Judith Butler, who is emblematic of a certain discourse of gender theory when it tries to go elsewhere, although not necessarily further. When Judith Butler continues writing Theory while denouncing Theory, or pretending that she is beyond Theory—then I see her doing Theory, but "shaved." In other words, to use a musical image, we seem to be always between *Le Nozze de Figaro* and the reprise of the *Figaro* theme ("Se vuol ballare..."), which is curiously heard at the end of Don Giovanni. My idea of the hysterization that Theory engenders takes its cue in Lacan. My starting point is Lacanian, although *The Future of Theory* is not a Lacanian book, strictly speaking. I have been interested in the theory of the "Four discourses" in Lacan, and I was trying to see why Theory, as it has been famously or infamously displayed, or produced, had to face the discourse of the university while, at the same time, never quite being reducible to the discourse of the university.

Since I have started shaving in front of you, I can confess more. Most of this book—it may not be obvious—is autobiographical. When I came to Penn in 1992, the first local star who was mentioned to me was Camille Paglia. I never heard of the name but she was the most famous anti-theoretician living in the United States at that time. One day, an acquaintance suggested that I should invite her to my seminar because she had "kicked Derrida in the ass!" My response was: "Oh really? That might be interesting." Then I heard Camille

Paglia talk a few times and loved the way she kept contradicting herself without any qualms—indeed, it was an hysterical reaction to Theory's hysterizing discourse. She was the living proof that Theory could antagonize or hystericize, thus produce effects that, for better or worse, are similar to those of classical hysteria. This led me back to the discourse of the Surrealists who, in 1928, published a praise of hysteria. My gesture in the opening pages of the book was simply to take passages from this manifesto for hysteria written by Breton and his friends, and whenever the word "hysteria" was used, I replaced it with the word "theory." And it works!

Lambert: I think I remember that Paglia, at the time, published an article where she recommended that we [Americans] have a second Boston Tea Party and throw all the French back into sea.

Rabaté: Yes, so this confirms the autobiographical element here. I like this idea of "importation;" a lot has been written about the French as these "interlopers," like the Greeks were for the Romans. This is what Camille Paglia says, basically. These sophists were invited to American universities because they make more money in the United States, but they pervert everything, and they now need to be sanitized and thrown back.

Lambert: Well, even Derrida had made fun of this desire. I remember a lecture given at Cornell (later published as "The University in the Eyes of its Pupils") where Derrida constantly referred to himself as a "*professeur au large*," which also means as you know, "from the high seas," that is, somebody who's just landed. So, in a sense, he constantly talked about his position in the United States as being equivalent to someone who has just come off the boat, so to speak.

Rabaté: Right, this is indeed what I mean. Before I came to this country, I had worked with Derrida as a student at the *L'Ecole Normale Supérieure*, and it was interesting to compare how in France—maybe this has changed a little now—he was not really a star, even though he was rumored to be very big in America, like you might say "big in Japan." When we heard this, our response was "Oh

really, is he?" And then we might have a coffee or a drink with him, and he'd say, "Oh, these Americans, they exhaust me!" That was the myth: to be a good theoretician, one had to make it big in America.

Lambert: On the subject of imports, the figure of Barthes has always struck me as extremely important, and you devote a whole section to his influence, I think, in order to demonstrate a more subtle genealogy of his work than is often registered in the United States around the distinction between structuralism and post-structuralism. For example, Barthes' earlier work did not find an audience that was exclusively located in universities, and despite the difficulty of the essay "Myth Today" in *Mythologies*, I am often amazed by the staying power of this programmatic little book, which is still taught in secondary schools today, and may even offer—if revised for a more contemporary social and ideological context—an alternative model for the analysis of popular culture than the British version of Cultural Studies. Finally, there is something about the variation of Barthes' project, which cannot be reduced to any simplistic program, which seems to illustrate your understanding of "theory as literature," the title of the last chapter of *The Future of Theory*.

Rabaté: Yes, I agree that I owe a lot to Barthes, although my love for Barthes derives from after having come to the United States. When still in France, I had written on *Camera Lucida* in a number of discussions of the image, but it was the anti-semiotic and phenomenological "later Barthes" I was interested in, while I would never open again these old volumes associated with Structuralism and *Tel Quel*. I remember telling French students that *S/Z* was beautiful, but also totally messy and unusable. It was only after I had started teaching "Theory" in the U.S. that I discovered how important, even necessary, the whole of Barthes' oeuvre was. As you say, his first essays pave the way to a more subtle approach to cultural studies and also to social semiotics. More than that, it is the very sweep and reach of Barthes' claims, the multiple ambitions of a polymorphous intelligence able to work and play everywhere—which did not preclude a series of embarrassing recantations—that provided a model of what Theory should do: be dynamic, launch processes without worrying where they will end, and never be afraid of internal dissensions and contradictions.

Lambert: In the introduction to your book, you give a note, or "caution" as it may be, concerning what you describe as a burgeoning new "consensus," which refers, maybe, to a second stage of this hysterization of Theory we just spoke of. There is, if I could quote you, "a spreading reluctance to 'do' or 'let do' Theory in the university." As I was reading this, I was thinking of the various disparate signs of this new consensus, the most evident of which (for me) has been the gradual acceptance of a certain kind of historical narrative of Theory itself, in which Theory is capitalized, as a sort of "High Theory" (like in "High Modernism," or "High Baroque"), and has been supplanted—for reasons of history, agenda, politics, constituency—by a kind of acephalic or de-capitalized number of theoretical modes of inquiry (under the heading of "theories of" ... gender, sexuality, identity, race, etc.). I have witnessed two aspects of this myth as it began to become institutionalized at the level of departments and disciplines (especially, more recently, through the influence of professional organizations like the MLA). The first was an explicit charge of "elitism" against the dominant historical modes of theory, mostly European in origin, such as deconstruction, psychoanalysis, and new historicism. (Although, I have to say, in the case of new historicism, I remember a line from one of Stephen Greenblatt's essays, I believe, about coming back from Thailand in first class and reflecting on post-colonial topics over the jingling of ice in his Scotch glass—and I could see why this might spark some charges of elitism). The second can be described as an "anti-systematic" impulse, which could be understood to actually refer to a certain style of Hegelianism that is now being reacted against. How do you understand these traits "elitism" and "system-building" to have become attached to the representation of Theory in the United States?

Rabaté: This is an important question, and this charge is based on a misconception of Theory. Personally, I do not think that Theory is elitist, per se, but rather that it poses the question of knowledge as well as a certain relationship to knowledge. One of the reasons why Theory seemed elitist when it emerged in the seventies in the United States was that, suddenly, it opened a new library. That is, suddenly, literary scholars were more or less forced—

willy-nilly, quickly—to read through the works of Levinas, Heidegger, Bataille, Habermas, and other European philosophers. That was part of the seduction, but it was also what somehow precipitated its downfall, as this has been the rallying point for new critical schools in the university. Besides, what looked "elitist" by comparison to "politics," as we said in the nineties, seems mostly an American problem. It doesn't exist in France, for the simple reason that they don't do "Theory" as we do it here. Of course, many of the thinkers we mentioned have been in contact with French writers, but not "Theory" as such. The name is always used as an Americanism, and Theory is not taught in French universities. You can be a philosopher, you can be a sociologist, or a literary researcher who has philosophical leanings, but it's only now that a certain numbers of terms have been imported back in France. In Europe, it would be different, of course, but in France particularly, Theory is just "literary theory," not the American meaning in which you have philosophy, ethics, psychoanalysis and other such discourses included under the name.

This is why I quoted Judith Butler in the introduction of the book. I was surprised to see how adamant she has been in saying, "No, no. I'm not doing Theory. I'm doing activism. I'm doing politics. Theory is dead." Well, for me, this is a semantic problem. What she does is indeed Theory, since her grounding is clearly in Hegel, in psychoanalytic discourse, gender discourse, Foucault and similar thinkers. I wondered why she would deny what she had been doing for some time. How can she—not really following Camille Paglia (who can be dismissed rather quickly), but employing the same gesture—simply say: "No, Theory is behind me. This is past. This was ten years ago, or a leftover from the sixties and seventies, and now in the nineties we have to be "political"?

True, we are essentially still talking about elite institutions somehow, whether they are called Stanford or Penn, and about the problems associated with tenure and promotion in elite institutions. In this sense, I can accept that Theory has partly an elitist character, but this remains purely sociological. In fact, I don't think that Theory is particularly opaque. It does require that you be conversant with a number of difficult texts, although reading Plato or Kierkegaard is not much more difficult than, say, reading Chaucer, Hopkins, Joyce or

Shakespeare. Fundamentally, Theory opens to another dimension of the library. It opens also to another dimension in your own discourse, and this is where things get complicated. This is not my complete definition of Theory, but it's one aspect of Theory: you are supposed to account for what you do when, for example, you are reading or attempting to be concrete. This is what I often ask of my undergrads: I ask them to choose freely any topic they want, provided they can account for the reasons that made them decide to treat this topic. It looks simple enough, but in fact it's not so easy to justify the choice of discussing a poster or a film. It is not easy if you want this choice to be relevant and to keep a connection with why you are a student, or why you want to do this and not something else, and so on. There is an added level of discursive responsibility brought in by Theory.

Lambert: Current "anti-theoretical" positions have charged Theory with "missing the real," and are implicitly described in your argument as stemming from hystericalizing discourse. In the case of the substitution of the term "politics" for "theory," as in the example of Butler, who you cite, there is an implicit assertion that Theory becomes more concrete, or is suddenly restored to the real (which, interestingly enough, is given the status of "a missing object"), only when Theory takes on an overtly political subject of agency. In response, you write, "The post-Romantic yearning of an unattainable mother construed as more real or more alive has never sounded so true as when dealing with the subject of Theory." Overall, many of the arguments, as well as a certain amount of irony that is detectable in your account of the historical modes of the debates around Theory, seem to be predicated on this thesis that the status of Theory concerns a "missing" relation to truth. It seems that almost all positions against Theory today are those in which truth is said to be either missing or elided in the kind of knowledge that Theory produces; hence the charges of its being ahistorical, apolitical, and partial (or Eurocentric), so that some aspect of the subject's own agency is necessary in order to re-establish access to this register of truth. Can you comment on this?

Rabaté: Yes, this point is very important, if not crucial, and it is this idea that Camille Paglia and others conveyed in the early nineties. Indeed, the very

connotations of the word "Theory" seem to lead you astray; that is to say, if you're in Theory, then you're in the realm of ideas and you're not dealing with the real world. Consequently, a shift has been observed in literary theory from deconstruction, post-structuralism and psychoanalytic theories to neo-Marxism and new historicism, a shift that claimed it heralded a "return to History." The main implication was that Theory had always been essentially ahistorical. What interests me here is that the same has been said about high Modernism. Suddenly Modernism was perceived as both elitist and ahistorical. Authors like Eliot and Pound were quoted as confirming the elitism and ahistoricism of the "movement." At the same time, people were embarrassed because of Eliot's right-wing ideas, of Pound's neo-Fascism. Even if their choices do not help, they tend to suggest that they were closer to history than one would imagine! The political discourse associated with P.C.ism was both rejecting their politics and blaming these political choices on a fundamental absence from history. I shocked many people when I said that I had worked on Pound precisely because he was a Fascist—that this was an excellent opportunity to study and perhaps undo or deconstruct certain aspects of fascism.

What struck me when I came to the University of Pennsylvania in 1992 was the inflation of the term "the politics of..." At that time, all the students I had were working on "the politics of" this or that. I first thought, "Wow, they're really political here!" I should've realized that the phrase was more or less empty. I even engaged in a sort of in-joke about this in the book, when I make fun of people who have "the politics of" in their title. Of course, as I had just recently published a book entitled *James Joyce and the Politics of Egoism*, I was making fun of myself as well. However, this inflation of "the politics of," as in the politics of language, the politics of sexuality, and so on, was often blamed on the French. I would often hear, "But you taught us that everything is political; therefore, everything now has to be politicized." This also led to the idea—which is very Romantic in a way—that the *real* Real is just there, a little further... As one of my French students once said, "I renounce, I cannot write a PhD, life is too short." This may be true—it will be, in the long run—but if you are a student engaged in some kind of writing and reading process, one can show to you that

there is a specific "Real" to be dealt with in writing as well. At least I was successful in demonstrating this to him and having him finish a thesis!

The belief in a "reality" leads, nevertheless, to different versions of what determines reality. When I was a student in 1968, "reality" was *nobler*. Many of my friends believed this and acted upon it when they stopped being students and started to work in factories. Some of them would go to demonstrations, and that was it. At least what mattered was that you knew what the real was. However, even if you drop your studies and become a construction worker, you need a theory or at least an account of why you are doing that. Suppose you join a Renault plant with the idea of transforming your factory and co-workers into a revolutionary unit—can you do it? What degree of delusion and false consciousness must you try to avoid?

Lambert: This reminds me of an anecdote in one of the Seminars where Lacan talks, in a very funny passage, about working in Sardinia in summer as a fisherman. It is the little story of petit Jean, who says, "Do you see that tin can floating out there on the waves?" Lacan says, "Yes, I think so," and petit Jean says, "Well, it doesn't see you."

Rabaté: Exactly—I return to this anecdote for a piece published in the *Cambridge Companion to Lacan*. I remember how in 1969 Lacan quoted himself and modified the punch-line of the same anecdote by simply replacing the sardine can with Freud. He added that when he was writing, even if he knew that Freud was not actually looking at him, he could feel the presence of his insistent gaze! This and other factors may explain why, in the early seventies in France, those who tried very hard to be political and had joined leftist groups ended up on Lacanian couches. Lacan was perhaps the only person who had a comprehensive and powerful enough discourse that seemed to speak to the subversive intent of the students and, at the same time, who situated himself elsewhere. This might force us to examine more systematically the function of the master who is always implied in the discourse of hysteria. At that time, however, another model was provided by Foucault, who was rather anti-Marxist and not very Freudian, and who actually taught people a lot about real politics,

for example, when he worked with prisons and prisoners' rights. Foucault once said that he found it was curious that we saw philosophers like Camus and Sartre, who elaborated a generous discourse about ethics, politics, commitment, engagement, while they happened to have done the least during the war; whereas there were also intellectuals like Jean Cavailles and Marc Bloch who ended up in active Resistance groups and paid the price with their lives. Both were executed during the war. Cavailles had invented his set theory and new logico-mathematical objects, and Bloch was a renowned specialist of the Middle Ages; neither really tried to connect their field of expertise with an ethical or political discourse but they enacted their ethical beliefs directly.

Lambert: Because this is partly scripted, we're following the script, but at the same time, this is also supposedly organic, and our conversation has been developing in a way that I thought it would, that is, more and more of our discussion of Theory has been framed by psychoanalytic discourse, particularly that of Lacan, on whom you are an expert. I believe that psychoanalysis in particular may have something important to tell us about this specific problem we have been discussing concerning the subject of Theory in the university. In particular I'm thinking about the status of the university in the famous four discourses that you alluded to earlier, and how that's related to the discourse of hysteria—since I'm guessing that your reading of the four discourses is behind the description of Theory as hysterical and hystericalizing. I wonder if you could clarify this for the benefit of our audience.

Rabaté: This is a difficult moment in Lacan's seminar, but he distinguishes four discourses, one being the discourse of the master, the other the discourse of the academic (*universitaire*), the discourse of the analyst, where he tries to situate himself, and the discourse of hysteria. "Hysteria" is taken in a very broad sense. My main impetus in writing this book was to assert that "Theory comes from, or is like, hysteria." There were immediately people who responded: "Oh, but you are then against Theory!" And I would reply: "On the contrary, I am all for Theory." Inevitably, someone would cry: "Oh, how can you see Theory as positive and call it..."

Lambert: ...call it *petite hysteria*.

Rabaté: Right! But even the grand hysteria of someone like Camille Paglia can be interesting in its own manner. What Lacan is saying is that hysteria—its strange structure—is never satisfied with a neat answer, always asks for more in the name of a certain notion of truth. Therefore, some kind of knowledge is produced. You can only be a good scientist or intellectual when you question absolutely everything, you want to go back to elementals and redefine the terms, not accepting any pat answer you are given. For instance if today we talk about building Europe, a new Europe, how can one account critically for all the good intentions that are deployed and also situate them as an alternative to the American model? Is the notion of "late capitalism" or "post-modern capitalism" that Jameson and others used really useful? Yes and no. What current political system could fall outside the scope of such a term? These are just examples of how a theoretical hystericalization might function. Lacan tried to negotiate this in a productive way with a sort of later Freud-Marxism. The crucial innovation is that he introduces an element which is rarely produced in Marxist discourse—the dimension of enjoyment, of *jouissance*, something that is, I think, fundamental to any discussion of politics today. And in this sense, I think someone like Zizek has managed to make sense of all these strands of critique coming from Lacan and the Neo-Marxists. Deleuze is another, with his critique of ego-capitalism from the point of view of schizophrenia, which is another interesting way of thinking about these issues.

Lambert: I recall a wonderful moment from Lacan's seminar on Ethics, where he describes the character of the intellectual in a manner that, I think, has a particular pertinence for today. He was speaking around the fifties, I believe; certainly it comes from the period of the creation of atomic energy and the atomic bomb as, perhaps, the central problem of *jouissance*. I believe he phrased this problem in terms of whether we would cross this threshold of *jouissance*, that is, whether we would rather extinguish the world than let the other ideological side get a chance to enjoy it. It is in this context that he made a very canny comment—as he usually does in a moment of joking—on the structure of the political, which I think still holds very true today. He said that,

typically, the conservative intellectual, as an individual, could be characterized as what he called a "knav." (At that moment he uses the English notion of knavery, the knave from, in fact, Shakespeare.) But he said that, as a group, conservative intellectuals are in fact a bunch of fools. I think that if you can see this with Bush today, and it's almost a demonstration of this thesis that when you get a bunch of conservatives together, they'll begin acting foolishly. Whereas, you know, that behind every one of them in the group there's a real knave at work—and I'm thinking here of Cheney, probably. But Lacan also said that the problem with the left, and with a certain orthodoxy that is common in the discourse of the left, is that, individually, the leftist critic is often a fool, whereas a group of leftists are often a bunch of knaves. And so, in a certain way—and I'm speaking about this in relationship to all you've been talking about—I find that there is a tendency to suspend a certain register of the truth for a political good, as if the presence of an overtly ideological decision is what guarantees, or in fact validates, the effect of truth at the moment when one lies.

Rabaté: Precisely. And I think this is just as true today as it was then. This is where the academy, as a group of knaves perhaps, is right to refuse to be too foolish. But it looks as if there was a choice; in fact, you are either a knave or a fool in refusing the discourse associated with Theory, or a particularly bad version of postmodern theory in which there is no truth. If everything is constructed, then, everything is deconstructed too easily. This is where a reductive version of Derrida—transforming "there's no 'outside the text'" into "everything is a mere text"—played into the most fundamental and reactionary values of American life. If all that is being said about social discourse is that it is fundamentally constructed, meaning all this is just lies, why not just be ourselves, with all the old individualism coming back and nature as a sort of source and mother. One slips back into a reactionary ideology (Rorty). If this is what American "Theory" inevitably begets, I agree that it's good to refuse it. However, this can only be stated after a series of total distortions. Derrida would immensely complicate such simplistic assertions. This is why I am still close to Derrida, even though I am a little baffled by the theological turn his thinking has taken recently. Although it is true that in an American context, it is necessary to

go back to issues like "God" and the "name of God."

Lambert: I remember even in the seventies and the eighties, during the period when reader response criticism was coming in, I think there was a real American sense of the politicization of theory. But there was a real reaction at the same time, because people began complaining, "Well, what do critics have left to do if we do nothing but act like ethnographers and record the readings that students make of every text?" There was the danger of no transformative relation, or the evacuation of the critical position of knowledge and authority in that moment. In response to the entry of deconstructive criticism, there was also real terror in the idea that there is no truth. I think that both fears were characteristic of the early reception of theoretical discourse, which prompted a misrepresentation that was hysterical. And yet, the positions that followed from this reactionary period took this misreading as a true representation of Theory. What was worse, however, in my view, was that others simply took the first misreading literally; therefore, if there is no truth, and if everything is constructed, then it is all just "strategy."

Rabaté: Yes, the same symptom appeared when it looked as if the main enemy was Plato or Platonism. This was something that struck me as being misguided when I came here to teach. Someone would say, "We do not want to read Plato," and then add: "We are against idealism" or "Derrida teaches that presence is bad." My response was always an "Oh, really?" by which I tried to establish as much distance as presence! Happily, at that time, in a number of discussions with Anglo-American students, Derrida insisted that presence is not bad as such and that it is even the best one can have. Even if we can question the "metaphysics of presence" denounced by Heidegger, it does not follow that we have to demonize presence. Deleuze could be blamed for an early knee-jerk anti-Platonism that would assert: "Platonism is idealism; we are materialists; materialism is good, idealism is bad." Why not, after all? The real problem begins when this is understood to mean: "Let's get out of Platonism as quickly as we can!"

On the other hand, following Lacan, I see Socrates as the figure of the first

hysteric in philosophy. In the Socratic method, if you play the role of Socrates, you have to play the role of the hysteric. "Why do you say that? Do you think that really? What do you mean when you use that word?" This is connected with the psychoanalytic method; in a hypothetical situation you cannot tell people, "Well, you believe, that individualism is 'good'—as good as altruism, say—and that idealism is 'bad,' but you know, you're wrong." From a psychoanalytic perspective, it is important to understand that people can know, but that they don't want to know because there is too much enjoyment in their misinterpretations and misconstructions.

Lambert: I'm going to shift the questions now to another tense and talk a little bit about the past. My genealogy begins much later than yours, from the beginning of the eighties and from another coast—as you say, from elsewhere. I studied at Berkley with the likes of Jean-Luc Nancy, Lacoue-Labarthe, and Avital Ronell. I remember quite clearly from this period the dominance of what could be called the first wave of de Man's students, Ronell among them, who could be said to have established the tone of a distinctly American brand of deconstruction. I look back on this period with a mixture of regret, disdain, and admiration for all the political intrigues, the back-stabbings, and the phantom assassinations. It was like watching a Chinese opera! Perhaps we need—we Americans, that is—someone like Elizabeth Roudinesco to sort out this important historical period for us. In fact, I sometimes think it's the closest we've ever come as a culture to imitating Parisian social life.

What I regret, however, was the sort of somewhat paranoid atmosphere and the heavy-handedness of the guerilla-like tactics that were employed by some of this group to establish the place of Theory in departments and in professional organizations in the 1980's. In my view, part of the backlash that has occurred around the continued place of Theory was conditioned by the air of intimidation that was employed against members of the academy, and you can still see this today when people react with a sense of insecurity in response to someone who does Theory. Perhaps this is part of the implicit charge of elitism, which is that, early on, many people used theoretical discourse as a weapon, as a kind of bludgeon, as if to say, "You're not smart enough to talk to me," or something like

that. Although this period does not play an important role in your book, I wonder if you could relate some of your own experience and perspective of the early to the mid-late eighties.

Rabaté: Right. That's a very important question because I think any school tends to create mannerisms by which you identify with or against. I don't know whether you read this really good and funny book called *Wittgenstein's Poker* which describes Cambridge in the 1930's when all these British scholars had started imitating Wittgenstein's habit of meditating, keeping silent and then suddenly having an illumination manifested by hitting his forehead with a loud, "Ach, Ja!"

Lambert: Yes, I know of a contemporary analytic philosopher who was born in the United States, but after he went to Australia started speaking with a heavy British accent.

Rabaté: Likewise, I remember a time when, if you were a French communist, your grammar would deteriorate because Marchais, the Communist Party leader, would put on a proletarian mask and systematically use wrong subjunctives, bad grammar and so on. Everyone who wished to be thought of as an orthodox Fellow traveler would suddenly speak this terrible French. On their side, the Lacanians had devised a complex Mallarmean syntax and even used a few of their own phrases in imitation of the Master (they would never say "I am alluding to x;" they'd say "*je pointe*" at something.) Indeed, any group will tend to create these signs; and flaunting one's familiarity with Hegel, Nietzsche or Heidegger, this parading of Germanic erudition was the dominant mode by which de Man and his followers asserted their authority.

Lambert: Well, I am fond of the following anecdote, because it describes a de Manian sort of encounter. I was phoned one morning by a graduate student, and during the conversation he asked me what I was doing. And I said, "Well I just spent the morning reading Henry James' 'Figure in the Carpet' and I'm writing on it right now." I usually work pretty quickly. And so, the response from my inquisitor was, "Oh Really? And to think that it took me two years to read

that text." So there was this pregnant moment, and this was typical of the de Manians, it would take years and years for them to finish anything, because the notion of reading was, of course, over-determined in a sense that no one could actually really read something in the morning, and I was a fool for thinking I was really *reading*.

Rabaté: Since you talk about de Man, a lot of what has to do with the hysterization of Theory has rebounded in the endless trial of de Man, a complex issue no doubt, perhaps too complex to go into right now. I'd say simply that I'm not a "de Manian" (it sounds like a bad disease). I like de Man's work in some respects, but in too many of his essays I find at some point a more or less deliberate obfuscation. At any rate, it's not because one has been a Nazi sympathizer as a young man that one's writings should suddenly stop being readable. I have the same attitude facing Heidegger, Céline, and Pound. When I learned that de Man had been an extreme right journalist as a very young man, he became more, not less, interesting. And the American rejection that followed adulation was emblematic of the mistake I was denouncing earlier a propos of Butler. It is similar to the case of Céline, who is obviously one of the greatest French novelists of the last century. True, he turned into a Nazi sympathizer, and even worse, a rabid anti-Semite. But this is a symptom that we should try to understand. Since so much in the twentieth century had to do with fascism, let's address that squarely.

Lambert: Part of this earlier tradition that we're tracing historically was the rise of a very experimental kind of Theory, and I'm thinking of books like Avital Ronell's *Telephone Book*. I suppose it emerged partly in response to Derrida's *Glas* and the period of *Tel Quel*, which was the dominant influence in Paris a decade earlier. But the period I am speaking of was at the height of the Reagan Era, and it's a very odd and kind of interesting truism to say that a more conservative political environment produces a more hysterical leftist environment, at least in a certain sense. One of the things that I was part of in the early eighties was a group called "Radio Free Theory," and this was in Berkeley, where we actually put on a radio show together that starred several people like Ronell and others who have gone on to make a name for

themselves, or to disappear. But we created a radio program that had things like a "schizophrenic weather report" and a radio version of Freud's "The Rat Man." It actually aired on the PBS radio station. But it seemed like anything was possible in this environment, and the more radical and experimental that we became, the more possible it seemed, although I also think that we went way over the line of good taste in the process. But I wonder if you think about that and the period that followed, precisely around the emergence of the revelation of the wartime writings of de Man, that there was a closing down of some of the more surrealist and experimental forms of theoretical work in the United States?

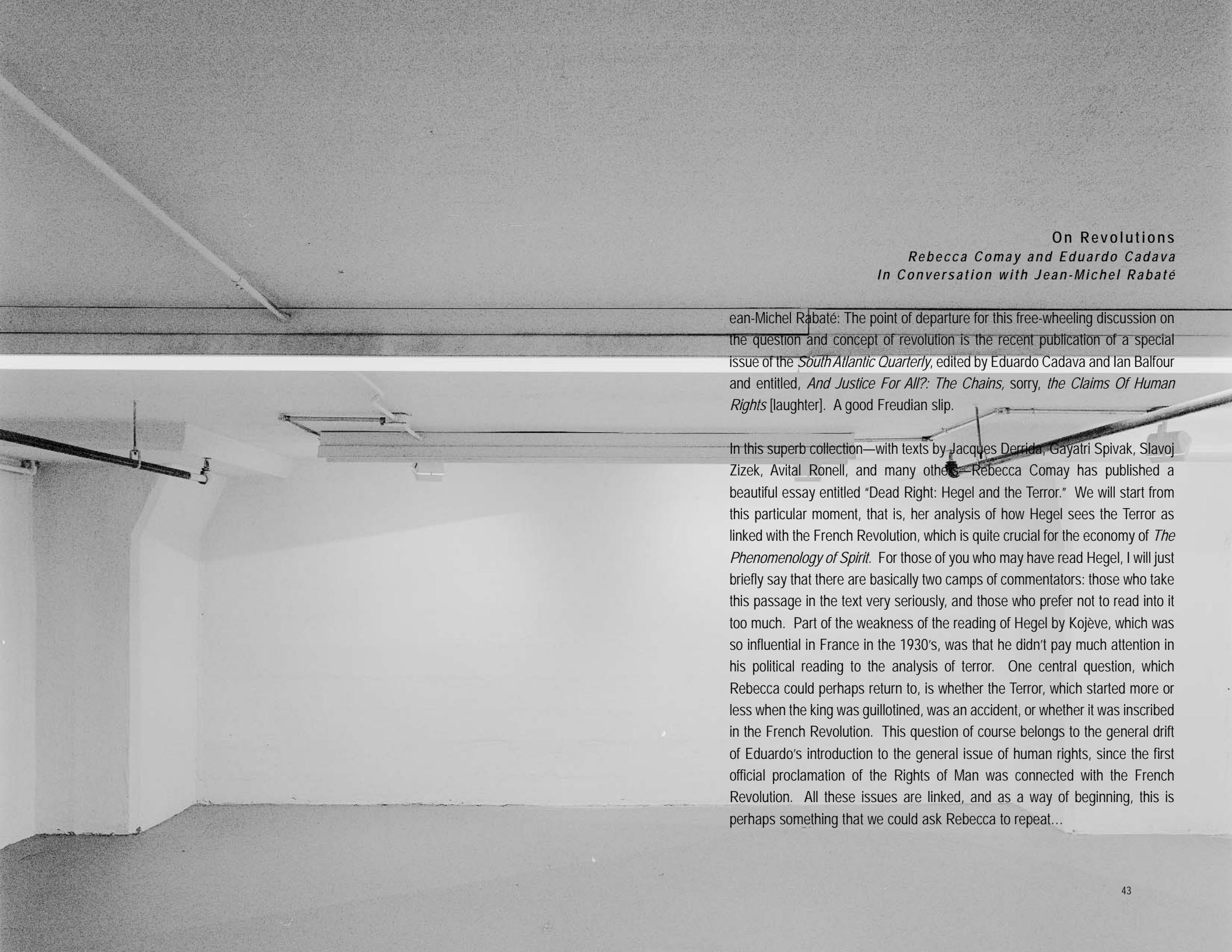
Rabaté: Of course, you could say that Lacan himself, with his very bizarre syntax, was one of the first to perform Theory. It's a good suggestion for us: let's immediately start these Rat Man's talks... But, indeed, the moment of experimentation seems to have passed. And my reaction here is to take precisely a historical perspective and go back to major texts like Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* or texts by Kierkegaard—this is a literature of theory, writing, experimentation, creatively blurring genres and boundaries. Most of the systematic rewrites of Theory of the eighties seem secondary to these. Take Derrida's *Glas*, for instance. I am surprised when I see people are baffled by it and speak of its radically innovative form. Next to *Finnegans Wake*, it seems rather tame. Avant-garde gestures toward subversion presuppose that by subverting language you can also subvert politics and culture as well. We have gone wary of these assimilations, back to a more conservative attitude.

Interestingly, the experimental moment was avoided by de Man. But it is precisely when the de Manian discourse was getting predictable or stereotyped, that Derrida and other American deconstructionists like Ronell started playing with fonts, types and settings, radically opening the page to new assemblages. For me, of course, Theory is not opposed to poetry, and a lot of LANGUAGE poetry comes close to what I call Theory. I heard the same story from many poet friends in France; they would go all the way to California and chat with Californian "witnesses." All they wanted to do was hear anecdotes about Ginsberg or Kerouac, whereas these American writers only wanted to chat about the latest books by Derrida or Deleuze. Then, indeed, there was a time

when one American avant-garde was fascinated by Theory, just when most poets in France had had too much theory and were getting back to more direct experimentation.

Lambert: Well, this has been good. I'm going to now ask one final question, which is basically to rephrase or to repeat to you, in a very Lacanian gesture, the title of your book as a question. So what is the future of Theory? You have already spoken about this in terms of the possibility of an avant-garde, about the varied forms of experimentation that question the level at which we read the text, and that has to continue in some way, but what is the future of such practices?

Rabaté: Well, you know the prophecy of Rabelais who has a character announce: "Tomorrow, the blind will not see and the deaf will not hear." Perhaps this is the future of "Theory" as well: a neat tautology whose function is to keep alive the pleasantly soothing illusion that there is a future. Nevertheless, I do believe that Theory will re-emerge as more visible simply because it is needed. One needs to update our "discourses on method," one needs to keep a discursive take on concepts if one wishes to know what one does as an artist, as a scholar, or as a writer. There is nothing new to this, as this is what Socrates had already been urging fellow Athenians to do. Thus, it's always good to look back in time and see parallels with, say, the age of Apuleius and the age of Dante, the age of Bruno and the age of the Schlegels. Because of the politicization of academic struggles and the recent "Theory Wars," one forgets that there has been a longer history of Theory. One of these days, I will teach a class on Theory using only non-canonical books. No Derrida, no Lacan, no de Man, no Butler, no Bhabha. Just Protagoras, Democritus, Rabelais, Balzac, Bruno, Vico, Coleridge, Carlyle, Borges, and a few others. If it is feasible, this should trigger an awareness that there is yet a much more complex history of Theory to be written. It might lose its capital "T" in the process, but that for now would be a worthwhile future project. But, in the end I would say that Theory is for today, is now, and that may be my final answer.



On Revolutions

Rebecca Comay and Eduardo Cadava
In Conversation with Jean-Michel Rabaté

Jean-Michel Rabaté: The point of departure for this free-wheeling discussion on the question and concept of revolution is the recent publication of a special issue of the *South Atlantic Quarterly*, edited by Eduardo Cadava and Ian Balfour and entitled, *And Justice For All?: The Chains, sorry, the Claims Of Human Rights* [laughter]. A good Freudian slip.

In this superb collection—with texts by Jacques Derrida, Gayatri Spivak, Slavoj Zizek, Avital Ronell, and many others—Rebecca Comay has published a beautiful essay entitled “Dead Right: Hegel and the Terror.” We will start from this particular moment, that is, her analysis of how Hegel sees the Terror as linked with the French Revolution, which is quite crucial for the economy of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. For those of you who may have read Hegel, I will just briefly say that there are basically two camps of commentators: those who take this passage in the text very seriously, and those who prefer not to read into it too much. Part of the weakness of the reading of Hegel by Kojève, which was so influential in France in the 1930’s, was that he didn’t pay much attention in his political reading to the analysis of terror. One central question, which Rebecca could perhaps return to, is whether the Terror, which started more or less when the king was guillotined, was an accident, or whether it was inscribed in the French Revolution. This question of course belongs to the general drift of Eduardo’s introduction to the general issue of human rights, since the first official proclamation of the Rights of Man was connected with the French Revolution. All these issues are linked, and as a way of beginning, this is perhaps something that we could ask Rebecca to repeat...

Rebecca Comay: Maybe we can just start with this very specific question concerning the extent to which revolution and terror are conceptually, or even chronologically, coextensive, as seen from across the river, let us say, from the perspective of Germany. The German cultural sphere at that point felt itself to be inherently immune from revolutionary upheavals, precisely by virtue of having been immunized against revolution by virtue of its own cultural revolution, which it identified with the Protestant Reformation. In other words, Germany felt immune by virtue of having achieved a kind of secularization of faith, that is to say, by having achieved a kind of freedom of conscience, a freedom in faith. The project of enlightenment had already taken root within the cultural sphere and this pre-empted, or made unnecessary, the need for a political material solution. This is a strand we find running throughout the philosophy of the epoch, that is to say, around the turn of the century, as Germany observed this event, which was continually described in theatrical terms as a kind of spectacle, a kind of tragedy, a kind of drama. It was something whose fruits could be appreciated from afar, by virtue of Germany's fundamental position as a witness, and capable of being a witness not simply by virtue of historical, geographical distance, but by virtue of the fact that the event had already been processed, in some way, conceptually.

The issue of the Terror specifically—can you have a revolution without terror, and to what extent does terror define the revolution?—is broached in so many different ways. It's interesting to compare on this precise point Hegel, for example, to Kant, who was writing essentially at the same time, perhaps a few years earlier. In the name of a philosophy of history which is committed to the idea of history being the site or bodily medium of continual moral progress, Kant is confronted with this event which presents itself as a kind of eruption of irrationality. Certainly, in Kant's own terms, the very foundation of the state is overturned, and the continuity of right, of legally sanctioned rule, has been interrupted. This interruption presented by the spectacle of the king's legally sanctioned beheading, in January of 1792, presents a kind of crisis for a philosophy of history which is seeking continuity. As Kant continues to worry about this event, you can see a strenuous effort to reduce the scope of the

terror to mitigate its force in such a way that the revolution can be conceptually appreciated as being compatible with progress, with human rational progress. By siphoning off the terroristic aspects of an ever-decreasing sphere, the sphere of terror becomes more and more minute as Kant's analysis proceeds. It doesn't have to do with the storming of the Bastille, it doesn't have to do with the seizure of power by the National Assembly, and it doesn't have to do with the proclaiming of a revolution itself and with the deposing of the king. The terror doesn't even necessarily get linked conceptually or exhaustively with the killing of the king, at least insofar as this louder event could be understood and therefore put in its place as a kind of eruption of libidinal passion, motivated by fear, revenge, or simple caution, throughout the mitigating circumstances that were abundant. Insofar as the regicide could be understood as a kind of assassination attempt motivated by some kind of pathological interest, it can be comprehended and contained within a progressive, optimistic philosophy of history.

For Kant, the Terror is this uncontainable fissure within the continuum of history, because of the legal sanctioning of the event through the law courts and the trial, and because of the fact that the execution seemed to follow a rule of law as such. The event is marked as essentially terroristic and introduces into the revolution itself its essentially revolutionary force. Until then, revolution can be described as, essentially, *evolution*: one thing leading to another, and contained within a conceptual continuum. But revolution is linked to terror by Kant: evolution turns into revolution at the moment that it becomes terrorizing. What's important is that this eruption is chronologically and conceptually contained and confined to a very small event.

Writing just a few years later, Hegel has quite the opposite approach. Terror is continuous and coextensive with the entire sphere of the revolution, which as such *is* a revolution. You don't even have to wait until the official *Terror* of 1793-1794, when "terror" becomes an explicitly valorized word. For probably the first and only time in history, the word "terror" becomes a term officially sanctioned by the government, and is linked to virtue. But it doesn't begin with the king's

beheading, it doesn't begin with the proclamation of the republic, and it doesn't begin with the storming of the Bastille. It begins when the *États généraux* transformed itself into the National Assembly, thereby constituting itself as a nation with a singular unified voice appropriated for itself from the authority previously invested in this divinely sanctioned king.

What's terroristic about this moment is not simply that it's democracy, or that it's no longer monarchy. What marks this event as terroristic in Hegel's analysis is that, with this identification of sovereignty with a homogeneous corporate nation, a nation defines itself as exhaustive and exclusive, and therefore logically unable to tolerate an outside, including an internal outside, an internal dissension or differentiation. A metaphysics of death is already instantiated, insofar as there is a politicization of an eradication of objectivity, that is, of externality and of difference. The guillotine is its logical culmination and expression, which Hegel analyzes in terms of this radical suppression of individuality. The individual, insofar as it is different from the collectivity, has to be identified as a suspect, and the suspicion has to be acted out literally by way of a killing that is at the same time infinitely particularizing. It identifies the suspect and singles it out from the collectivity as *other than* collective, at once supremely particular and inherently collective. The death is anonymous, it's factory produced, it's mechanical, it's the same for everyone, the bodies can't be buried, they all dissolve in the quicklime, and so on. This is the basic contradiction that Hegel is intent on hunting down and that is fundamental to the revolution as such. There's a tension here between a liberal reading of the revolution, for instance Kant's, which would separate revolution from its precipitation into terror, and a Hegelian reading, which sees the domain of revolution as coextensive with the domain of terror. One of the challenges that a reading of Hegel has to face is: what distinguishes this identification with revolution and terror from the standard conservative readings of Burke? What is the distinction between Hegel's reading and a monarchist reading, which led to the seemingly similar conclusion?

Rabaté: On the way over to Slought, we started to discuss Kant and Benjamin

Constant, and the general issue of the right to lie for humanitarian reasons, which was defended by Constant. For Constant, the point was that one should distinguish between absolute principles that, because of their abstraction—and this runs parallel to the analysis of Hegel—lead to absolute death, and to the death of the absolute master, and what in the name of humanity he sees, for instance, as the right to lie to save somebody, such as a friend. Connected with this idea, both for Constant and the liberals of that time, there was the idea that one should be able to absolutely dissociate 1789 from 1793, that is, that there was no link between state terror and the law. This is to say, any person suspected of being an enemy could be executed.

There's a little anecdote that I found a few years ago in a Paris guide, about an old Duchess, I believe, who was brought to Fouquier-Tinville, the ruthless public accuser. A guard then said: "Well, look, she's very old, she's 70 years old. She's deaf, she's blind, and she doesn't understand anything. You should spare her." Fouquier-Tinville immediately kept on writing the accusation sheet, and added: "The Duchess who for seventy years has been blindly and deafly conspiring against the nation." And she was led to the guillotine. There was a sense that anybody who was called a "suspect" would be caught up in the death machine, and the machinic element, well-embodied by the guillotine, struck all contemporaries. In a way, what you are trying to show is that Hegel, anticipating a Marxian reading, does not distinguish, although differently from Kant, between 1789 and 1793, as if there was a terror inherent to the negativity unleashed by the reign of absolute freedom. Is that something that you would also see leading up to the nineteenth century, and to the Marxian concept of the revolution? Namely, that the revolution must be a bloody act, and that the revolution must imply having heads rolling in the dust?

Eduardo Cadava: I would like to comment on that, but first I would like to return to something that Rebecca said concerning the general question, "Can there be a revolution without terror?", and the difference between Kant and Hegel. What I like about her essay, but also about what she has already suggested in this discussion, has to do with the extent to which Hegel and Kant each respond to

the French Revolution, and in such a way that they come to articulate a philosophy of revolution. They incorporate and encrypt the rhetoric of revolution, but also the force of revolution, within their own writing. And it seems that one of the things that happens, if you take the side of the Hegelian reading of revolution and its relation to terror, is that the story that Hegel wants to tell becomes a story wherein consciousness, the story of consciousness, the moment when consciousness turns back on itself and retrospectively grasps its own progression by confronting death and nothingness, recognizes its own becoming in revolution. I think this repeats what Jean-Michel was saying, namely, that, at this moment, absolute freedom changes into its opposite, and comes to be identified with death and nothingness. At this moment, terror enters into the process by which freedom becomes necessity. Indeed, the terror is always already there. It's behind us, and it's within us. Terror, in fact, becomes the precondition for the emancipatory process. Would you say that this is in line with your argument, Rebecca?

Comay: This is one of the respects in which Hegel's analysis of terror as identical to revolution would be distinct from a conservative or monarchist reading, although they articulate the same identification. As you said, that identification is necessary for Hegel. It is the essential occasion for the emancipation of consciousness as such. And the revolution, not in spite of, but in its terrorizing and self-terrorizing negativity, becomes the essential occasion for consciousness to reflect upon itself and eventually for consciousness to develop a theory of revolution. In Hegel's analysis, not only does the subsequent course of German philosophy get interpreted as a kind of philosophical rendering of revolution, a project of affirming a kind of autonomy in thought which has just been played out on the stage of history. German philosophy also becomes, retroactively, and for the first time, legible *after* the revolution, so that Kant becomes legible as giving the conceptual form of revolution itself. The Copernican revolution, a term which was being used innocuously, suddenly acquires political force as a kind of retroactive response to and inspiration for the revolutionaries who had never met him at the time.

Rabaté: In your article, you try to show that for Hegel, and for those who have meditated on the French Revolution and terror, German thinkers, and maybe people as such, are being inoculated and will avoid the mistake of the French. You use the Freudian terms of mourning and melancholia to oppose a "French" impossibility to mourn, of abandoning a link with death, with a "German" capacity to mourn the loss that is always implied by negativity. This view is, I suppose, for Hegel, based on the idea that the Germans are less naive than the French because they did not feel the need to enact absolute freedom by killing everybody off.

Cadava: As if the French are very brash, and almost act without thinking...

Comay: This is something that Marx will take up and inflect in an entirely different direction. The Germans are operating according to a different clock and a different calendar. On the one hand, there is no revolution now. I mean, it's happening at their gates, but it's not of this time for Germany. And it's not of this time because, on the one hand, Germany has already been through it, it's old hat for Germany since it's been through its reformation several hundred years before. The church has been effectively secularized, such that God doesn't stand any longer as an external figure of dogmatic coercion, nor do the priests. With the internalization of religious authority in conscience, the issue of autonomy has already been worked through. We don't have this literalism whereby churches are either torn down or converted into temples of reason or institutions, and so on. And we don't have to take away people's Christian names and replace them with Roman names. All these rather literal de-Christianization strategies, which were practiced in the French Revolution, are a symptom of an unprocessed relationship to religion. Because this relationship hasn't been worked through and given up, the transcendent and coercive force of religion has not been given up, and it has simply been transferred onto different terrain; this power returns with all its oppressive force.

Germany doesn't "need" the revolution because it's already had it, and it's not going to happen now. By the same token, actual material revolution, or let's just

say a change in social circumstances, can be deferred indefinitely. So, on the one hand, the revolution which is called "the Reformation" has always already happened, and, on the other hand, there's this consciousness of a kind of fundamental transformation of spiritual existence, which Herder and Schlegel both refer to in one or two places as "the other revolution" still to come. This seems to be connected with some kind of avant-garde moment, a transformation of literature which is going to have the same kind of import, and that can be deferred to an ever-receding future, so it's not that the now is not the time of revolution: revolution is either past or future.

With this thought we have this shifting of calendars and clocks, such that we can have philosophical revolution in the place of a material change in circumstances. What's at stake is a compulsive charting of analogies between the moment of philosophy and the moment of revolution. For example, in Heine, who wrote after Hegel, we encounter this identification of Kant's philosophy with the first moment of the revolutions. And, in 1789, we encounter Fichte occupying the place of the convention, that is to say, when terror institutionalized itself. We find Hegel representing this kind of post-Thermidorian consolidation, i.e. Napoleon. And we find Schelling representing the Restoration. He's joking, but not entirely, when all the tropes of philosophy become tropes of politics and vice versa.

Rabaté: For me, one of the most bizarre things of the French Revolution is the return of the abstract religion of the Supreme Being at the height of the Terror. As you suggest, this will trigger the Hegelian analysis of the link between the revolution and the need for a religion of emptiness, culminating in the state-sponsored Cult of the Supreme Being. And, at that very same time, the priests who refused to convert to the State were also executed. This can be linked with Hegel's analysis of Moses in the early theological writings. You mentioned Hegel's earlier texts, in which he accuses Moses of being the first terrorist of the absolute. Moses took his people into the desert and started slaughtering a number of them in the famous story of the Golden Calf, his anger fueled by the possession of the divine laws. And behind Moses, one could also see Kant, at

least for the young Hegel. In a way, he would be attacking Kant, accusing him of being an abstract thinker who posits duty for duty's sake, and therefore is caught up in an opposition between two abstract opposites that will never be reconciled. In today's language, the main issue would be: can one think of revolution without religion? Is it something that you would try to keep apart? If one thinks of oneself as a revolutionary, can one be a revolutionary while avoiding backsliding into a fundamentalism of any sort?

Cadava: People often identify revolution with a certain kind of secularization, as if revolution could only take place through a process of de-Christianization. It's the same question, though, isn't it? Can there be a revolution that would not secularize?

Rabaté: We know that Danton and a few other earlier revolutionaries were beheaded precisely because they were deemed "impious" or irreligious. From a Montagnard point of view, this would send you to the scaffold, as it almost did with the Marquis de Sade. How would you account for the ghost of the old religion, a repressed returning in most revolutions? How do you conceptualize this? It's something we might be more attentive to today, in view of the return of all the many fundamentalisms, at times in the name of a possible revolution. For instance, think of what happened in Iran some 30 years ago.

Cadava: Or even of what we were told in the *New York Times* today: that now, with the Bush victory, the conservative right and its variously aligned religious groups are all declaring that now is the time for revolution. Now is the time to reverse Roe vs. Wade, to allow Scalia or some like-minded judge to direct the Supreme Court, etc. Here the time of revolution, the time for revolution, corresponds to the time of fundamentalism.

Comay: Interestingly, this is a revolution which is fundamentalist in its content, but which seems to need to prop itself up with reference to another fundamentalism, that is to say, Muslim fundamentalism, which is a fundamentalism which cannot present itself as such. The conservative right is

able to mobilize itself only *vis-à-vis* a kind of fanaticism which is on the outside and somewhere else. So there's a fundamental tension within the very appropriation of the idiom of revolution in a supposedly secular society. Its own fundamentalist presuppositions are now rising to the surface, and it can only express itself by way of this massive disavowal of what it's doing by projecting it onto the other.

Rabaté: Can one ask: "can a revolution succeed?" Is it necessarily taken up in this series of Freudian returns that you describe so well? Can revolution be a break with the past, or can it lead us elsewhere?

Comay: Can there be a definitive revolution, a final revolution which is not immediately and logically implicated in the structures of repetition?

Rabaté: No. [laughter]

Comay: Marx analyzes this so eloquently, while seeming to hold onto the possibility of a final revolution that will not be just another doubling of a previous failed revolution.

Cadava: It's true that Marx does talk about the overcoming of revolution, but he's also one of the great analysts of the repetition that belongs to revolution. I think that we could speak here about the history of the modern concept of revolution because, of course, revolution didn't always mean the emergence of something new. The Copernican Revolution, but also the Glorious Revolution, were not meant to simply inaugurate something new, but to return us to, and to restore, a preordained order of some kind that had been corrupted. When Marx analyzes revolution, he talks about the repetition without which revolution could never take place. Deliberately or not, he's also evoking associations that belong to older conceptions of revolution.

Perhaps it's only with the French Revolution that revolution becomes attached to the possibility of the emergence of something new, and also associated with

the aims of freedom. It has to be both new and also aimed toward freedom. Just to remind ourselves of it, the opening of *The Eighteenth Brumaire* is of course one of the great passages on the inevitability of repetition within Marx.

Rabaté: And then, what of the American Revolution?

Cadava: They were all reading the Europeans! [laughter]

This is why Emerson once said that we go to Europe to become Americanized. But to give an example of this structural tie between revolution and repetition, I might remind you of the opening paragraph of Emerson's first book, *Nature*. There, he says: "Our age is retrospective, it builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes." The opening of *Nature* is always read as Emerson's plea that American writers shed off the burden of history and begin to write a literature that would be peculiarly American, which would enact a revolution without precedent. But his appeals for revolution are entirely and explicitly citational: they call for a revolution that is unprecedented, and that will inaugurate something new, in a language of revolution that he inherits from the revolutionary rhetoric of both the American and French Revolutions.

For example, when he writes that "our age is retrospective, it builds the sepulchres of the fathers," he is alluding to Daniel Webster's 1825 speech at the groundbreaking ceremony of the Bunker Hill monument, where Webster claims that "we are among the sepulchres of our fathers." We can begin to read the politics of Emerson's gesture here by noting the changes he effects on the language he inherits: by changing Webster's "our fathers" to "the fathers," he indicts Webster for a certain form of cultural provincialism and for seeking to establish a tradition of authority that would be patriarchal, since, for Emerson, the revolution was a revolution against patriarchy. In other words, Emerson's language both repeats and revises the language he inherits and, in this act of changing language, he believes he can perhaps change much more than

language: he can perhaps change the relations in which we live, he can perhaps effect a revolution. If his language seems insistently repetitive, it is repetitive in order to bring about something singular. To go back to Rebecca's reminder about Marx, Emerson understands, as Marx did, that something unprecedented, something new, something singular, can only emerge through an engagement with what one inherits: only in this tension between the old and the new can one talk about what's possible for the future.

I am always reminded of Gramsci's passage in *The Prison Notebooks*, where he says that "the crisis lies precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born, and, in the interregnum, a variety of morbid symptoms appear." What he's interested in is the way in which, at particular moments, things break along certain lines, in certain directions, rather than others.

But things will never break all by themselves. Kant very often evacuates the content of the French Revolution in order to read the revolution as what he calls a "sign of history." But what is a sign of history, and how do you read a sign of history? How does an event like the French Revolution not only come to encourage us to think about what an event is, but also what history is? To begin to answer these questions, one has to read historically, one has to put an event in relation to other events, language in relation to other language—one has to ask Gramsci's questions, to engage in a reconstruction of all the forces and relations that led up to this moment. To the extent that it didn't fall from the sky, it is linked to a repetitive, and unforeseeably mediated, relational context.

Rabaté: This ties in very well with the discussion we recently had with Dorothea Olkowski, who presented here at Slought Foundation and was talking about the link between catastrophe theory and revolution. She was trying to describe that moment in the system in which something suddenly breaks, collapses, in a purely mathematical way, that is nevertheless connected with the issues we are discussing, like the emergence of a new literature, for instance, or a new technology. And when we speak of the industrial revolution, or technological revolution, I should also mention the exhibition that Aaron Levy just finished

installing at Slought Foundation, which shows the work of Arakawa + Gins. Their work is explicitly undertaken in the name of a certain revolution which proceeds and takes place via a different way of living and building, so as to in theory avoid death, which is another kind of utopia...

Cadava: Yes—theirs is a revolution against death...

Rabaté: This leads me to another question. We were talking earlier about Blanchot's reading of Hegel, and in a number of essays, especially "Literature and the Right to Death," which was written just after World War II, he returns to this analysis of the French Terror. He's trying to take into account this idea of the literary or artistic revolution as something that can create another sense of community, another kind of utopia, which a revolution, at least according to Hegel, can never constitute. Or at least that's what I understood from your analysis. Do you agree with that, Rebecca? A revolution cannot create this kind of community of artists or innovators, somehow...

Comay: Hegel was looking at only what he knew in 1806. He didn't have Blanchot to look at, but he did have the avant-garde writers of his day, which were the Romantics. What he sees and castigates in Romanticism is a kind of literary aesthetic aftermath and the kind of moralism that Kantian philosophy presents. He reads this as a kind of philosophical processing of revolutionary fever. Even though it was written before, it still reads as a processing of what came after. According to Hegel's reading, you have a failed political revolution, which makes a failed moral revolution conceptually legible, which makes necessary an artistic revolution. This founders, however, on precisely the same grounds as the original revolution did itself, by virtue of its aestheticism.

The Romantics tried to create this community of private, isolated individuals, but they fall into precisely the same operations of suspicion as their political predecessors. They are suspicious of everything, they hate the world, they are paranoid, and they look to art to negate everything else. Their artwork suffers the same fate as the revolutionary buildings which crumbled. Their artworks

are never finished, can never consummate themselves, are constantly denied. It's a kind of guillotine logic which Hegel identifies with the aesthetic avant-garde of his day. In his analysis, he blocks any appeal to art as a way of redeeming the failed problems of the revolution. This would mark a great distinction between his reading and later readers such as Blanchot, who would see in the revolution aesthetic possibilities.

Cadava: In terms of Blanchot, I think you're right. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that he thinks of Communism in relation to a community of literature. He is thinking about the activity of writing, and the role of writing, within the project of Communism. But it's clear that this project cannot be aligned either with the idea of Communism or with the idea of literature as we know it—and this even though Blanchot seeks to think the relation between literature and revolution.

If one goes back to Marx, one could argue that literature plays an enormously important role in his work too, and not only in his analysis of economics, politics, and history, but as something that's actually more essential and fundamental. I'll give one example and then say something more. The earliest extant letter we have from Marx is a letter he wrote to his father, and, like Kafka's *Letter to His Father*, he also apologizes to his father for his interest in literature, for his love of literature. He claims that he's arrived at a turning point, a moment of change, possibly a moment of revolution for himself, and that, at such moments, a person becomes lyrical. The letter itself is extremely lyrical, and he says that these moments of change are constituted by a kind of farewell or swan song to what one is presumably leaving behind, but also by the need to write a great new poem. In other words, what is at stake in these moments of transition, in these moments of alteration, and, again, possibly even these moments of revolution, is the need to say farewell to something at the same time as you inaugurate something else. In this sense, the letter is actually describing his farewell to literature: *I'm going to stop writing poems. I'm going to stop writing novels, drama, etc. I'm going to start reading law, politics, history, and economics because the classes I have been taking have, in fact,*

been conflicting with my interests. But he nevertheless expresses his desire to erect a memorial to honor what he is leaving behind. I would argue that the memorial he erects is the rest of his corpus, and that this ongoing act of memorialization is not just legible in the moments when he explicitly uses Balzac to analyze this or that feature of capital, or when he uses *Don Quixote* in *The German Ideology* to analyze the young Hegelians.

Indeed, I would say that he often uses these literary levers even when he's not talking about literature directly. He uses them when he's talking about, or analyzing, the hallucinations and phantasms of capital and money, or the mists of religion—phenomena that we often associate with the literary. Marx sees a very central role for literature in revolution—he even defines revolution as the "poetry of the future"—and in fact one of the arguments that Blanchot makes in his essay is that there can be no revolution without literature. What this means, among other things, is that one must revolutionize what one means by literature. And, for Marx, what makes literature "literature" is that it is never simply itself: it's always already touched by history, politics, and economics. If we can begin to revolutionize our conception of literature, perhaps we can make a case for something literary being essential to revolution.

Rabaté: Perhaps the mistake of a certain avant-garde, and here I am thinking of the tensions in French Surrealism conveyed by their main journal's name *Le Surrealisme au Service de la Révolution* (*Surrealism in the service of the revolution*), is a sort of wishful thinking. At the same time, Breton and his friends had to admit that they couldn't join the French Communist party. Breton, for one, couldn't do the dreary analysis of economics requested by Communist comrades. As we know, Breton left the Communist Party soon after, which led to a big split among the Surrealists. Blanchot is thinking back to that moment when a certain group in France was positizing itself as a sort of avant-garde in the arts and literature, being "in the service" of a revolution that they were hoping to see. But the group couldn't function as a group, and it then became a collection of small sects fighting against one another in the name of the same terrorist tactics and exclusions. Blanchot's way of thinking about this ideal

avant-garde has always been to link it to politics, but without identifying himself with it or its politics. When he became a real activist in 1968, he left his post-war reserve. He measured his interventions in relation to a few well chosen tactical moments—which is not at all the position of the systematically “committed” intellectual that we’ve seen, *ad nauseam*, elsewhere.

Comay: Can you break with the past without turning it into a kind of recent past, relative to which there is some kind of deeper past to which you can refer yourself? Can you break with all of history, or must you break with the history which has a boundary, so that you are always in a position of seeking some kind of precursor? Historians are always worried about why the French Revolutionists were always invoking these classical forms, down to their names and sometimes their clothing and their buildings. Why all these Greek and Latin Republican gestures, certainly up to 1794, when they were all told to change their names back again to Saints’ names? Why look back to the past at a moment when time was thought to begin again? You have the introduction of the year Zero, a completely new system of chronology, and a new system of measurement. Everything is being introduced as some sort of beginning. What is the functioning of this antiquity? Is it because antiquity itself is seen as some sort of inaugural event, and they are trying to recapture the idea of beginningness as such? There is an explicit attempt being made to invoke some sort of primal past not simply as a pedigree, but as a way to legitimate and conceptualize what it means to begin. Can one think of a beginning without referencing or modeling oneself on a previous beginning?

For Marx, Roman costumes are just a symptom of the fundamental anachronism of the French Revolution. They are trying to anachronistically reenact an old form of democracy which is no longer, and which doesn’t fit the modern condition. As everyone knows, democracy in the classical cities of Greece, and of course Rome, was founded on the distinction between slaves and free men, such that the realm of work was completely distinct from the realm of politics. Those who were free to be political didn’t have to work, such that the whole economic productive sphere relied upon those who were by

definition not political. This split between economics or work, and, in Marxist terms, society and politics or the state, was neat and clean in classical antiquity. That’s what gave its democracy the shape it had. When the French invoke Greco-Roman forms, what is essentially happening is that their modernity is being denied. They are acting as if you can separate society and politics, or the domain of work and the domain of political freedom, in an era where the political is founded upon social forms from which it cannot be divorced, and which it has to constantly mask. As such, the very appeal to ancient garb is a kind of ideological cloaking of a class division which can no longer be openly acknowledged. That’s a specific instance of a repetition that can be read in entirely different ways.

Rabaté: Maybe it’s only in the arts, as Adorno suggested, that you can have revolutions, and revolutions that are irrevocable, as it were. Schoenberg is, of course, the example he uses; Schoenberg revolutionized musical language, and, if you go back to a reactionary like Stravinsky, you misunderstand history and you misunderstand the dynamic internal to the medium of the language. Think of someone like Ezra Pound, for example, who became a Fascist because he was looking for a revolution. For a long time he saw Lenin and Mussolini as parallel revolutionaries. Of course, that poses the question of all the reactionary revolutions.

Fascism pretended to be a revolution for a while, until it returned to classical, pseudo-Roman discourses that attempted to set Mussolini on par with Latin Emperors. Here again, and especially throughout the twentieth century, we have constant backsliding into the conservative or the reactionary. One is not obliged to accept Adorno’s historical paradigm. Benjamin and others have famously debated Adorno on this issue of progress. I think that Benjamin is perhaps closer to what we were trying to define here. If there is a revolution, it should perhaps be more along the lines of Jewish teleology and some kind of Messianism in which the totally unexpected should come—but precisely because it’s so unexpected that it hasn’t come yet.

Cadava: And so unexpected that we won't be able to recognize it when it comes.

Rabaté: Following Benjamin and Derrida, if you want to think of revolution as *the* revolution, you need to be on the side of Messianic. Otherwise, and I think this was Benjamin's argument facing Adorno, if you think you are a Marxist why have the revolution as we see it, with insurrections and storming the winter palace, etc., if it's just a matter of progress and letting history follow its course? There are a few letters in which he is quite ironical facing the German proletariat that believes it's revolutionary, when in fact it is not. This has been a long debate in the history of German Socialism and Marxist and Neo-Marxist Reformist Socialism in Germany. But, fundamentally one has to go back to religion, as it were. At least with Benjamin, it's quite crucial to have a Marxism, as he says, that also incorporates theology.

Comay: I am often asked why Hegel and Marx refer more often to the French Revolution than the American Revolution. Why is it that the French Revolution becomes the sign of history, rather than the other one? I don't know, but perhaps it has something to do with the role that theology played or didn't play in these two revolutions.

Rabaté: ...perhaps it is because the principles at stake in the American Revolution differ, since in the *Declaration of Independence* the principles are less abstractly universal? It's a good question. Today we also tend to see terror as coming from outside. What Hegel forces us to see is terror from within. That little shift is an important political debate. Having just come back from France, one sees another perspective on America. There, you see terror on the American side; here, we see terror as always on the outside, and an unthinkable irrational outside at that. It could also be thought from within with a certain kind of rationality. At least, this is something that Hegel suggests very, very strongly.

Cadava: As you suggest, one of the traits that seems to permeate political

debates over terrorism is the slippage that takes place around the word "terror," and not just around the word "terror," but also around the word "terrorist." Who is the terrorist? What is the terrorist? I think that the mobility of this term within contemporary discourse is quite impressive, and one can easily become identified with this term simply by taking *this* particular stance rather than *that* one.

And, of course, once one becomes associated with this term, it becomes very difficult to dissociate oneself from it. There was an advertisement in the *New York Times* about two years ago now, and, as I remember, I initially thought I had misread it. It asked, "When is a terrorist not a terrorist?" And the answer was, "When you are Palestinian." The advertisement was meant to attack the United States press coverage of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict for its presumed bias in favor of Palestine. I did a double take because, as we all know, the conflict is not at all represented in this way in the media. Indeed, we could even say that there is something terroristic about the advertisement itself—and especially in its effort to paint and define an entire cause with one stroke. I mention this because what it demonstrates seems to belong to the lessons we have been talking about tonight and, in particular, in regard to the inevitability of political complicity. It's absolutely inevitable, and this is why it becomes so difficult to differentiate between different political stances, acts, or events. What is at stake is the possibility of differentiating between different degrees of contamination, and this is a difficult task. Nevertheless, unless this work is done, we will only repeat and reinforce—as this advertisement does—the very thing we wish to overcome.

Comay: As you were speaking, I was just thinking that the question of the avant-garde relative to the crowd or, say, the level of the popular, perhaps parallels the political problem of the vanguard. It parallels the problems of Marxism and Leninism with respect to the relationship between the party intellectuals and the people. We find this already in Marx. What is the connection between the intellectuals and what he at one point calls the head and the heart, or the thinkers and the masses? Problems are often

conceptualized in remarkably parallel terms. Even the vocabulary of the vanguard and the avant-garde is the same. This is just an elaboration of your question and the fact that the issue is political from the outset.

Rabaté: I'm always surprised by the use of "crowd," especially as it is translated in Elias Canetti's book *Crowds and Power* (*Masse und Macht*). For me, it's always "mass." And I know I betray my age, that of people who learned by heart the *International*, in which one sings: "*The International / will be all of mankind.*" This presupposes some kind of universality via the masses that is not necessarily there in the word "crowd." In German, *Masse* is the political crowd, as it were. It's slightly different and, I think, presupposed somehow by the French Revolution. You need a crowd, you need a mass, but it will be identified as the entirety, and in terms of universality. For instance, "the Third Estate had been repressed" becomes, "we were nothing and we will be all. We will have to become all." I think there is something of this in the current religious fundamentalism of certain groups that know they are not "all." It is part of their rhetoric to want to become all. In the representations of these masses, in the idea of movement that runs through Eisenstein's films, Fritz Lang's, and so on, what you always see is this emblem of the multitude with all the faces that you cannot recognize and that become, in this way, a synecdoche, which is to say, a part for the whole. Most of the revolutions that we are talking about have this idea of universality as a background, which is why they can also be scary at times. It's part of their constitutive dynamics.

To reiterate, can one have a revolution without a desire for universality? I don't think so. Even an artistic revolution, if anything like that exists, would have to be, in a way, born by the belief that the whole of humankind will follow.

Comay: The term "masses" is of course important and theorized and legitimated by Leftist avant-garde theorists, with Adorno being the prime example. Mass is used generically, as if it's all of humanity. It's a part term used as a total term. What is presented as "the masses" is in fact a class whose limitations are being obfuscated. The discourse of mass and massification, if you will, has to do with

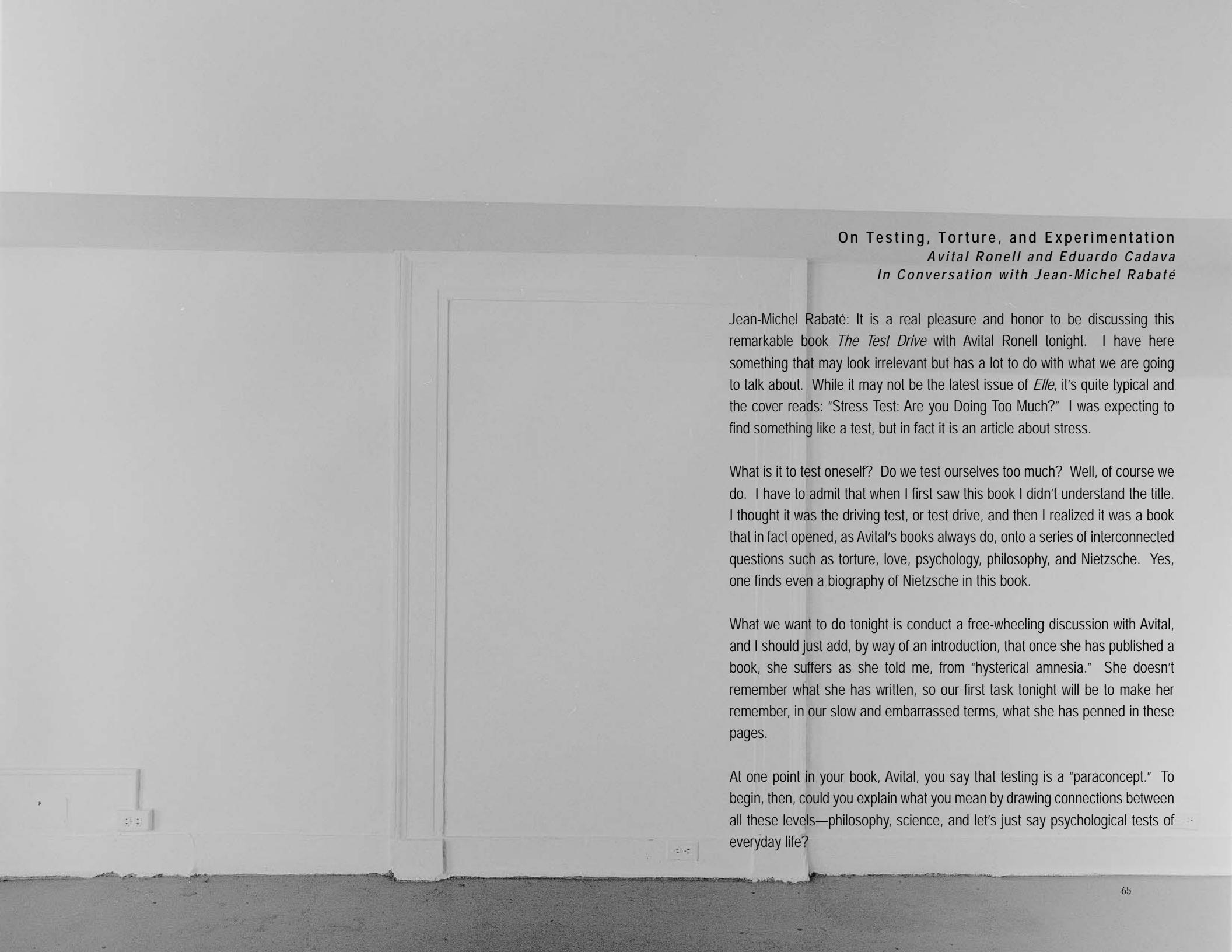
ideologies and an unveiling of class relations and class oppression. As long as class appears as a mass, you can be sure that it's divided. It's divided in its very homogeneity. It's divided and marked by such exclusions.

Marx, for example, specifically invokes the German proletariat as the class which is no class. It is no part, and no partial class. Why? Because it does nothing. It's been eviscerated of all content, and in this lies its supreme and philosophical capacity, a supreme capacity for abstraction, which is to say, universality. It is nothing, and therefore it is the only part which can represent, which can be the perfect synecdoche for the whole, and which can represent the whole entirely.

We move from the almost theological moment of *ex nihilo* creation and zero to everything, which is the task that the German proletariat has to bear. Having nothing, they become everything. The proletariat is representative not of this or that particular humanity, but simply humanity in general. That horizon of totality is by definition an abstract totality, a totality without qualities. Inequalities would differentiate it, since it is the horizon against which any thought of revolution can properly begin to be conceived. It is the metaphysics of an *ex nihilo* creation or beginning.

Rabaté: I think we will conclude there. Thank you, Rebecca.

Cadava: And thank you all for coming.



On Testing, Torture, and Experimentation

Avital Ronell and Eduardo Cadava

In Conversation with Jean-Michel Rabaté

Jean-Michel Rabaté: It is a real pleasure and honor to be discussing this remarkable book *The Test Drive* with Avital Ronell tonight. I have here something that may look irrelevant but has a lot to do with what we are going to talk about. While it may not be the latest issue of *Elle*, it's quite typical and the cover reads: "Stress Test: Are you Doing Too Much?" I was expecting to find something like a test, but in fact it is an article about stress.

What is it to test oneself? Do we test ourselves too much? Well, of course we do. I have to admit that when I first saw this book I didn't understand the title. I thought it was the driving test, or test drive, and then I realized it was a book that in fact opened, as Avital's books always do, onto a series of interconnected questions such as torture, love, psychology, philosophy, and Nietzsche. Yes, one finds even a biography of Nietzsche in this book.

What we want to do tonight is conduct a free-wheeling discussion with Avital, and I should just add, by way of an introduction, that once she has published a book, she suffers as she told me, from "hysterical amnesia." She doesn't remember what she has written, so our first task tonight will be to make her remember, in our slow and embarrassed terms, what she has penned in these pages.

At one point in your book, Avital, you say that testing is a "paraconcept." To begin, then, could you explain what you mean by drawing connections between all these levels—philosophy, science, and let's just say psychological tests of everyday life?

Avital Ronell: Thank you, but when will Eduardo speak?

Rabaté: When he wants!

Eduardo Cadava: You should start, dear.

Ronell: As with so many undeconstructed Q & A sessions, this feels like a pop quiz! However, it would be ungracious of me to leave unmarked my gratitude to you for having read and considered this work. I'd like to address some preliminary remarks to the group that has been constituted around our reflections for having discovered areas ripe for interrogation. First of all, let me just thank all of you sincerely for inviting me, and for taking time to help me present a book that has been somehow disavowed by me, for some reasons that I would be very honored to share with you. So thank you, all of you, for taking time from your work to do some work here with me, even if our time together should also take on the meaning of "working out" or "working through." We will in any case *work out* together, in the sense that I try to develop in terms of a "mathletics"—the conjunction in philosophy of athletics and knowledge. (One thinks, for instance, of diverse "mathletic events" such as wrestling matches in Plato, Rousseau's decathlon in the *Promenades of a Solitary Walker*, his exit-text, the Heideggerian calibration of jumps and leaps in *What is Called Thinking?*, Husserl's jaunts, Derrida's soccer team, and, more institutionally inflected, the attachment of the gymnasium to all sorts of schools of learning, the spaces and sites created for exercising one's mind-body.)

This book is dedicated to Jacques Derrida, and I was tested to my limit in writing it because I have had the privilege of spending the last eight months of his life with him in France doing all kinds of Californian-type healing rituals on the order of visualizations, meditation, etc. At one point, he was in a particularly bad mood, and he didn't want to do any mediation. He said this to me: "You and I have two different views of 'meditation' and its exigencies. 'Meditation' for me is exhausted in Descartes' 'Meditations!'" This was a way of saying, I think, that he didn't want to meditate with me on that day. Looking after him, helping out

his wife, the psychoanalyst Marguerite Derrida, I was also, on another track, living out the end stages of this book. One day the galley proofs arrived. I was eager to show them to Jacques, to show him that he was an integral part of the book's unfolding, maybe to instigate some pleasure, even though he was steadily decathecting the works around and on him. One of the things that I had to contend with in my small and private space of agitation was: well, would I show him the galley proofs when they arrived, or not? Rather, this desire or eagerness had to be stalled and translated in to an ethical idiom: *should* I show him the pages, offer him a sneak preview? I obviously wanted him to see this book. I wanted him to see that I was trying to honor essential parts of his work, and that he was in very significant ways crucial to the trajectory I am trying to establish in *The Test Drive*. He was my training camp and I wanted him to see that I fully acknowledged the unbypassable stature, marked and mapped, that he occupied in this particular work. I wanted him to note, once again, that I did not disavow him as many others had done (this is another story). But I also realized that, if I showed him the galleys, and asked him to view the very last stages before it became a book, then he would know—because we are cabled to each other according to all sorts of paranoid codes and anxious protocols—that I thought he wasn't going to make it. He would not live, or rather survive, to see its appearance. Given American slowdowns in publishing, it would have been normal to offer him—but would it have been an offering or an aggression, a petty little narcissistic *demande* that he might recognize as such and then this might not have been as devastating as all that, but I could not take the risk, no, I could not venture to suggest by idiocy or neglect or self-promoting little-egoness that he would not make it to see the publication of the book, whenever that should happen, dragging along as these things tend to do, I did not want the responsibility of scaring him with a precipitous "gift."

I needed to reflect, to weigh, to stop myself from delivering something that risked functioning only as a mortality timer. I had to convene with myself and say, "Honey, can you take it if he never sees this?" Having decided not to show him the prepublished form of the book, I inflicted upon myself a narcissistic wound—hardly the greatest problem or most searing wound with the continued

struggle and sense of dread I have with his disappearance, but it means that something happened to this book, that it went down with an untouchable history, a piece of ruin that points to his demise and, on an incalculably smaller scale, its own ever diminishing status. As a result of this impossibly fused history of disappearance and abandonment, I'm in a constant state of disavowal of it. Thanks to you, Aaron, and Eduardo, and Jean-Michel, this is the first time I can even look at it. Urged on by a mood of full disclosure, I wanted you to be aware the difficulty that I face this evening, my residual strategies of avoidance and phobic flight, and I wanted above all to thank you for tunneling through this darkness that continues to prevail over my relation to this text. Obviously this is somewhat pathos-filled, and I hope it doesn't make you want to turn away, avert your gaze—I am sensitive to the violence of such disclosures—but it's heartfelt. It's a difficult thing to somehow let this book start to have its own itinerary. I think that can happen here, I can release it from its pained holding pen.

Alright, then. Let me be responsive to what is at hand. "Paraconcept" testing... one, two, three. This is something that is very hard to designate, or delimit, or philosophically even to pin down according to any classical taxonomy or definition or grid that we would immediately recognize or legitimate. And yet, I wanted to work with the figure of testing, its modalities and splits, without reducing it to a theme or a *topos*, nor to assume that it had somehow achieved the stature or status of a concept. When I started examining these questions, "testing"—not even a philosophical question or program—didn't enjoy any kind of, let's say, "musculation" or possibility for firm presentation. I wanted to work it in a certain unexpected way, but according to the way we work with concepts, and pursuing the fairly normal protocols with which we work. I called it a "paraconcept" so that it could simulate a concept, but, somewhere along its path, testing has to drop off the grandiosity of a concept, or let's say, ditch the Kantian explicitness of the conceptual function.

Testing seems to be ubiquitous—in your face, on your case, all over the place, any time you want to test out, or test in, or testify (which is linked to testing) to

any institution or space. What does it mean to be human?—If you consider the definition of the human, or post-human, including such mutant forms as replicants in *Blade Runner*, that archaic film at this point, everything gets determined, and gets its definition, by passing through the crucible of testing in a certain marked way. Tracking its reach and range, I am led to suppose that it's all over the place, as said, and you can't really bypass or evade what I'm calling "the test drive." At the same time, it's flown below philosophical radars even though everyone and everything gets tested and is putting out feelers, probes, testing devices. You can't even go on a date, if you're safe, unless the other has been tested, and so on and so forth. There's a kind of, let's say, high frequency pressure zone into which testing can be inserted, although it hasn't been phrased as a philosophical question before. Husserl stops writing at one point when the word "test" appears. The text just breaks off at this point. I go into this empty space of a Husserlian maneuver that stops itself short, breaking up a speculative moment of some consequence.

Even though it hasn't been phrased as a philosophical question before—despite its many appearances or fleeting energies and furtive drive-by—testing can be situated as the question of the question. In French, "*question*" also means "torture." In this book I'm interested in ways of torturing, or, as we could say, "worrying" the subject: Boring into, probing, testing knowledge, disturbing the body for what it can cough up, and so on. Testing functions not simply as a concept, because it won't stop its disseminative flow with mere results or effects of expertise; something else happens as well. There emerges a series of logical spillovers, new attunements to being, different sorts and scans of ethical anxiety. But I'll stop my disseminative run right here, and let Eduardo take the floor, as it were.

Cadava: I wasn't exactly ready to take it, but I'll take it. But first I also would like to thank all of you for being here, and to thank Aaron and Jean-Michel for inviting us and for making this event possible.

One of the things I would like to accent—and this is something that I thought as

I was listening to you speak—is the way in which testing belongs to the signature of philosophy. It is something that is already part and parcel of the philosophical project: there can be no philosophy without testing, and indeed philosophy can be understood as a mode of testing. When you say that testing is also a means whereby we arrive at assumptions or definitions, one of the things that I registered—and this also is legible throughout your remarkable book—was your insistence that testing works on a double-register. On the one hand, it is there to provide definition, to calculate, to measure the other, and to affirm confidence. But, at the same time, it also increases uncertainty and deprives us of this same confidence. It legitimates and cooperates, but it also de-legitimizes and questions. In other words, testing both asserts and questions, defines and unsettles definition.

Whether you are discussing the trial of experience, as you say, or whether you are talking about tests of loyalty, friendship, love, humanity, faith, convictions, competence, or health, what is clear is that the role and place of tests within our relations with others, but also within the medical, political, philosophical, religious or academic domains, is extensive. In each instance, it seems to me, you insistently and carefully pay attention not only to the relations between testing and torture—to its positive and negative effects—but also to this double register of testing, to the way in which testing tests itself.

Having said this, there are a number of things that I would like to ask you to talk about. The first is your effort, here and elsewhere, to enact and perform within the very movement of your writing what you wish to convey. This is something that I think belongs not just to what makes this book what it is, but also something that belongs to the signature of your work, and something that I've always valued in your work. In the same way that you talk about Nietzsche's *Gay Science* as a test site, as already being a test site, I would like to suggest that your own book, *The Test Drive*, is a kind of test site which tests your own relationship to several different traditions, be they philosophical, scientific, medical, psychological, etc. Perhaps this can be one of the threads that we can follow in our discussion.

And since my antennas are always up for references to Emerson, I wanted to say something about the construction of your book and, in particular, about the way in which so much of it is organized around a reading of Nietzsche's *Gay Science*. As you know, the title *Gay Science* comes from Emerson's essay "Poetry and The Imagination," where he talks about poetry as a "gai science," and Nietzsche takes the epigraph for his own book from Emerson as well. I'll perhaps return to the role and place of literature within this deliberation on testing, but, for now, I would just like to recall your claim that Nietzsche's *Gay Science* presents itself not simply as a book, but also as a test site. Indeed, the book's "experimental disposition" is legible from the very beginning in its multiple prefaces. It has multiple beginnings. It keeps testing how it's going to begin, how it's going to proceed. Your book, *The Test Drive*, also has multiple beginnings, beginning with multiple epigraphs. You begin with epigraphs from Rilke, Hölderlin, and Emerson, and this seems to me to be a way to stage the beginning of the text as itself a kind of test site. And when I was thinking about the beginning of your book, and its relation to Emerson, one of the things that I also recalled is that Emerson's essays on fate and history were Nietzsche's own first test site for his thinking about the concept of the "eternal return." As is well known, Nietzsche scribbles his first notations on this concept in the margins of his copy of Emerson's essays and, in particular, in the margins of "Fate" and "History."

Beyond these brief comments on the structure of your book—and its relation to several other test sites—I would just like to register another front in which Nietzsche registers his relation to Emerson: America. Indeed, as you point out, Nietzsche thought of America itself as one of the privileged test sites. America has always been viewed as a site of experimentation, a site of trial, and so on. As you remind us, immediately after 9/11, George Bush declared that, as a nation, as a people, we were being tested. Here I'm thinking about the thread we might follow from Emerson to Nietzsche, and to America as the test site, and, in particular, in relation to your discussion about the links among democratic institutions, testing, and torture, which seems to me very urgent, important, and relevant today.

Ronell: Thank you Eduardo, you do me great honor. Do you want to say anything or shall I begin?

Rabaté: I think that you...

Ronell: Well, that evasive strategy didn't work!

Rabaté: That was a test...

Ronell: There's something humiliating about actually sensing that one is being read. This excess of light and ventilation follows upon the usual sense of writing in extreme and glacial landscapes of solitude where you say to yourself that you are either following the psychic ideology of a "who cares" while you're doing this kind of work, suffocating in your ever tightening space of thought, or you're wrapped by the certainty that "no one's going to read it anyway." But now this is a kind of call, spectacular and compelling, that one does want to respond to. So, thank you for the time and thoughtfulness that you cast upon the work that I am trying to represent here, remembering that we find ourselves in "The United States of Amnesia" but, more locally, that one has traversed all sorts of oblivions, corridors of forgetfulness and hauled off only distorted memories when it comes to recalling a work, no matter how harrassingly close, and now we ask it to testify.

I'll try to respond to some of the points that Eduardo has made, though they are quite eloquent and far-reaching, deserving of a written response. Clearly, there are several registers, and one involves the possibility, even the necessity, nowadays of taking to task scientific dominance and shaking down the sway of scientificity under which we live. The concern with scientific power is by no means limited to institutions, where scientists routinely get pumped with money, while the so-called humanities suffer a kind of exacerbated depletion. One of my subtitles, or one of my imaginary subtitles for this book, was, "Why Science Amazes Us." It would be foolish to score oneself as being "for" or "against" science—we are located in the epochality of science, it is in and around us—

and Heidegger long ago sent out the warning signal about the scientific straitjacketing of our being; he raised with acute care the question concerning technology and the issue of its attendant peril advisories. Clearly I'm trying to read a preeminent figure in the overflowing domain of scientificity when I pursue something like "testability." I come into contact with the figure of the test in all sorts of scientific protocols, leading me to the edges of what I call "test tube grammatology," scanning certain metaphysical illusions and comforts that science still permits itself to indulge.

There's also a very serious critique of science in this book *à la* Emerson and Nietzsche. I throw open the dossier or the question of whether science can be held responsible for the worlds that it exscribes or is called upon to produce, as Nietzsche demanded, whether it is capable of signing up for galaxies of joy rather than certifying time and again the glacial and deadening killer environments that we associate with scientificity. Husserl felt that science has spread a severe type of objectivist alienation. I explore scientific sites explicitly on the side of death, scarified by depletion and toxicity, some of which are located in so-called third world arsenals.

I'm also very concerned about the scientific sway that Lacan, in his *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, has taught us about: science is always on the horizon, he notes, it's always ready to explode or take us down. Now I'm going to switch on the transvaluating machine, and move toward a celebratory sense of science, noting that there's also that kind of science within the Nietzschean scope, there's genuine need to affirm science as we can see now in struggling with our—the term "our" is used loosely here—American government's anti-scientific velocities against, say, stem-cell research, and the general heightened invasiveness of the state as concerns science. Nietzschean left-wing scientificity, so to speak, even though this gets very complicated and contradictory sounding, insists on joyfulness, gaiety, and power politics that will out-politic, so to speak, mere politics. Nietzsche put science up against something like God, or something like theologies or theocracies, that, as you know, he found highly problematic and ever on the way out. That corpse of God

is still stinking up the whole scene. (I'm quoting Friedrich Nietzsche, acting as transmitter.)

Just imagine the current situation in America. Science is, on the one hand, all too powerful and problematic and institutionally overly endowed. On the other hand, in a certain way, positionally and structurally, it's ineluctably fighting against a certain kind of right-wing Christian attack zone, leading a battle that we need to understand and support more carefully. What Nietzsche said is this: God always put a veto on science; God is, in effect, *terrified* by science. And that's one of the starting engines for what I'm trying to probe here.

Nietzsche and I have been friends forever, you know that. But beyond the closeness to which I here attest, beyond our nightly conversations and turnarounds and breakdowns, there is my effort to respond to his still echoing sign off: "Have I been understood?" Of course there's a theoretical stake in the questions he raises around science. What's the nature of the scientificity to which Nietzsche points us? And how can it be joyous? What does Nietzschean joy mean in the most serious, alert, vigilant, and responsible way of receiving his transmissions? That's where I start pretending I'm Husserl—in the book I speak in the first-person, commenting texts and philosophical behaviors as if I were Husserl. Husserl actually believed that we should sink our teeth in, have our hearts set on, and open the incredible vitality of thought in philosophy and in science. This is the stuff that—without having merely redemptive powers or merely discursive bids on our existence—is supposed to truly turn us on and help us get out of real serious ruts of all sorts of determinations and levels. Husserl asks that our, let's say, "adherences" to these highly philosophical, or theoretically-inflected questions be calibrated on whether they turn you on or get you out of bed in the morning. There's something about this demand in the idea of scientificity that Nietzsche obviously prompts, in a very covert collaboration with Husserl and other philosophers (such as Kant in his writings on cosmopolitanism). Philosophy, in affiliation with science, is supposed to give you a spring, it's supposed to be there for you when you're doing battle with the often hopeless inanities of your contemporaries. It's supposed to keep you

strong, give you healthy choices. In the case at hand, for instance, there's something deeply anti-racist about the test in a way that has allowed me to find an access code, an untried access code, to some of the mappings that all of us collectively have been working on, whether or not it's conscious, whether or not it's passionate or even articulated.

The very switch and shift to a hypothetical relation to the world is radical, as Derrida has shown in his reading of Judaism and Germanicity. When thinking through the innovations of Hermann Cohen in this regard, Derrida puts the "protest" back in Protestantism. I want to put the "test" back in my Protestant background, okay? This necessity has something to do with the challenge thrown at dogmatism by the Reformation and its many activities of translation. Nietzsche's pro-test's have everything to do with the installation of an alternative theology, but in order to be precise and cautious about unfolding these parameters and potentialities here, I would suggest that, ideally, we first would want to circuit through Jean-Luc Nancy's *Declension*, his deconstruction of Christianity. Perhaps we can go there some other time and be content for now with just a few assertions that presuppose his and other essential works, without falling into the trap of assuming that we are supplanting one theology with another or propping up an atheology.

There is a perpetual rupture and a perpetual protest going on within the test. The test initiates for Nietzsche (and others) a provisional logic, which is to say that it undermines itself, it consistently splits off from its own intentions. It's highly risk-taking. It scrambles the very master codes that it installs. It blows up in your face and has to start over. This is why its procedures are often too fast, no doubt, and this is what pushes testing toward the side of the Reformation that we see as a kind of anti-authoritarian operation. Henceforth, everything has to stand the test of time. No one can get away with extreme nonsense of the sort that we've seen with historically destructive and thoroughly aberrant positing. No form of racism—this is Nietzsche's example—will be allowed to stand for more than two minutes if it is put to the test. Racism is the great lie that, when put to the test, falters by necessity and by necessity

disintegrates. It is for the most part an effect of resentful mendaciousness that cannot survive the test to which it *must* be put.

Nietzsche and the Reformation and all sorts of armies of tropological forces share a certain subterranean logic: once you have to put yourself or an alterity or any kind of assumed veracity to the test, you have to be willing to give it up. There's a kind of humiliation that compels me here. I am called to the humiliated. I love those who get battered and tortured and have to get up again and try again. Nietzsche has a very nice image for that. He says that those who are courageous enough to go with the test are those who don't have to bow to his Lordship at the end of the day and say, "Oh, I'm so ashamed. I failed." Instead, there's a new horizon of pride in failure, a kind of fatalism. "You know, my thinking was mistaken. I'm wrong, I rescind." So, one of the "paraconcepts" that I work with is that of rescindability. What does it mean to rescind what you thought might have been the truth or foundation and ground, even a probability? What you thought might have been the truth really changes if you are willing to rescind, or take back, or rewrite, or die and collapse and try again. This is one of Nietzsche's *Untergänge*, his going under. I set aside for the moment whether rescindability is (im)possible, what kind of traces and skid marks remain, and to what effect, after following the collapsing syntax of being which belongs to the regime of testing.

The eternal return is also a test. Dionysus is the God of the test. I'm trying to read, in my paranoid and grandiose way, all of Nietzsche, all of phenomenology, the bulk of empirical evidence that crosses our desks, the subphenomena, psychoanalysis, and so on and so forth. What interests me in the test—you are so right, Eduardo, to point to the double register that prevails in these considerations—is something that corroborates or deprives us of confidence in the world. That kind of movement, always tremulous and uncertain—the wavering indices to which I try to be attentive. I was trying to mark certain moments in the test that de-legitimate and deplete the world of grounding according to the grammar of testing. I am asking the test to work in service of a certain political kick-ass attitude, or *Einstellung*, as Husserl would say.

In *The Test Drive* I try to consider different modulations of testing while venturing into empirical and quotidian precincts of its occurrence. This is typical of what I've been doing lately, which is to say, in shorthand, that I work with what's called "high theory" but also drop into colloquialisms, as when I wonder, what does it mean when someone says: "Try me?" This utterance, "try me!" occurs in all sorts of critical idioms and political situations. As injunction or ploy or opening, it invites the other to test a limit, but it also constitutes a threat, and this dimension of threat interests me. Of course, I'm very concerned with the general risk-taking that testing demands and involves and invites, which is to say, you can lose everything by conceding to the requisites of the test. Then there are other moments and itineraries that I explore, such as testing love or testing friendship. If it is truly a matter of love and friendship, should these categories even be submitted to testing? On the other hand, can testing the other's love be avoided? The test already attests to the failure of love but also marks its passage—consider medieval trials and the fate of the Troubadour—to the other side of love's demand. For Lacan, love is a sort of military service.

What would be an absence of test? Has such a now inverted space been foreclosed for us? And, assuming that testing now permeates all relationality, when does a test take place? According to what cognitive or phenomenological decree? If you know it's a test, then it's not a test: for instance, if God had said to Abraham, "Okay, this is a test of the emergency broadcast system. If this were a real emergency..." Yet in Rousseau, and elsewhere, as with Abraham, you can't know it's a test in the present. The test is present without offering presence; in a certain very vital way it cannot present itself. So there are a lot of complications here. Eduardo, you began by referring us to Emerson's essays. The very word "essay" or the form of the essay is a test, a trial. Indeed, in French, the word for testing or trying something out is *essayer*, as in English: I'd like to essay it. I'd like to try it out. So there's all sorts of, let's say, registers, that I try to work with: the trial, trial run, essay, hypothesis, probability, and so on and so forth. This sketch would indicate the beginning of a response.

Obviously, the question of democracy is greatly at stake for us today. It's very

perverse to have Nietzsche step up to the plate to help us think democracy. But precisely because it's perverse, and there's absolute incompatibility between the well known tonalities of the Nietzschean aristocratic disdain and the call for democracy, Nietzsche has to be called to testify for us. First of all, Nietzsche is always splitting hairs and heirs according to the transvaluations he performs. There's a good democracy somewhere in the Nietzschean critique—the good evaluation of democracy still awaits retrieval—and a bad democracy, which is wimpy, servile, docile, and decadent. This latter form of democracy takes place by the rule of the most idiotic, imbecilic, and puerile types and manifestations, drawing up a political scene that sometimes happens in some places. Then there might be a more powered-up democracy, which can be a test site that not only replicates the crush of death, but which takes risks, and blows up, always at risk of dying off and withering—which is where we find ourselves with our baby and fragile democracy today, as it turns out. It's being tested out right now, but can it survive, and what does it mean that democracy, itself a vital test site, risks collapsing by means of its own velocities and inclinations, by its openness to incessant takeovers?

Nietzsche pushes things to a place or question of survivability. In this case, we are prompted to ask according to the protocols he has set up: Can our democracy survive? For democracy to be at its peak, it has to question itself in this radical and tortured way, all the time, and it can't take itself for granted. It can't even claim to know what it is. In a sense, it doesn't have a substantial form to rely on, but it has this really troubled and anxious relation to its own limits, which are never secured or assured: it is in constant panic, one big panic-attack.

Rabaté: I love what you just said. In order to flatter you, I'll just say that there are only two powerful readings of Nietzsche, and both are very critical. One is Heidegger's reading of Nietzsche, when he tries to show that what Nietzsche believes is the radical collapse of Metaphysics, whereas in fact he embodies the achievement of Metaphysics. And then there is what you've been doing in this book—and I think Eduardo already said that very well—which is to give us

the street-wise Nietzsche, with tattoos, shaved hair, sneakers and torn jeans, an American hood whistling a hard rock tune, or something like that. That really comes alive wonderfully. At the same time, it is also a serious, philosophical book that gives us, as it were, a Husserlian Nietzsche, that is something that is not at all Heideggerian. It is a Nietzsche obsessed with the question of science, and this is something that has never been done before so radically. After all, what did Nietzsche know about the science of his time but a bit of philology, economics, politics, history, etc? What you show is that he's totally relevant for an "American" culture in which science is basically everywhere.

Here is my question for you, though. When he republished *The Birth of Tragedy*, in his famous introduction, which was an attempt at self-criticism, he said that he was trying for the first time to view science through the object of the artist, and art through the object of life. This sentence has often been quoted, and it's a little baffling. I think your book makes sense of it in many ways, by insisting as you just did that provisional solutions can be reworked, and that nothing is absolutely final. This is something that science, after all, brings to us. We revise. As Nietzsche says, "Why should we have to keep our convictions, better to change our convictions once in a while." At the same time, we need to question the ideology of scientism or Positivism as you do. Could you say a little more about this idea, viewing science through the object of the artist?

Ronell: Thank you. You're quite right. And we should point out that Nietzsche often takes himself down, and denounces himself, as in his so-called autobiographical work, or otothanatographical work, as Derrida spells it, because it goes through the ear, spilling and spelling the "otobiography" of Nietzsche. He takes himself down, he rips himself apart, and he is always testing himself and declaring the necessity of his experiments. In German *Versuch* (test) is related to *Versuchung* (temptation). The test and temptation are often merged in Nietzsche. In any case, he's always disrupting himself in a very brave and courageous way and marking himself down. He already does this in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Nietzsche says and installs art in order to prepare and inoculate us for science. Nietzsche claims that, without art, we would all

commit suicide, because art is preparatory to the relentless type of scientific rigor that can really rip us apart. Now, what does that mean, this kind of untimely cohabitation in which science succeeds art in a manner that Nietzsche insists upon, perhaps parodying the successionary myths of Old and New testaments?

Art takes us and pulls us away from the more theologically imprinted necessity of adhering to truth and all sorts of metaphysical comforts. Art already starts administering the drugs we need in order genuinely to put up with science. You've got to build your immune system to take on science, because science is no longer dependent upon such metaphysically laden simplifications as truth or falsity. And this is why Nietzsche also had his night goggles on. He saw what a disaster science and the experimental disposition could become. The experimental disposition in America becomes exemplary in part because America is the land that prompts all sorts of switches and provisional molds. America holds no substance, but ceaselessly mutates, releases and discards.

Nietzsche already predicted that in the future actors would become politicians in America, precisely because in America—and for Nietzsche this is not a put down—different masks and different fictions of self-presentation are always and easily propped up. No one is pinned down to an essence or identitarian substance or pathos. Anyone in America can go under, hide, or come up as a new person or changed being or born-again shadow of a former self. One can be a jack-of-all-trades, multiplying and diversifying one's identity-portfolio, shedding and shredding former poses. There are pre-Socratic plumbers in America, bartenders hooked on Spinoza. He knew it all, but he also knew that you had to get your immune system ready for these kinds of switches that multiply any kind of phenomenal being, where anyone can take on nearly any role and assume any mask. Again, this is not entirely bad news according to Nietzsche, because he wants to disrupt all of those "heavy" assignments of identity and historical gravity that Europe has been stuck with. Walking the walk in America, you can be whatever you want and you can be whomever you want like anyone else you want to be like. Larry Rickels says something to this effect

in his audacious reading of the philosopheme, "California." Returning to Nietzsche's rapid turnovers: what that means is that there is also a scary and altogether terrifying aspect of science—it, too, can turn into a figure of unfettered renewal without being held to any solidifying obligation: science will not be held back by some sort of supramoral responsibility.

Here I am thinking of Jean-Luc Nancy's work on Nietzsche and supramorality, which is to say something that supersedes Kantian morality or the ethical range of a categorical imperative and its conceptual support group. What's going to hold science back? This is a significant and pressing issue, for instance, when considering destructive/redemptive movements in science, such as what has brought the atomic bomb into existence. I don't have to remind you that the Frankenstein monster remains the *imago par excellence* for the kind of runaway scientificity that amounts to a massive killing machine. Science kills. Science is not beholden to this or that imperative (sure, there are restrictive laws and attempts at instituting bans of all kinds)—essentially, according to its constitution, science doesn't need to account for itself. Again, you can evaluate this according to different Nietzschean perspectives: for instance, it's great, or it's liberatory, and it's amazing that we have before us a complex force that can just outrun any archaic hold of a moralistic or Christian sort. But then there's also the truly troubling side of science, which Nietzsche could see, as I was suggesting earlier, with the prosthetic supplement of his night goggles, with his futural night goggles that saw beyond good and evil into the twentieth century and its unprecedented murderous outrages, often committed in complicity with a technological order. The most radical experimental sites were the concentration camps, where anything went. I will limit my language here, as much of my writing has been devoted to traveling this difficult and recalcitrant path. There are still ethical debates about whether one can use the results from those experiments in the camps for current scientific work and elaboration. All sorts of experiments as you know were carried out there. I don't try to disavow that this is part of the scientific drive. Without being able to assimilate or fully understand it, this is a trauma that we share, namely, that science also has a killer instinct, which it inevitably enacts, with lawless voracity.

This instinct won't be held back, and there will be monstrous moments where it just cannot be made to stop itself. These more or less are the questions and dossiers that I open. I don't pretend to bring a supply of answers or cognitive comforters with me. But I do claim that Nietzsche foresaw these prickly imbrications, and that he was already asking about the experimental disposition, what its extreme manifestations are, and the way in which they would become inevitable, disastrous, and irredeemable.

What I'm also quarreling with here, in a sidebar kind of way, are certain theories of the "productive," because one of the downsides of science is that it overestimates production, primes productivity. The other inevitable problem is the way in which testing rescores what we understand by failure, its necessity and vicissitudes. What would be the temporal determination of such demarcations of failure? There's an obvious need for a deconstruction of what constitutes failure, or its polar twin, so-called success. We wouldn't want failure to be the opposite of success anymore. Testing actually makes us re-zone these kinds of questions, because, even if you "test to failure," failure itself turns around and becomes something else, evolving something other than itself. What is failure? The testing injunction makes us ask that very question, and you are absolutely right on the modernist pulse to ask about the proliferation of failure as a key premise for anything that happens or for underlying any "event" that somehow occurs. We wouldn't want to limit failure at all, but one has to seriously think through and reopen all sorts of theoretical considerations before claims can be made on behalf of failing and the creation of new probabilities, the incessant displacement of truth claims.

Rabaté: I think we should open the discussion at this point to the test of dialogue, and your questions, if there are any.

Audience Question

Ronell: One of my questions concerns the subterranean logic of testing and how it affects us even as it constitutes what we still persist in calling a human

being, or determines our relation to the word and the world, and so on and so forth. And I certainly try to differentiate between the different aspects of testing, the different valences and diverging phenomenological printouts. There are different stages of reflection: there's the pharmaceutical notion of testing, there's the drug sense of experimentation, legal testing and testimony, juridical weigh-ins, philosophical avoidance systems, reality-testing, and what Eduardo referred to as literary dimensions, some of which perform allegories of self-constitution and collapse, as well. There's certainly a lot going on and there's so much ground that I am trying to cover. So much so that I wouldn't know if these considerations could be thrown back to the structures of truth and illusion that you evoke, or any kind of binary mirroring. Because something gets cracked and broken and fissured with testing, and I think that's why I am pressing this often atopic topic. Sometimes it's like riding a wild beast in a rodeo—I do get thrown off and have to dust myself off, embarrassed and bruised. Suddenly there's a Zen master, and the question there is focused on the Koan. One question concerns Zen and the art of testing: does Zen withdraw from the West-Test, or are some of those Eastern forms of terrific aesthetic discipline and meditation, warrior poses, alert stillness, body training, not in some way participating in, and redrawing the map of what we think consists in a test? On another register I am also trying to explore what it means "to prove" something, what proving grounds are, where probatory claims come from. How do you supply proof? What is evidence? What constitutes evidence? I enter into legal situations, all of which are supplemented by a theater and indulge a performance aspect, no doubt about it.

Audience Question

There's constant contamination and also a kind of unconscious travel zone, an itinerary of testing from, let's say, the Greeks, where the word "*basanos*" covers both "torture" and "the test." Which is to say, everyone tortures today. I felt it necessary to get back to a history and concept of torture, obviously, since we are now, more admittedly than before, a torturing culture. We always were, but now it's sayable, in some indecent loudspeaker way. Let us say it. Let us talk.

Let us reflect on what the history of torture is, and why it presents itself as indissociable from the test. If torture is related to truth and testing, it's because it's generally thought that a body can be made to speak or to externalize the truth. The container body can be probed, it holds truth, there exist certain codified ways of approaching the body.

Already Aristotle, in his *Rhetoric*, had urged his fellow torturers, "You know, someone might say a falsehood or produce a lie just to have the torture stop." This was a revolution in thought, to say that torture and testing are not necessarily connected to the truth. This is also a question about the very staging of philosophy—about whether or not philosophy is irrevocably linked to the question, and if testing is a form of questioning. I am trying to consider all of the echographies of testing and examination and interrogation in order to understand what kind of contaminations and overflows and vital factors continue to be carried on, even in something as seemingly benign as the oral exam in a university. And the traces of torture, let's admit this without hesitation, that are involved and continue to thrive in ordinary kinds of hazings, making us wonder how they continue to shuttle from *basanos* to the present, and require us to weigh the kind of premium that's placed on test situations. Why are these situations still permitted to determine results and outcomes, even if they are inconclusive or fuzzy in certain discursive formations? Why are we so hooked on the test? A lot of my work has to do with technological addiction, and testing also belongs to the Heideggerian concern with the thrownness (*Geworfenheit*) of technology. The concern with testing affords a way of examining a kind of technological invasion of the subject, if there's a subject.

Audience Question

I'm also working with testing velocities and implications of the sort that don't simply yield results, or that just destroy the world in a certain, steadily pounding way. Let's stay within the result world over which the test holds sway, for this portion of the discussion. In the first phase of the interminable Gulf War, a lot of soldiers came back with "Gulf War Syndrome." There was no testability for

that. In other words, their illness could not be isolated or identified. Certain types of hepatitis haven't yet been identified, so there won't be a test result. More than that, and here's the rub, it won't be seen to exist. Certain things cannot be brought into existence—no validation or corroboration—unless there's already a test for them. That is something that has interested me, especially as it concerns a number of illnesses that get tagged onto hysterics or women or wimpy soldiers who merely can't hack it anymore. When there is not a test for something, for some sort of default or deficiency or failure of the body or the world, it can't be said to exist. Phenomenology deflates. This situation compelled my attention as well: what happens when there are no results because there are no tests? Or what are the implications and consequences of working with a test that disrupts our notion of results? A relation to test and a relation to world depend on certain regimes of testing that I explore.

Audience Question

I certainly do not want to commit phrasal injury against serious scientific pursuit. I'm aware of the generosity of work and the sometimes serious reflection going into all sorts of research. I am in contact with ethically anguished scientists. For my part, I'm asking philosophical questions of a sort that would account for the general devitalization of certain scientific procedures and the problematic relation to the lab, which I try to work on beginning with the work of Hans-Jörg Rheinberger. He's done some very interesting work around protein syntheses and the grammatology of the lab environment, asking, among other things, what gets framed, how scientific *écriture* makes its mark, according to what operations of exclusion and what fictions of nature, and so on and so forth. There's no doubt that there are extremely important innovations today in the sciences. They aren't, however, necessarily the ones that are donating all sorts of paradigms, and that enjoy a certain kind of stability and are the beneficiary of specific kinds of dominion that I study. Do you understand? The more progressive scientists, of which there are a few, are usually a minority and do not necessarily shape agendas or philosophical takedowns.

One of my concerns entails a reflection, from Boyle to the present, on what constitutes the textual dimensions and practices and constructions of a laboratory environment. What is a lab? In *The Test Drive*, I try to trace its evolution from the alchemist's closet to the imputed openness of the research space, which, by the way, made allowances for women to participate very explicitly in the experiments and staging of several unbeatable seventeenth-century texts. One of the very important and moreover democratizing tendencies found in the lab emerges with the demand for repeatability—the requirement of witnessing, and the requirement made for all sorts of consensual determinations. It was quite consciously presented as a political incursion into scientific and pseudo-scientific procedure, an upheaval, to have the lab open up to women and other minorities, and to demand that evidence be shown, results be demonstrated publicly and by report. So I do try to be very careful here in considering this kind of work. In the quick wrap-up required by tonight's structure of presentation, the overlapping and sometimes contiguous fields that I have worked on for many years may come across as reductively scanned and precipitously classified, even closed down as classifiable or recognizable territory, resembling only a rather warped and distorted view of an immense conjunction of disciplines. I hope you don't walk away with the wrong impression. Being trained by Nietzsche, I do not wish to engage a merely reactive or resentful politics of thinking.

But one question, regarding current circumstances, that we have to ask is also: What, in principle and in terms of philosophical inflection, allows W. on the eve of 9/11 to come out and say, "our nation is being tested?" How do you respond to this articulation or disarticulation of a traumatic politics? How does someone trained in deconstructive and rhetorical reading, someone beset by hermeneutic anxiety and hounded by unrelenting critical suspicion, understand the political punch of this collapse of terror into testing? I try to show how the president scrambles the codes of a number of exegetic and heuristic traditions by assimilating the thought of testing into his first response. On the one hand, he takes recourse, with this statement, to the Old Testament, to traditional biblical exegesis where an elected entity is put up for a test. He also means to

convey that, when the President of the United States intones with grandiose tonalities, "We're being tested," this means that the test has already been passed, if not bypassed; it loses its futural inflection, its quality of uncertainty and lack of confidence in the world.

The finality of the test does not correspond to the nature of testing in the way that we need to understand it. In light of the political recruitment of the idiom and practice of test structures, I also have wanted to show the pernicious implications of testing in a rhetorical sense, and its different translocations and dislocations of testing that continue to work the political unconscious. Why does 9/11 remain inscribed as a test for this nation? And how does one respond to the test? What kinds of practices of testing persist if they relapse, regress and depend upon the Old Testament and its twin tower, the New Testament? Of course there are many testing modalities in these texts, and one does not want to be reductive or overly simplistic in recounting them. There's little Job who really changed the nature of the test as it was determined until his story—he remains the first to be explicitly contestatory, in a way that separates his doubting momentum from that of Eve. If there's ever a little big mouth who comes to your office hours with the grievance, "You gave me the wrong grade for my test," that's Job showing up, saying, "wait a minute, I have a beef with you, I contest your authority." There are different kinds of tests with Abraham, with the guy on the cross, and different kinds of tricks, ruses, rules of subterfuge and false testing. I'm perhaps not needed in fields where people are doing work in good faith and strongly and powerfully, often defiantly, in great solitude, and to great consequence. I'm needed, if at all anyone needs anything of an intellectual passion anymore, in places where there's indecency and corruption and the forgetting of a certain filtering of history. Often these breaches occur unconsciously, by means of forgetfulness, or they're prompted by the oblivion of critical neglect. My way of making revolution—of pushing established or assumed horizons, of trying to ensure certain insurrectional tendencies—(I recognize that "revolution" is an old term, old as the sun, and that we're stuck in the rut of paleonymy, ever and again) is to go, in the style or habit of Nietzsche—one of the Nietzsches, the one that I have appropriated and

compassed and befriended—to go to where a cause has proven victorious, is sprawling and heavy with its own sense of importance, has begun to harden or become naturalized and to try, with a sense of philosophical equipmentality and integrity, to pick a fight, as it were, to ask a few questions, maybe by throwing in a bit of impertinence, some attitude, whatever it takes. This is very different from the clamorous approaches or retreats of the great nihilists. Thank you.

Rabaté: Thank you very much. It is now time to let Avital breathe a little. We have some of her recent books here, and you are welcome to chat with her. Again, thank you, Avital, and thank you, Eduardo.



The Future of Feminism

Dorothea Olkowski and Gregg Flaxman

In Conversation with Jean-Michel Rabaté

Gregory Flaxman: Our guest, Dorothea Olkowski, has asked to begin tonight's event by reading a short text which will frame the conversation to follow. Indeed, Jean-Michel and I have prepared a series of questions that will address specific matters in this text and will allow us to segue into the broader issue of feminism and philosophy with which Dorothea's work is concerned. So, without further ado, let's begin.

Dorothea Olkowski: Thank you, Gregory. I asked Jean-Michel, "Well? What do we do?" And he said, "Send me some pages." It turned out to be a five page text, which is about all you can probably stand. Then we will open up to questions. The text is called "Love and One's Own."

From Plato to the present, love and one's own have been discouraged by philosophy. In *The Republic* Plato argues for a city in which all women should be wives in common to all men, and no woman shall live privately with any man. Men and women will live and eat together. No one will have private property and nothing will be one's own. Nonetheless, what cannot be taken away and held common is this so-called inborn necessity to have intercourse with one another. A necessity that Glaucon has quietly reminded Socrates is not mathematical, but erotic, and therefore stronger in persuading and compelling the mass of people than anything mathematical or rigorously dialectical in formulation.

Socrates, who has professed a certain lazy-mindedness toward his

own proposal, passes over the question of what is possible and momentarily permits himself to assume that what he desires is available. And what he desires is to prohibit promiscuity as impious and to make marriage as sacred as possible, recognizing that sacred means beneficial not to one's own but to the City. Therefore, only after their childbearing years will the inhabitants be allowed to indulge in their own pleasures. Only after serving the City will they be free to have intercourse with whomever they wish. Even so, that inhabitants will be able to indulge in their own pleasures seems less and less likely as common feelings of pleasure and pain bind the city together, while those isolated in private feelings dissolve the city's unity.

In the City words like "mine" and "not mine" are particularly problematic. Pain and pleasure must be shared such that whatever happens to a single citizen—good or bad—must be shared with the entire city. Commensurate with the sharing of women and children will be the prohibition on private houses or land or any type of private possessions, since one man calling anything his own, not merely private possessions but also wives and children, would instantiate private pleasures, private pains, private events. Individuals can own nothing but their own body, everything else will be held in common sparing them the dissension that comes with possession, especially the violence and anger which arise from personal disputes over ownership.

The prohibition on one's own promotes a stable and moderate life, Plato concludes, and it is the path to happiness. It is certainly ironic that Plato posits the prohibition on one's own as his own desire since this seems to break his own rule, asserting that anything, even an idea, is mine or one's own. Thus, he must also address what is possible. If the rule against one's own is not merely his, but is in some sense common, Plato has to show in what sense this rule is common and in what sense it is not merely his own desire.

This means that with reference to the inborn necessity of men and women to have intercourse with one another, including that of men with men and women with women, he must not merely calculate how to persuade or compel the mass of people to obey the rulers and to leave aside their own pleasures and pains, he must also address the erotic aspect of this necessity. And he does this in *The Symposium*: "The lover who loves the beautiful or the good appears to desire that they become his own since possessing the good or the beautiful makes one happy." But Diotima is made to caution Socrates. She is made to argue that no one takes joy in what is his own, but only in what is good, and that love is wanting to possess the good forever. This is apparently achieved by a singular means. That means is to give birth in beauty, whether in body or soul. Why birth? Because it goes on forever and love wants to possess the good forever. But the possession of what goes on forever cannot be a personal possession, it cannot be one's own. Nothing that is one's own goes on forever. Not only the body—hair, flesh, bones and blood—but the soul, too, manners, customs, opinions, desires, pleasures, pains, fears. None of this remains the same.

To possess something that goes on forever, mortals must turn to the sphere of what is immortal and therefore never one's own. This sphere is accessible through love. I'll quote from *The Symposium*: "A lover who goes about this matter correctly must begin in his youth to devote himself to beautiful bodies. First, if the leader leads right, he should love one body and beget beautiful ideas there. Then he should realize that the beauty of any one body is brother to the beauty of any other, and that if he is to pursue beauty as a form, he'd be foolish not to think that the beauty of all bodies is one and the same. And when he grasps this, he must become a lover of all beautiful bodies and he must think that this wild gaping after just one body is a small thing and despise it." So, having turned away from the love of one body, the lover is freed from the threat of seeking to make that

body his own. And rather than attending to his own love and the body of the beloved, the lover turns to souls, seeking to give birth to ideas rather than to the beauty of the singular body of the beloved.

In fact the beauty of bodies is relegated to a thing of no importance. The lover gazes not at the body of the beloved but at activities and laws, customs and knowledge, in order to give birth to glorious and beautiful ideas and theories, loving now not out of his erotic necessity but loving wisdom. This is the final love of what "neither comes to be nor passes away, neither waxes nor wanes" and so can never be made one's own. This love is a movement upward. By loving correctly one is lead to the final and highest mystery of love, that love of the absolute pure unmixed and unpolluted by mere human flesh, the great nonsense of human mortality, that love of divine beauty, that mystery of love which turns away from the single beloved body in search of unpolluted beauty. In all of this the question of what is one's own has seldom, if ever, been asked.

Plato implies that love of one's own is the greatest danger of all for the city. Although Glaucon suggests that there might be an erotic necessity among men, it appears to me to be less and less likely. One's own desire and one's own love appear to be easily forgone, victims of desire itself which moves from one body to another, facilitating comparisons and the search for unpolluted beauty. In fact Plato is little worried about desire and the love of one's own because he knows that the soul's trajectory is inevitable. It is written on the soul whose tripartite form of appetites, doxa and intelligibility, guarantee that the individual will be driven beyond love for his or her own body, and beyond the desire to make the beloved body of the other his own. Even degeneracy is not love of one's own, insofar as no aspect of the soul, not even its appetitive nature, leads the soul first to its own body and then to the loving adoration of the body of another. To be degenerate, to be a glutton or a sexual adventurer, is

not to love one's own body nor the body of the other.

The great mysteries of love are not love at all. Women and men love their own bodies and the bodies of others so little that they must be tempted into giving birth by the promise of beauty, the promise of honors, or the promise of wisdom, the highest mysteries. Love of appetite, opinion, or wisdom is not love but the inevitable trajectory of the soul. Love would demand that it is possible to have something that is one's own, that there is a truly erotic necessity, but none ever appears in western philosophy. Drowned in appetites, goaded by honors or transformed by wisdom, there can be for us no love of one's own. Let us then begin by asking: what does it mean to love one's own, and why does Socrates make Diotima, a woman, the source of these ideas? Love of one's own would begin with love of one's own self, one's body and soul in Plato's formulation, or in contemporary terms one's body and the consciousness which exists in this body and recognizes that it is nothing but the body.

Passing over the body is passing over what is one's own in the most deeply personal sense, being insofar as it is through this body that anyone is and can be connected with the world. One's own is first experienced as something felt; without affective connections there is no experience of one's own and certainly no relation to another that could be made one's own. What are affective connections? The caress in its profusion of forms, the caress which shapes one's own body and shapes the other as one's own, the greeting, hands raised, eyes wide open, head nodding, the glance to the shoulder, the eyes, the neck, the thigh. These are among the more obvious forms, but there are many more, most of which are barely registered most of the time, because we do not have a language which expresses them nor a philosophy which acknowledges them as the condition of the possibility of all life, all desire, all thought.

Affective connections are truly one's own the most. In order to open ourselves up to them we must first subject ourselves to all the elements, all the milieus in the world, and to all the motions emanating from them, and in so doing we become our own bodies, we feel our own bodies as motions. The warm sun shines and we feel the heat of our skin. A jet takes off over our heads and we cover our own throbbing ears. Bright lights flash along with strong rhythms and beats in a dance club and we jolt our bodies around the room. The caress does not seek mere contact. We place our body against another body. We subject ourselves to our own affectivity in order to touch the body of another. In order to caress one's own body with her body or with his body, her flesh, his flesh.

But philosophers, avoiding one's own, do not think about these things. Perhaps only a woman, a feminist by definition, could recall the caress the entire realm of one's own, and question the philosopher's soul. A priestess engaged in ancient Greek rites would subject herself to the caress of the gods. She might find the path of the high mysteries unintelligible. She might instead have questioned the condemnation of one's own, not on the level of knowledge and not on the level of honors or appetites, but certainly on the level of affective sensibility, where to embrace one's own is to embrace all the beings and becomings of the world.

Jean-Michel Rabaté: Thank you very much Dorothea. In this beautiful fragment, you started by quoting Plato's *Republic* and then moved on to the *Symposium*. Leo Strauss, in a seminar that has been recently rediscovered, presents the *Symposium* as the key to Plato's entire political theory. Would you also say that there can be no critical theory of the ideal state that would not be at the same time the politics of love? Or should this term "politics of love" simply be avoided?

Olkowski: Let's avoid anything that comes from Leo Strauss! The politics takes over and there's absolutely no love, there's no desire, there's no attention to one's own. It all becomes a question of finding a way to control the masses. And a question of feeding people noble lies, so that you don't have to actually educate them. You feed them symbols rather than concepts or ideas, so that they can respond in habitual ways that are easier to control. Pleasure and pain would be far too direct. That would be Artaud's route, but not that of Leo Strauss's.

Flaxman: Perhaps, then, we ought to ask, "Why Plato?" Among contemporary philosophers surely the work of Alain Badiou is the most obvious example today of such a return, but his motives are fairly clear. I wonder about your particular motives: what do you hope to get by returning to Plato?

Olkowski: I haven't returned to Plato.

Flaxman: Well, perhaps just in this piece...

Olkowski: I know I'm being difficult. I picked up the Platonic texts when I had been working almost exclusively with Irigaray and Sartre on these questions. The last paper I gave on love was a reassessment of Sartre's analysis from an Irigarayan point of view, if one could say that. I did this because the whole question came up of love being a spiritual phenomenon. In Plato, it's the obvious place where love is excessively spiritualized. People are fairly familiar with these texts, and I certainly am familiar with them as well because I've been teaching them for years and writing about them from time to time.

I read these texts because I have this uneasy feeling that we have to look at how we got to where we are, and what the preexisting habitual structures are. At times, the structure is so habitual that we don't even see it. Sometimes it helps to go to someone like Plato, who's so clear and who lays it out for us in such plain terms that it is easy to see the structure and to point out what the bad habits are. In so doing, we can see how love got to be something spiritual, and

how pleasure and pain were completely left out of the picture. It's not even that they're identified with the appetitive soul, they are just eliminated such that they don't even exist. Then one can try to find other ways to bring what I think are the crucial issues back in. It's not necessarily that Plato was wrong, it's just that he wasn't addressing what I think we all are trying to address.

Rabaté: Going back to the *Symposium* again, and not in Leo Strauss' terms, I've often wondered how should we assess Diotima's speech. Should we take it as somehow embodying Plato's theory about love? I was thinking of Lacan's different reading in a seminar on transference. For Lacan, the person who articulates the most crucial insight about love and desire is not Diotima, not Aristophanes who is quoted by Freud—Aristophanes is a strict Freudian—but Alcibiades precisely because he disrupts the order of the speeches about love. As we know, Alcibiades comes at the end and his unruly intervention aims at praising Socrates with a very particular goal in sight. That is, he wants to seduce Agathon by showing that Socrates is not in fact a real lover, not a sexual one. This double-edged praise of Socrates nevertheless allows Lacan to introduce his theory. The hidden treasure concealed underneath the rough exterior experience of Socrates discloses, for Lacan, the very important function of an object, that is, the object of desire. Without reopening the entire file of Lacan's theory of love, how would you theorize in your own vocabulary this important relationship between love and desire?

Olkowski: The last time I taught the *Symposium*, all of my students were totally fascinated by Alcibiades. At least half of them wrote about him. This surprised me, because I hadn't really spent much time on that part of the *Symposium*, so it surprised me that they had. You know, I think Alcibiades is a sort of ruse used to draw you back into the structure of the *Symposium*. Throughout Plato's work, love is a disruptive, even violent force that is necessary in order to bring us from the gluttonous and repetitive soul through our beliefs, where we have right opinions if we are lucky. In the end, we arrive at the level of the highest appreciation of the good, the beautiful, and the just. Alcibiades simply reintroduces that energy at the end of a serious and high-minded spiritual

discussion which has been put in the mouth of a woman and reintroduces that so-called "erotic energy." But it's still part of the game, and the Platonic structure. To me it doesn't lead anywhere outside.

Flaxman: Let's talk a bit further about Diotima's speech. When Socrates asserts that all men "desire their own good," Diotima is clearly more skeptical. Then why, she replies, "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." If you had to answer that question, which Socrates avoids, what would you say?

Olkowski: You are asking me to consider her question of "Why are not all men said to love?" That's just the peculiarity of the dialectic, of how the dialogue is working out. The question is whether love is some sort of universal principle or not, and whether it only applies to a narrow segment of things. That's a question, you know. To start, I'd like to keep politics out of love, and love out of politics. I'd like to start there. I also want to avoid completely that dead end of the public and private distinction. It gets you absolutely nowhere, as far as I can see. Everything I've ever read about the public and the private leads to a stop sign. Part of the problem is even conceiving of any of this in Platonic terms. I think one has to read Plato in order to know what not to do.

Rabaté: I'd like to now focus on the question of loving oneself, or love and one's own. The gentle or angry claim that women should be entitled to an X of their own (X standing for a room, the body, sexuality and so on) has often been taken as a staple feminist motto. Having worked on Max Stirner's *The Ego and Its Own* and its 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 of 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, for instance, anarchists would criticize or debunk? This is, of course, the Marxist moment of the evening...

Olkowski: Yes, I can tell. I do have ideas for working towards some form of

politics. But I'm so completely discouraged by everything I read, absolutely everything, such that I really have come to the conclusion that most of it needs to be tossed away. The reason why I began thinking about one's own is because precisely it was one of those points where I kept seeing again and again, "one's own is contrary to social and political norms," blah, blah, blah. So I thought that must be the place to go, because this is the forbidden corner. Let's go to that forbidden place and see what's there.

In doing that, I have to say one's own is not about ownership, it is not about propriety and property. In the beginning, it's about this affective element in the sense of paying attention to one's own pleasure and pain. This is certainly something you cannot possess, nor can you buy it, nor can you sell it, nor can you own it in any traditional sense of the word. Paying attention to pleasure and pain is something we absolutely refuse to do in this society, as far as I can see, or perhaps in almost any configuration of Western societies. What I'm trying to do is begin by drawing attention to what I mean by affectivity in that way. Nothing more—pleasure and pain, that's all. So let's just try to start there.

Flaxman: This seems a propitious moment to move into the question of psychoanalysis, which Jean-Michel has already broached. Freud's model of sexuality leaves an important place to autoeroticism. One might almost say that autoeroticism 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."

Last night I must say that I was watching TV and there was a moment during a television show where someone said that Freud once explained asthma as an attempt on the part of the individual to call out to his or her parents. This 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 deficiency in our libidinal development in which parts of our body selected by our drive eternally remain parts. What I have in mind here is the following question: how much do we

need to believe in a whole body as our own body in order to speak of love of one's own body? In other terms, what happens when I am loved for a part of my body, or when I love just a part of someone else's body, rather than "the whole person"?

Olkowski: This is something of a trick question, actually. Paying attention to one's own pleasure and pain is not necessarily autoeroticism. Okay? Part of the problem, as I see it, is that even something like autoeroticism has come to be defined by a certain nexus of habitual activities. I think that de Beauvoir and Sartre are right when they say that we only exist in situation. That is, we only exist insofar as the other acknowledges us. That's the starting point.

I never understood why one would follow Freud in thinking that we start somehow with this little *Id*. Melanie Klein, in her description of the infant's partial objects, is absolutely right. They are partial for a reason, namely, we are speaking of an infant. It's not developed, it's un-integrated, and that's all it has available to it. I have argued, and would continue to argue, that if adults were to exist that way they would simply blow apart. They don't have the stamina. So it's not autoeroticism, it's pleasure and pain. And that's a start to answering your question.

Rabaté: We're going to move to a broader series of questions now, and it seems fitting to shift from Freud to his contemporary. Let's talk a little bit about Merleau-Ponty and the phenomenological tradition. Could you discuss 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?

Olkowski: Stupid as this may sound, for a long time I didn't realize it was a male world. I just didn't pay attention. Though I was reading texts written by and large by men at the time, I never really addressed them the way I was supposed to in graduate school. I was supposed to be a scholar and I failed miserably at this. I decided it was much more interesting to read things by connecting one

text to another, and one set of ideas to another. It was only much later that I gradually learned that this was not a scholarly methodology—at least according to those who were attempting to teach me scholarly methodologies. Part of my fascination with this material came from not realizing that it was supposed to be something different from what I thought it was. I really thought you could connect anything to anything as long as you had a connection, and so I did.

Flaxman: I'd like to ask you about your relationship with Bergson, which is also fairly unique. Very few people have attempted a kind of Bergsonian feminism, or attempted to read Bergson through a feminist lens the way you have. It's a striking synthesis. It's also strange insofar as Bergson's vitalism was, during his own lifetime, recruited as part of a natalist movement in France that attempted to address population decreases and to sustain the idea of the French nuclear family. With that in mind, is it possible to say that Bergson has, somewhat ironically, been presented as a false problem for philosophy? How do you conceive of your own work as intervening in Bergsonism?

Olkowski: That's a nice phrase, that Bergson is a false problem. When I read Bergson I'm also reading Irigaray. The two are as intertwined as any two could possibly be. I should just say that I continue to be deliberately blind to the scholarship about vitalism. I really don't care. To me the question is what I can make of Bergson by connecting his work to the work of others, and to other ideas. I'm aware that my so-called reading of Bergson is not very Bergsonian at all, and the same might be said to apply to my reading of Irigaray. Once again, I'm interested in what kinds of new ideas can emerge from and connect to other ideas. In Bergson, it's obviously this idea of the sensible. This allowed me to think about affectivity for the first time.

In 20 years of working on Merleau-Ponty, I never found anything about that in there! Bergson was the first to bring it alive for me. I want to be clear at the start that affectivity is not emotion. I'm not talking about emotions which, as far as I'm concerned, are as trite and habitual as any other form of life. Rather, I'm talking about affectivity as this influence of emotions, of all the entities, agents,

and objects of the world on one another. Although Bergson barely addressed this at all, it allowed me to begin to open up this sphere of thinking.

Rabaté: I'm inclined to want to ask you about what it means for you to "read philosophers." Both here and in the past I've heard you say—and say without apologies—that you don't feel the need to be loyal to the philosophers about or with whom you write. Could you talk about how you approach the history of philosophy?

Olkowski: Within philosophy you have to establish something. You establish your framework by taking it apart. To me any creative act is a feminist act. Maybe that's simplistic.

Philosophy is the place where I'm told not to go, okay? It's then the place that I go to connect to other things in order to create something else. Those are the most abstract terms possible, but it is deliberate on my part. Because if I don't express this in abstract terms, then I've prohibited my own free movements.

Rabaté: We need to return to the broader question. You mention at some point in your work Sartre or even Irigaray as having famously written as much fiction and strange texts as philosophy. Irigaray in particular often writes philosophy, but for a while she was also writing these strange novels about philosophy and philosophers. How do you articulate or give definition to what it means to be a philosopher? To return to your own work, why don't you write novels instead of writing these books on Deleuze? Do you want to address a certain audience? Is there a certain intellectual rigor there, and a certain pleasure, all at once?

Olkowski: I don't think I'm much of a novelist. But I think that, for example, the pragmatic aspect in my work is when I wrote this book and I asked, "can I call it *The Ruin of Representation*?" They said, "No, you have to put Deleuze in the title." So that's part of the game. More and more, I'm being encouraged from different directions to not do that anymore. I like to give people some frame of reference with something they can connect to. I like to use philosophy, and I

like to use some literature. Perhaps for me an even more important influence on my own thinking and development has been Clarice Lispector. Her work is as important as Irigaray in many respects.

Flaxman: I want to follow up on this question by making it clear to the audience that Dorothea is one of a still fairly small number of feminist philosophers on Gilles Deleuze. In your last book, *Gilles Deleuze and the Ruin of Representation*, you mention the vagaries in the reception of *Mille Plateaux* [*A Thousand Plateaus*], which seems to have been skewed towards male scholars in both the United States and France. While you have argued that this should not be the case, perhaps you could speculate about why the feminist potential of Deleuze's philosophy was and is so delayed, as well as why you specifically decided to engage with Deleuze.

Olkowski: Female philosopher is an oxymoron. So that's part of the challenge. What interests me in my work, the texts I read, and the social and political arena, is when someone tells you that a certain thing is the way it is. This is how it should be understood, this is the right understanding, this is a field for a certain kind of thinker. That's immediately what I want to then look at, because I know they must be wrong. I know there's some weakness there. Anywhere there's a joint, anywhere there's a corner, the frame can always be taken apart. That's Roland Barthes' idea, and it is from Barthes that I really learned that. At the time I started reading Deleuze, of course no one had really taken it over. In my recollection there was myself and there was Constantin Boundas, and we were the only ones we knew about for years. We would go to conferences and we would give papers and there would be four people, most of whom were graduate students, and most of whom hadn't read Deleuze. This went on for years and years, to the point where when actually it got to be the case that there were more than four people in the room we felt very uncomfortable. We decided that maybe it was time to find something else! So we still work with Deleuze, but in a certain sense I think that we have moved on.

Rabaté: The title is perhaps a little enigmatic—*Gilles Deleuze and the Ruin of*

Representation. Could you simply explain this title? Why do you feel that in connection with your feminism, there is something in representation that is a form of oppression? Why is representation, as such, oppressive?

Olkowski: There are many ways to address the problem of representation. The quickest way to access representation is to say that it is commensurate with whatever is habitual. So habituation and the repetition of something that is habitual in representation is the way I'm defining it in this text. What I'm interested in untying, undoing, and ruining are any conceptual, structural, or organizational methods and orders which are established on a purely habitual basis. This usually operates this way because it is something that functions very nicely for somebody somewhere. But not necessarily for me and not necessarily for the creation of new ideas. That's why I wanted to address representation. It's another word for habit.

Flaxman: Perhaps at this juncture we might return to the subject of the erotic, since at some level, your own text acknowledges that we do not have a language for such affects, that it is precisely unrepresentable. And yet, when I heard that you were going to speak on love today, I immediately and perversely thought of the opening pages of *Gilles Deleuze and the Ruin of Representation* where you discuss Catherine McKinnon's critique of the regime of representation. It is clear to me from those opening pages that you sympathize with McKinnon's critique. I wonder, in light of this work on love, what you make of her stand with Andrea Dworkin against the publication of pornography—a stand which, while not materially effective in the United States, has nevertheless helped to change Canadian law. Let me be clear: I'm not asking for a strictly or reductively political answer so much as I hope you will broach the distinction between the actualization of the erotic and the kind of pornography that degrades femininity?

Olkowski: To answer your question would require a book, but I would just like to say this in response: I feel sorry for McKinnon, although in part it is her own doing. She truly got mired in this stuff. She doesn't know if she wants to be

doing philosophy or changing laws. It is not that you can't do both, but it's the case that she's really stuck deep in a sort of pit that I'm not interested in climbing into. In brief, I would say that pornography in representation is habituation. That's why it's so reprehensible—because it's not creative in any way, shape, or form.

Flaxman: So it seems that pornography is reprehensible because it never moves beyond representation, which is always already "crude." But I'm hoping that this nexus of eroticism and pornography, however much we must insist on their distinction, will compel us to confront an important question—namely, the question of sado-masochism. Obviously, pornography is often condemned on the grounds that it degrades women, but I wonder if eroticism itself doesn't "enjoy" a component of degradation? I suppose the most obvious philosophical point of reference would be the *Birth of Tragedy*, where Nietzsche gestures toward a particular kind of affect (he calls its "cruel") that makes possible not the individuation of bodies but, rather, their de-individuation. Don't we require a certain kind of pain in order to encounter our bodies and, thereby, to forget our "selves"?

Olkowski: I don't think pornography deals with pleasure or pain at all. It deals with representation, with the repetition of familiar patterns. I don't think things have changed much since Linda Williams wrote *Hardcore*. I think it's pretty much the same. There's a quite specific scenario for hardcore aficionados of pornography, and if you deviate from the scenario they don't want to see it.

Flaxman: That's why pornography produces more sequels than any other genre...

Olkowski: ...and that's why we say of sequels that they're pornographic. One analogy in contemporary philosophy that is related to this discussion is the way in which what's passive and what's active are often undifferentiated. Even in physiology, a lot of physiologists do not differentiate between active and passive. Because everyone knows that passivity is bad of course—right? This

is very bad, and especially if you're a feminist, it's the worst.

It seems to me that that's part of the same nexus—no differentiation between pleasure and pain, no differentiation between passive and active. So some of the examples I gave before had to do with things we don't normally associate with pleasure or pain, such as the glance or the raising of one's hand in a gesture to someone else, or simply how you widen your eyes in a greeting. These are small gestures that are made all the time. Much of this is imperceptible. It's below the level of perception. We generally only pay attention to what we can perceive. What we can perceive is minimally a figure on a ground. It's defined by what we're interested in, because as you all know, if you perceived everything in the room you would probably just pass out. It would be so overwhelming. So you only actually perceive what interests you, and what you're focused on is what your attention is directed towards at a given moment in time. The ultimate goal of perception is action, doing something. We're so fascinated with the things we can do that we perceive for the sake of acting. The whole passive element of the imperceptibles, what is below the level of perception, is what I'm interested in.

People don't actually have any sensibility—they don't feel anything. I don't mean emotions here. I mean that they don't actually feel their own pain, and they don't feel their own pleasure. They don't, for instance, pay attention to when their throat is tight, or they're not breathing well. They don't pay attention to the cramp in their thigh until it's so strong that the foot falls asleep. We pay very little attention to how we move through a room, virtually none at all. Every time I walk into a classroom all the blinds are closed, for example. You can't even look out the window. These students of mine don't often see that the blinds are closed and the room is dark and dreary. Too many of us pay no attention to this. Everything is reduced immediately, the idea of pleasure and pain is reduced to something psychological when it is not. As I've articulated it, or attempted to conceptualize it, it's the influence of every agent and object upon any other. This is why it's to a very large degree imperceptible.

In any case, this is a difficult question. It has to do with paying attention to one's own affective states and all of a sudden realizing that you're in a room full of people and you can barely breathe. Or that something you're doing is producing some sort of response from others that makes you again feel happy, joyous, or something else. You know it's just like what I tell my students all the time: if you would just stop and tickle yourself a little more, you might actually be able to get in touch with this and think about this a little bit.

We all know passivity is by definition evil and ugly. I'm beginning to get it, and I think we can't do anything until we start talking about it a little more. Sort of guerilla acts of affectivity aren't going to be enough. I would like it if we discussed this without immediately being taken to be suggesting that, "oh, we're talking about feelings." In the sense of the emotions, etc. We're not. We're not talking about emotions. We're not sophisticated enough to even begin to talk about emotions because we don't know anything about our own pleasure and pain, and the emotions we think we talk about, well, we've just made this all up. Completely made this up! It doesn't even exist. Someone says to you, "how are you," and what do you say? You say, "I'm fine." This is all made up! None of this is real. I think that what I'm at least attempting to do is begin to talk about this in a philosophical way and in other contexts. This is one of the values of artists, many of whom already do this quite regularly. Not all of them, but many of them.

Flaxman: I'd like to thank everyone for coming, and in particular Dorothea for coming from Colorado. Again, thank you.



The Politics of Mourning
Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Eduardo Cadava
In Conversation with Jean-Michel Rabaté

Jean-Michel Rabaté: As you may know, the Modern Language Association is undertaking a survey about the legacy of Jacques Derrida, and the legacy of deconstruction. The question we would like to discuss tonight is slightly different: it could be phrased in the terms of "How can we mourn Jacques Derrida?" Given the scandalous reaction of certain American or British newspapers, this will be my first question to both Gayatri Spivak and Eduardo Cadava. I would suggest that we begin by first going back to this Freudian couple of "Mourning and Melancholia." Beyond the very possibility of mourning Jacques Derrida, are we not, perhaps, in a sort of melancholia for an age that might be that of the work of mourning? Here I am alluding to Derrida's book, *The Work of Mourning*, in which he has included a series of eulogies he wrote as obituaries for people like Lacan, Althusser, Foucault, Barthes, Deleuze, Louis Marin, Levinas, and Lyotard. For those among us tonight who knew Jacques Derrida, there was indeed this sense—and I know that he felt this very keenly—that he was the last of a certain generation. Do we have a sense of nostalgia, an endless melancholia for that age? If so, can we name it? Is it something that we could put words on, which is to say, is it an important process? This could lead us to the question of politics as well: it has been evident in the last decade that Derrida's work became more and more political, but also more religious, at the same time. This poses another kind of problem, and this is also the question with which I would like to start.

Eduardo Cadava: I'd like to begin by thanking Aaron and Jean-Michel for inviting us here and by thanking all of you for being here as well. All three of us have participated in different memorials for Derrida in October and November,

and I think that, if one returns to Freud, and to the necessity of considering the intellectual and political genealogy of loss and mourning through melancholy, I would agree with you, Jean-Michel, that, in relation to Derrida, we are perhaps closer to a period of melancholy than to one of mourning. Initially, the conception of mourning within Freud's essay has to do with the eventual withdrawal of the libido from the lost object. Derrida, who often wrote on mourning, not only in the memorials that he wrote, but also in *Specters of Marx* and in his text on de Man, often talked about what he called "impossible mourning." This impossible mourning would be closer to the endlessness of mourning that Freud identifies with melancholy. I would just say, and perhaps we can elaborate this together, that at some level to mourn Derrida would involve, among other things, remaining faithful and unfaithful to his work at the same time. And what I mean by that is that one should carry on the multiple legacies of his work.

He very often said that there is no unique affiliation, no such thing as a unique legacy. Every legacy and every affiliation is always multiple. When we think of the legacies of Derrida, or when we think of mourning Derrida, we must touch on the multiple threads of his work. And I think that one of the strongest ways in which we can remain faithful to his work is to take it, to recontextualize it, and to move it somewhere else. This means that we can perhaps remain most faithful to his work when we also betray it in some way. He did this in relation to the texts that he read, and I would say in turn that this activity of reading, reinterpreting, and moving his texts in another direction belongs to what I would call "mourning." Mourning would be redefined here as something that involves reading his texts historically and within different contexts, and trying to move them in other directions. These are simply preliminary remarks, and perhaps you can both add to them...

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: I'll echo Eduardo and thank you all for coming. Many of us here tonight actually engaged in one of these memorials very soon after his death. I was at the burial. I want also to remember the last time I was with him on his birthday. I don't want to make too much of it, but, in a very

significant sense, I was trying to be as careful as possible with Derrida there, in terms of how I had been touched by deconstruction. And the best I could do was to say that I felt in some way like Lacan's definition of the subject in the field of vision. I was a *tache*, I was a stain in the field of deconstruction, so that my part in that nostalgia, or in a Freudian scenario of mourning, is necessarily somewhat oblique.

You will remember how, with infinite sweetness, Derrida turned it around in his response, and yet, on the other hand, he did not contradict that obliqueness. He said, "I will tell you that in French the word *tache* has another meaning. You are the *task* of deconstruction," he said. To a certain extent, the entire field of knowing how to mourn, something that requires you to act in relation to a certain performative set of conventions, involves this task: the task of deconstruction. In the larger context, one doesn't know how to mourn anyway: mourning happens—perhaps in my daily thinking of how it was that his work enabled much of my thinking life. As I've said many times before when I am frustrated, when I first read his work, I did not even know his name, so I did not know what I was reading. To a certain extent, I am bewildered about how to mourn him.

And what is mourning anyway? Is it a private act of coming-to-terms with a loss—which, as you know, is a way of describing what we read in Freud? And when we talk about the politics of mourning, or the conventions of mourning, is it even possible, in fact, to mourn in public? Eduardo and I have been reading Derrida's *Voyous* together, where Derrida brings to mind the fact that Pascal and others suggest that it is in the public domain that a certain irony is made possible by democracy. So what is it to mourn in public? I have no answer to this question.

Because there are co-mourners in the audience, I will say something that is just out in *Radical Philosophy*. When Derrida was discussing *Voyous* at Columbia University, he mentioned that you can neither execute nor mourn without an intuition of transcendence. I think we know very well what he thought about the

death penalty. His position there was absolutely uncomplicated. It was a "no." Here he put aside that intuition of transcendence. It seemed to me that, at the burial, at the municipal cemetery, with absolutely no presence of anything religious, and a request for no public speeches, and those anodyne words read by his son which could not be his, and about which we have to think twice, that it was indeed a valediction forbidding mourning.

I don't want to go on about this because we ought to talk about other things, but I have many things to say about Derrida's supposed turn to religion. It's not something that I will just let pass. I have something to say about that. Indeed, he was profoundly concerned about religion, with religion. But I'll stop here, because this is not a satisfactory answer. The answer to how it is that we can mourn him is either, "it is too soon for me to know," or, "I don't know."

Rabaté: I completely agree with this caveat. Derrida's so-called turn to religion in the later years was perhaps a way of thinking along the same lines, but with a slightly different vocabulary. I was thinking of this because, as Gayatri just suggested, in order to mourn you have to be sure that you are alive. But one is of course never sure that one is alive. This is something that Derrida complicated for us.

Among all the people for whom he wrote beautiful eulogies, and for whom he eventually might have written one—somebody who I thought had died but who is still alive from his generation, someone who is not often associated with Derrida, although he was one of those who brought Derrida to the United States—we might remember René Girard. Girard is indeed still alive and kicking and publishing. Obviously, he is somebody who has chosen this turn to religion with a vengeance. While I don't think there is much in common between what Derrida has done and what René Girard has done in the last ten years, I do think that this would be a case where the deconstruction of religion would be necessary. I'm referring here to the biographical fact that Girard was one of the organizers of the Baltimore meeting of 1966.

In this context, it is interesting, but also a little shocking, to see a recent book by René Girard that accuses structuralism of being a perversion and stating that the only truth that matters at all is to be found in the Bible. This poses the question of whether we need to pluralize everything. Eduardo spoke of legacies in the plural, of strategies and mourning in the plural. In a way, what to do next? And my other question would be for Eduardo: is there something we can do? This is why the politics of the question somehow forces us to think of agency, or at least the conditions of and the possibility of some kind of agency.

Cadava: I want to return to Gayatri's statement, and this question about whether or not grief is something that is private, and whether it is something that one experiences in solitude. Very often people think about grief in that way: they think about grief as something that in a certain way either depoliticizes death or takes place away from politics altogether. I think that the alternative way to look at grief—we all have experienced loss—is that it tells us something about ourselves. When we experience loss, when we experience grief, when we mourn something or somebody that we have lost, and when we reveal in this way that we have been touched by somebody else, one of the things that grief tells us, among many other things, is that we are related to others.

Grief tells us, in advance and always, that we are related to others. We are bound to others, we are tied to others, and this *relationality* is something that both makes us who we are (we are the ones who are related to others) but also dispossesses us in some way (since it's precisely because of our relations to others that we are never simply just ourselves). So it seems to me that we can begin to think of what we can learn from grief and mourning. And I think one of these lessons would be the relationality about which Derrida so often talked in terms of the trace of the other in us. The trace of the other is something that is in us but exceeds us at the same time. This is perhaps one way to begin to broach—in a different way perhaps than you might have done, Gayatri, I'm not sure—this issue of transcendence.

When Derrida talks about transcendence he very often marks it in such a way that it has to be considered a finite transcendence. And I've always understood this as a signal of, in this context, the relationship that we have with others, the others that we bear and that leave their traces in us. From the very first moment that we are touched by an other, and moved by an other, we are inhabited by him or her in some way. This trace of the other in us is both in us *and* outside us at the same time, in us and transcending us in some way. And so it seems to me that if you begin to think about what you can learn from grief—and if one of the things that grief tells us is that we are related to others and that this relation both constitutes us and dispossesses us in some way—then this question of how you organize a political community around grief becomes very difficult. The question of agency becomes all the more complicated.

There are certain contexts in which we want to think about ourselves as bounded in some way—when we claim rights for ourselves or for others in legal contexts, for instance. It is perhaps a mistake, however, to think that the description that we need to use when we are in those contexts is an adequate description of who we are, and especially since, as I'm suggesting here, who we are involves these relations to others that, again, constitute and de-constitute us.

I guess I am trying to trace a kind of thread through the terms that Gayatri was invoking, and to return in this way not just to the need to re-conceptualize agency in terms of autonomy and dependency, but also to rethink politics in some way. I'll just close these comments with this because I of course agree with Gayatri that, in regard to the question of how we can mourn Derrida, it is difficult to know not only if the timing is right, or if we can mourn already, but also what it would mean to mourn. I think mourning always has some relation to something that we don't know. One of the things that Freud says is that, when we experience a loss and mourn the other, there is something that we don't yet know about what we have lost in the other. There is something that remains hidden in the loss in some way. And I would extend this uncertainty into the domain of politics.

One of the things I often ask students to think about is what a politics would look like if it were modeled on tears. When we think about acting politically, we always think about looking at a situation, evaluating it, and then, on the basis of that evaluation, deciding which way to go, which way to act. This means that, at some level, acting politically depends on seeing something. It depends on something visual. But, when you have tears in your eyes, you can't see things clearly. A politics based on the model of the tear is a politics that begins in the presupposition that you always act without seeing things clearly, that you always act with tears in your eyes. And, of course, when you are witnessing somebody crying, you are witnessing that self melt. You are seeing the self melt in some way, and I think this dissolution of the self, this figure for the dissolution of the self, is something that would be linked to the consequences of our being inscribed in relation to others. At the same time, it becomes the means through which we can begin to define who we are—as agents who are not always in control of our actions.

Spivak: I am going to say something about grief that may be just a little bit different. First of all, I think that one must distinguish between grief and mourning. Mourning is a work, and it happens. The reason why I said it was too soon was because, in a certain sense, it is always too soon to know if one has mourned. If it matters, then the counter-signature of the other person is not there in different ways. But grief also makes, in one sense, a solitude.

I would like to say that I'm not a religious person. What is it to say that one is not a religious person? If you think about the beginning of *Aporias*, Derrida says something there that is quite obviously true, so I will repeat it: "All cultures are cultures of death." My cultural production is a different culture of death, where you burn, where you make sure—and it seems brutal to Christians—that the skull burns well: you have an action which tells you that mourning is over. In my piece on Edward Said, which has just appeared in *Critical Inquiry*, I invoke at the end not so much a prayer, but simply a bit of speech from the *Scriptures* before it was turned into the kind of stuff that we know today, when it was linked more aboriginally to nature. It says: "as the ripe fruit bursts its skin [and

presumably the seed falls to the ground.] so does immortality burst out of death." "Pushing up the daisies," I said in the thing, right?

This notion of the forbidding of mourning spoke to me. This notion of stopping mourning is very different from the elaborate extravagance of the peoples of the book, and which then gets transformed into a different and—you will forgive me for saying this—slightly more "constipated" extravagance that is legible in the Protestant tradition. I remember Derrida saying to me, to my great horror, at de Man's funeral: "these people don't know how to mourn." Of course, everyone was just completely proper and okay, talking and drinking champagne. To an extent, mourning is a set of performative conventions, and to quote Derrida again, "the event of mourning is what escapes those conventions." One cannot just endlessly talk about Freud.

In fact, what happens when grief hits us is not some universal truth about human beings. In this regard, I think we have to think about this without just pluralizing it as a gesture of political correctness. Singularity is repeatable difference, after all. So we mourn together, but we repeat our differences. It also seems to me that, in this sense, when we talk about agency, in mourning, we ask, well, what are we to do now?

I'm trying to quote as much of Derrida as I can, because it seems to me that this is also an act of remembering, isn't it? In *Politics of Friendship*, he talks about the madness of politics. What is that madness of politics? The madness of politics is being reasonable. That's the madness, because you take the obvious, commonsensical curvature between one speaker and another, and you straighten it out so that you can act. That's madness, and that's an incredible thing to say: that reason is something small that we must produce, that we must nourish, that we must protect because it is not our King, and because it is so easily contravened. Setting to work, acting according to consistent and calculable principles, well, that's politics. And it's very fragile. And it's mad, because the literal truth of things will not allow such a thing to actually go on. This madness is another name for consistent and reasonable

and calculable behavior. It seems to me that this setting to work is something that really speaks very practically to what we must do if we are to think of a just world.

Rabaté: I also was thinking of the way in which Derrida's thoughts in some cases were extremely practical. I recently read a whole manuscript on the foundation of the Collège International de Philosophie, which was basically Derrida's brainchild. And I think one could describe it, as Gayatri just did, in terms of a certain madness. Because it's an institution that has no real space and no funding, and that nobody knows what to do with right now. I'm not sure how long it will survive, but it's quite unique in trying to very concretely pose the question—and it has been rather successful at this—what is philosophy? What can philosophy do? How can one think differently through all sorts of practices, including the political?

But I have another question to ask. We are talking about this impossibility of mourning, and I'd like to have your personal take on this, Gayatri. In re-reading *The Work of Mourning*, do you feel that somehow, facing the friends who have died (such as Althusser), Derrida is really talking about the part of himself that died with the person who died? At the same time, I think there is one who has exerted perhaps even more of an impact than the others, and this would be Levinas. Maybe I'm guessing too quickly, but, with Levinas' death, Derrida was allowed in a way both to become Levinas, and to become Levinas differently. And I wonder whether this is something that is possible only after Derrida's own death.

Spivak: Jean-Michel, the idea of becoming Levinas differently is an intriguing idea because everything hangs on that word "differently." You know, for me it takes time, it really takes time reading Derrida. Because at first I'm convinced he means something, and then suddenly I read him again. This is not just true of Derrida. Of course this is also true of a handful of other writers. But for the longest time I thought the idea of the interruption of the epistemological by the ethical, the postponement and the interruption, belonged to Derrida. Just as I

had thought that the Nietzschean notion of pushing the same as pushing back the other was also Derrida's. And then I read him again carefully and realized that he was in fact commenting on this notion. I think that where you really get Derrida's idea of becoming Levinas *autrement*, as it were, otherwise Levinas, is in *Adieu*.

This is very peculiar because of course these are topics that one would not think the great philosopher to be dwelling on. But the courage of that address a year later in the presence of relatives can be measured in relation to Derrida's discussion there of Levinas' notion of reproductive heteronormativity and its place in his philosophy. It's amazing that Derrida chose to raise these questions on this particular occasion, and that he then recalls the passage in which Moses sees the backside of God! Again, if one reads carefully, one can see that Derrida is taking a distance from Levinas. And I think the most amazing part is where Derrida says that Levinas has been too silent, and I've said this before, too silent about the earthly Jerusalem and has not attended to the fact of state violence. Levinas is obliged to be silent on the fact that the state of Israel is breaking the commandment. I'm almost paraphrasing Derrida's words. The address seems to me to be an amazing text of solidarity and distancing. The only text to which I can compare this is *Of Spirit*, which has been completely misread by many people. Yes, I agree that Derrida is very closely tied to Levinas. There are many things in Levinas that one also can see in Derrida. But I don't believe that Levinas would be capable of asking the question that Derrida asks in *Voyous*, "How many votes for the unconscious?" He is extremely careful about this business of citizenship, of democracy as body count. That's where I find my Derrida, as it were, not just Levinas otherwise.

Rabaté: On this issue, I agree. Levinas had a more traditional political point of view, which was that of French Jewishness in struggle with a number of institutions, and striving for a certain kind of recognition that had not yet been given. I think there perhaps was more of a sort of moral timidity in facing politics, even when, of course, all of the other questions are absolutely sharp. With Derrida, the question of the political was literally everywhere.

Cadava: Actually, I want to say something about what Gayatri just said. As a kind of parenthesis, I'll very briefly return to your evocation, Jean-Michel, of the founding of the Collège International de Philosophie. You said there was a kind of madness entailed in setting up this institution which was not to be an institution, and which was not to be institutionalized. It didn't have a center, it was distributed and de-centralized across Paris and beyond. From what he told me, the proposal that he wrote for the Collège was extremely painful to write, because it had to be addressed to the Ministry of Education. Returning to what Gayatri said, the madness of this "institution" has to do with the activity of trying to be reasonable—in setting it up, in finding governmental support, in securing funding, and so on. If there was a kind of madness in writing the proposal, it also was because the proposal had to follow the protocols of a particular genre that often prevented him from signing the text in a double way. And this helps explain why he had such a difficult time signing this particular text.

In regard to Jean-Michel's comments about Levinas: I too was somewhat surprised when you said "becoming Levinas but differently." It reminded me of a line in Emerson's journals, written after the death of his brother, Charles, whom he considered his best friend. In different moments, and because he identified so closely with his brother, he says that, "when Charles and I were talking, I couldn't tell who was generating what, whether my thoughts were mine or his." At one point, in a very beautiful formulation from one of his notebooks, he says, "Charles was like no other." This is a fabulous statement, because, on the one hand, "Charles was like no other" because he is absolutely singular, while, at the same time, "Charles is like no other" because he is like me. What Emerson registers here is an identification that at the same time marks singularity and difference, and this is something I would just emphasize in relation to what Gayatri is saying.

There is a closeness and intimacy that Derrida actually defends in the text he wrote for his thesis defense. He specifically evokes Levinas and Heidegger as thinkers with whom he feels very intimate and close, precisely because there is a kind of loneliness in their work. But what I also want to say here is that, when

we try to talk about the way in which he worked, and about the way in which he read different writers, we cannot neglect the way in which he inhabited the language of the writer or thinker on whom he was writing. As early as *Grammatology*, Derrida says that, in reading Nietzsche, one has to surrender oneself to Nietzsche and go as far as one can with him, until one hits a kind of wall or impasse, and cannot go any further. At each moment in his reading, he surrenders himself to the language of the one that he's reading, until he meets a kind of resistance. I think this has something to do with his strategy of writing, which involves working in relation to an intimacy that at the same times marks and invites a kind of difference and distance.

Rabaté: I agree with you on the whole, but, in the case of Levinas, I think what Gayatri evoked was closer to the way that I read his famous essay "Violence and Metaphysics." In *Writing and Difference* he poses a number of very difficult questions to Levinas from the start, reiterating the point that one cannot go beyond the language of metaphysics. How can you go beyond the language of Greek philosophy that you are using when you talk about ethics? It's a well-known argument and a famous text. But I think that maybe, because of this, it could over the years absorb more and more, and become more and more a part of a Levinasian text that meanwhile was also taking Derrida into its stride, even as he worked to counter a number of these issues. This is something that we evoked together at Barnard College at the memorial event for Derrida.

But I was struck by the fact in which, as some of you may know, he also complicated the legacy of his archive very recently. This seemed to be, after all, one way for Derrida to die and to allow for an easy mourning. This would be to turn himself into a mausoleum like Lenin's tomb that you could visit, and where you could stand in line to see the archive.

As some of you may know, because of a complicated set of political issues and circumstances, Derrida sided with one colleague and fought with the administration to make access to his own archive extremely difficult, and to such an extent that now it may even be closed. I think this is quite typical as a

gesture, actually. To not just say "I will die soon, but you can have access to my textual body: it is going to be there to be visited." It's not really to be visited, after all. I'm saying this thinking of Aaron Ley's film, *in which the thinking man finds himself in a gigantic orphanage...*, the screening of which will immediately follow the discussion. Because what one sees in Aaron's film is the archive of a sort of dilapidated institution. Any institution once visited by Derrida leads to that vision.

Spivak: I don't know how much longer we have, but I do want to invoke Walter Benjamin briefly here and, in particular, his idea of ruins. The ruin is everywhere in Derrida. As we talk about how to mourn, Derrida's legacy, and so on, I don't know how to integrate the idea of ruins. Does one ever integrate the idea of ruins? These are questions Derrida taught us to ask. He was a very literal-minded man. This is why de Man and Derrida were friends. Tarak Nath Sen was my teacher and a literalist from whom I received my first education in reading in Calcutta. I mention this because Derrida was so pugnacious in his literal-mindedness. He really went at a thing, and went to the bottom of it in that sense.

To return to this question of becoming someone else, though. I completely agree with Eduardo. I was going on about this endlessly in Taiwan. Already, Ackbar Abbas had given it a name. From the audience, he raised his hand and said, "Gayatri, what I think you are saying is that in the 80's you learned from Derrida to substitute critical intimacy for critical distance." And I said, "if you do not mind, I will use that phrase and I will not cite you. Because I will use it so often that to give it a footnote would be ridiculous." At any rate, we are already in the ear of the other: the idea of not excusing someone you know, whether it be Levinas, or Nietzsche, or Plato. In regard to Plato in *Voyous*, how is Plato getting around the problem of democracy?

In the middle of the book, Derrida utters a very serious question. What is the question? It goes something like this: if I am going to talk about democracy, is it not true that whatever I am saying should be available and accessible, not

simply to the envious half-educated academic whining away, but really to anyone? Because this is what democracy is about. Plato solves the problem by setting the archons above the law. Aristotle solves the problem, and he does this exquisitely and ultimately by dwelling on the merit versus numbers problem, and by saying this can't be solved. He doesn't excuse anyone. If Nietzsche wrote this and the Nazis picked it up, that means it was there. This is why he urges us "not to accuse," but to "enter the protocols."

I sometimes tell my students, "listen, entering the protocols is not like entering the argument." When you're in front of the Queen, you back out and you curtsey, etc. These are not reasonable things. They belong to the protocols of the occasion. And so entering the protocols of a text, you find where democracy is in it, you turn it around, and you use it. You use it and this use becomes a means of dealing with whoever it is: the person becomes the text here. And that is the aura of that era, Jean-Michel. I'm not nostalgic for it, but I remember very clearly the extraordinary excitement. I had become an Assistant Professor the year before, it dates me. In 1966, when Barthes' text on the death of the author had come out in *Communication*, it was an unbelievable kind of thing. That was where we began to see that the business of reading was indeed to enter the protocols. And Barthes and Derrida didn't share a great deal, but this, I believe, they did inhabit. As you know, Lacan, in his own way, reads *Antigone*. Very often we are not satisfied with his reading, because it's not what we more conventionally think of as reading. He is not establishing an interpretation on a kind of legal model, and that's also not what we are doing. We take refuge in saying, "He became." He became the text. But to say this is in fact already a reading.

Cadava: I think that Benjamin is extremely important to the discussion we are having, especially in terms of trying to think about the relationship between politics and mourning. This is not only the case in the *Trauerspiel* book, the book on the mourning play, but also in his theses on the concept of history, which could be read, in fact, as a treatise on the ethics and politics of mourning. To the extent that the theses and his other works try to induce a kind of tension

between the past and the present, or between the dead and the living, to mourn the past is to have this engagement, this ongoing struggle, with the past. It is to establish a kind of active and open relation to history, and I think that this ongoing and active relation to history is what enables not only the rewriting of the past but a re-imagining of the future. This is something that is very important for us to return to.

Benjamin is Mr. Ruins, right? This is the way in which Derrida evokes Benjamin in *Memoirs of the Blind* when he's talking about ruins. And indeed there is a very beautiful passage in *Memoirs of the Blind* where at one point Derrida imagines or talks about how he has always wanted to write a treatise on the relationship between love and ruins. Without saying so explicitly, he suggests that one can always only love ruins, because one can always only love things that are mortal. We can only love what is finite. We should bring together this little thread about ruins, about finitude, and about relations with much of what we said earlier.

Rabaté: As you know, Flaubert said it is always stupid to want to conclude. In order not to conclude just yet, perhaps we could take a few minutes to answer questions from the audience. I could see during our discussion that a number of those in the audience wanted to say something. So why don't we just limit ourselves to ten minutes before screening the film.

Cadava: While we're waiting for responses, I'd like to just evoke a recent book by Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*, which is a book very much about the relationship between politics and mourning. At a certain point, she talks about the hierarchy of grief and mourning within the media, within political discourse. Certain people seem to have more of a right to mourn than others, or some lives seem to be worth grieving for more than others.

She raises this issue in the context of the obituaries we saw after the attacks of September 11th in Manhattan, which singularized every death and provided a narrative for each person. We rarely if ever see obituaries for individual

Palestinians, Afghanis, or Iraqis, and there seems to be some kind of hierarchy in relation to who is able to mourn, what lives are to be mourned, and which ones are not. If you conceive of a life as not being a life at all in the first place, as not being worth a life, then how can you possibly mourn it? I think it is important to register this, since it also touches on some of the things that we're talking about.

Another thing that I would just like to say in closing is that if we had a better understanding of the pathology of melancholy, then it might be able to become a resource for us politically. Even in Freud's initial conception of melancholy, the ongoing struggle to negotiate and come to terms with the past, the devotion to the lost object, the inability to overcome the loss and so on, never seems to work. One of the things that we might say here is that the continuous struggle with the past is a way of actively engaging the past. It presumes that the past is not fixed, that it's not complete. It allows for the possibility of an ongoing and open relation to the past. And it seems to me that understanding this might be a resource rather than a difficulty.

Spivak: And to not become incapacitated after a death applies to all this. To an extent, we must be generally able to mourn. Speaking within these conventions about Jacques Derrida, that bottom line is always true. We must behave in a healthy way toward the recently dead. But this is also trivially true to an extent, if you will allow me to make this remark. And how did I forget that all his life Derrida invoked a demi-deuil, a half-mourning?

Cadava: Because it can become a point of departure, rather than simply a beginning.

There's a beautiful moment in *Mémoires*, the text Derrida wrote shortly after the death of de Man. In talking about the goddess Mnemosyne and memory, in talking about Hölderlin and the impossibility of mourning, he confesses that he has never known how to tell a story. This line not only has a strong relation to Benjamin's own resistance to narrative, but in an anecdotal way also resists the

telling of a story. And in resisting narrative, as you suggest, Derrida offers homage to one of the great analysts of the grand narrative, and, in doing so, encourages and enables us to resist a single narrative about what it might mean to mourn him.

Rabaté: Thank you very much.

Cadava: Thank you very much for coming, all of you.



Beckett and the Unfilmable

Branka Arsic

In Conversation with Jean-Michel Rabaté

Jean-Michel Rabaté: Good evening and thank you for being with us. It's hard to break the silence after watching *Film*, but I'm very happy to welcome Branka Arsic, whose recent book, *Gaze and Subjectivity in Berkeley via Beckett*, was what prompted us to organize this evening.

I hope that during our conversation *Film* will become more transparent. I would like to start by asking Branka why she decided to approach Samuel Beckett via Bishop Berkeley. Can we better understand what Beckett has been doing in *Film* through Berkeley? Conversely, can we understand Berkeley better via the modern-age version of a certain number of ideas about vision, the self, reflexivity, and so on?

Branka Arsic: To the extent that Beckett himself imagined *Film* as a sort of commentary on Berkeley's theory of vision, I believe that engagement with Berkeley is not only helpful but necessary for understanding Beckett. At least my personal introduction to Berkeley's philosophy was prompted by a certain "empiricism" of Beckett's understanding of the mind and language, something which, it seems to me, he owes to the Irish philosopher. Beckett's obsessive question, no doubt, was the tension or perhaps dualism between what he somewhere calls the "say" and the "said," and what I read as a difference between intentional speech (the "say") and something that saying says without knowing it, which thus remains muted by speech, even though it is "actual" in the sense of being "vocalized" or sounded. It is this bifurcation of speech that I call his empiricism. The most urgent question Beckett raises is therefore not simply the problem of speech, for the "say" or "saying" is not endangered;

language speaks. The question, for Beckett, was to find out how to say what is muted in being said.

If many of Beckett's "characters" or figures advise us not to exhaust ourselves with speech, as if speaking were impossible, I think it is because the said cannot be controlled by speech. In other words, it is not that speaking comes to a halt because everything is said, because words have lost their meaning, and still less because there is nothing much to be said. The anxiety the voices express about speaking, in Beckett, is not the result of their fear of being articulated in a word, but of knowing that the words would part from their meaning or from what they intend to say. Change of meaning is swift and not controlled by the "thinking I." Meanings proliferate and multiply; we live, I think Beckett wanted to say, in an abundance of meaning, whereas words are slow and reductive. Words negate meaning, which is why meaning finds its way to be said in a way words cannot manipulate (a voice in *Texts for Nothing* says something like, "so long as the words keep coming nothing will have changed"). What is sometimes called Beckett's minimalism is in fact the minimalism of language and the point Beckett is making is that we have to learn how to reach the abundance it negates.

So, what is brought to a halt in Beckett is this saying/speaking that would not let changeable meaning speak. Allowing the meanings to speak in the absence of saying is what we sometimes understand as silence, but Beckett believed, like John Cage, that there is no silence, that silence is only a differently organized sound; "have silence, get into silence, or another sound, a sound of other voices" is his formulaic expression for it. Silence, as one of his voices says, is a "method" not to end words but smiles. People stop smiling at you when you go silent because they think you aren't speaking to them. Silence is the end of smiling but not of speaking.

What I see as Beckett's radical empiricism, therefore, is his constant insistence that everything changes so fast that we don't have the instruments to register it. Both our language and our minds are too slow for that; language mirrors or

triggers—that would be hard to decide—our stupidity: "one enormous second, ... and the mind slow, slow, nearly stopped. And yet it's changing, something is changing... The words too, slow, slow." This is the voice from *Texts for Nothing*. But there is the perhaps more famous formulation of the same idea, from *Endgame*, "What's happening, what's happening?; Something is taking its course." The fact that something is shaping up does not mean that nothing much "really" ever happens. It signals our incapacity to register the intense but minute events. "What exactly is going on, exactly," is the question raised by a voice in *Texts for Nothing* that sums up Beckett's urgency.

To insist on exactitude is to dismiss all approximations, all complex or abstract ideas. There would have to be a word for each minute sensation so as to allow it to shine within its meaning. As is well known, that was Bishop Berkeley's position: no complex, abstract ideas; a divine language in which every sensation has its word, etc. To a sophisticated speculative mind, say a Hegelian, this may sound like a crude proposal. But for Beckett it is the "savageness" of the Irish philosopher that saves the idea of multiplicity and so opens up the possibility that at some point we will sense "exactly" our bodies, words, and desires. In that respect Beckett both inherits and inhabits Irish philosophy.

Film suggests yet another possibility. Being influenced by Berkeley, Beckett introduced a kind of dualism different from the one that mars speech. Not that between the say and the said (even though that remains to complicate things) but between the seen and the saying. We cannot say the things we see. It is an empiricism—the fact that there are faculties but no intentional mind to connect them and so constitute a person—which accounts for the properly Beckettian condition of not being able to say the visible. There is seeing but not the utterance of it. And that is because the visual changes at a faster speed than what the mind needs to translate the seen into words or actions. Our faculties live at different speeds and so in different time zones.

That is what Beckett says when in *Texts for Nothing* he claims that "the subject

dies before it comes to the verb." What comes to the verb is the word in which the subject is buried; that dead subject is the one who in reaching the verb activates it, which is why—because they are activated by a corpse—actions in Beckett fail. The subject who started speaking may perhaps be well alive but traveling toward another word; for, to put it simply, the subject who saw something and is still following the minute changes of the seen cannot possibly reach the verb as the seen travels faster than words. Hence Beckett's dilemma: either passivity, a non-acting as the "display" of the empty subject without a verb; or else an impersonal speaking, the act of speaking in a subjectless way. In both cases the personality behind the voice vanishes. That explains why in Beckett there are no characters or persons but only figures. For figures are clusters of sensations and meanings, surfaces of visual, linguistic or sensual forces, whereas a character requires an intentional mind, overdetermined meaning.

The seen that is divorced from language will remain absolutely silent, and on a "deeper" level than the said, for the said is present within the speech that mutes it, whereas the seen is not. The fact that we cannot say what we see makes, on the one hand, our own speech blind (we never testify to what we are present to) and, on the other, our seeing "literal," as there is no trope to transfer it to language. The situation of the mind is thus devastating, because it sees and it speaks but without any parallelism existing between the two. The visible is absolutely exposed to sight (there are no secrets there), but cannot be translated and so is buried in muteness, turning us into crypts unable to say at the same time as we are speaking blind speech. We are something like chatter-boxes, uttering words that were never affected by the image of a perceived referent. This non-affection that we utter, mentioned so often in Beckett, is not the void of "existential" emptiness but rather the horror caused by our incapacity to say the seen. I believe that for that reason the major question for Beckett became how to say the seen.

Film formulates all those problems: its "protagonist" is neither a "person" nor a "subject" but is explicitly called "Object" and is marked by "O." The Object

(played by Buster Keaton) sees in a Berkeleyan way, monocularly, but does not speak; the film is silent. The object is seen by others and by a particular other that Beckett calls the "Eye," and marks as "E." The "E" has the role God plays in Berkeley: only what is seen by it lives. That is why the screenplay starts with perhaps the most famous of Berkeley's theses, "*Esse est percipi*" ("To be is to be perceived"). No doubt Beckett found the medium of literature and film particularly convenient for reasserting Berkeley's point. For the characters and protagonist clearly exist only so long as we see them or read them, but they exist—and this, I believe, is what haunts Beckett—only and always as objects, never as persons or subjects, only as something we are framing, cutting, seeing (another source of impersonality in Beckett).

Reading or watching is like ruthlessly hunting after a thing *to have*, not after a person *to be*. That is why so many of Beckett's figures are both expecting and avoiding others who threaten to harm them. That doesn't signal Beckett's psychologization of the universe turned into a "paranoid" world but, rather, formulates an ontological statement: others are objects. Because we cannot show the connection between our seeing, thinking and saying, there is no such thing as a subject or a personality; the universe is made of objects. The delusional moment of so-called persons is that they don't see themselves as objects like those they turn others into. It may even be that this delusion is what makes us persons. Our "enlightenment" would then consist in "seeing" or "saying" ourselves in a way that would talk us out of our personalities.

Now, to try to answer your question regarding Berkeley in a more precise way, *Film* is in fact Beckett's profound engagement with Berkeley's philosophy. In his essay on Beckett's *Film* Gilles Deleuze even went as far as to claim that "the role ... played by Buster Keaton would be that of Bishop Berkeley." What Beckett tried to make explicit in the film is a certain reading of Berkeley's theory of vision that addressed the same question: "How am I supposed to say that I see myself?"

Beckett's general instructions for *Film* specify the paradox: on the one hand, he

says, "all extraneous perception suppressed;" on the other hand, the "protagonist" is in flight from "extraneous perception," being overwhelmed by it. This simultaneous suppression and excessiveness of the exterior, this tension that is hard to stabilize makes everything slightly blurred in the film. As if nothing is quite focused or as if everything is only approximate (but approximate to what?).

The blurred and two-dimensional visual field (represented in *Film* by the wall which the protagonist hugs as he tries to walk) is the result of monocular vision. The protagonist is the only one seeing monocularly; everybody else is binocular (focused and "perspectival"). They all live in a world structured "dioptrically," which is why, I suppose, Beckett specifies that all the persons in the opening scene have to be going "in the same direction and in couples," and all have to be "shown in some way perceiving." The protagonist is thus a terrified Berkeleyan body lost in the world of Cartesian (modern) subjectivity.

In his *Optics*—this is just a quick digression that will help me situate *Film*—Descartes tried to account for the fact that we have two eyes but see one image; that the image on the retina is inverted and yet we don't see anything in its inverted form; that we see things at a distance, etc. He offered an elaborate explanation of how light rays intersect to form one image. The intersections of two images account for the fact that we see things at a distance and that images have depth. Through a complicated process of transmission those images are displayed on the screen of our brain as if our brain were a type of movie theater reflecting images. No matter what we perceive (whether it is our own body or an object on the table) the image will have the same status: it will be the object displayed on the brain screen. So the main question for Descartes became the question of who or what sees this geometrized motion picture on the brain. In answering this question, in Discourse Six of his *Optics*, Descartes hit upon a raw version of transcendental subjectivity: it is the soul that sees, not the eyes; the eyes are simply cameras or a type of screen-saver. The soul doesn't see directly but only by means of the brain. This soul is like a spectator seated in the brain, watching the screen, except that in contrast to a moviegoer

it cannot leave the theater unless it translates the images into words.

Berkeley on the other hand, dismissed this whole idea of the intersection of images that would turn the visual field into a geometric projection. In his *Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision* he said that Descartes' effort to explain the existence of distance by reference to lines and angles cannot be taken seriously because it explains the visible by means of the invisible; it explains visible distance by means of invisible intersections. The point Berkeley was making was that we in fact cannot see distance because it is not the object of sight but of touch. It is by touching things that a child learns how to determine and measure distance. Even dioptrical vision is not an immediate experience of sight. "True" or "originary" seeing is monocular, as Beckett understood also, and so he gave Keaton an eye-patch. There is thus no perspective, no distance that would produce depth, so that the visual field is blurred, again in the way that Beckett contrived it.

If the immediate objects of sight are not seen by the eye but "invade" it, what then sees them and from where? Berkeley doesn't have an isolated soul-like spectator in the depths of the brain, he doesn't have an already set "E" to watch the object-images. Such a "beholder" would somehow have to appear out of the images but it is hard to see how it would be different from the images themselves; to translate that into Descartes' terms, it is hard to see how a thought would be different from the brain or, closer to Beckett, how the O can maintain its differential distance from the E. If there are images but not a distant perceiver of them, then there are only images, neither subjects nor objects, only the visible with no one to see it. Berkeley came very close to this collapsing of the distinction between O(bject) and E(ye) and Beckett's *Film* is both an analysis and representation of that. For, as Beckett's instructions specify, until the end of the film "it will not be clear... that pursuing perceiver is not extraneous, but self." What we see at the end of the *Film*—when E falls into O—is the truth of the Berkeleyan person: a self falling into itself and so losing itself. Representation vanishes, because there is no distance, all that remains is presentation. The irony is that since we are spectators of *Film* we are allotted

the position of Descartes' insider-soul, so we can see the "presentation"; we are in the position of persons watching the impersonal.

Rabaté: Anybody who remembers something about Berkeley will indeed quote "*Esse est percipi*" ("To be is to be perceived"). However, as we see in *Film*, it somehow looks as if the character played by Buster Keaton is trying not to be. Branka's book has in the appendix the notes written by Beckett to explain how *Film* was conceived on this very simple idea.

I also think that it is not something that any viewer would understand upon first viewing, namely, that in the end we see a double Buster Keaton. As Branka has just explained, there is one character he calls O, the Object, and another character he calls E, the Eye. And there is an Eye running after the Object and, clearly, it poses many problems, technical and dramatic, and I'm not sure Beckett, or Alan Schneider for that matter, managed to solve them all. One idea that Beckett had, and I'd like to ask Branka what she makes of this, is that there is an angle, what he calls an "angle of immunity." When the camera—which is in fact E in pursuit—is at an angle of less than 45 degrees, it remains within this "angle of immunity." Only when it is at an angle of 45 degrees, the eye, or E, can be seen by the characters who all assume an expression of horror.

Arsic: The fact that the angle of perception should not exceed 45 degrees is an acceptance of the tradition that explains the visible by means of surfaces rather than through depth; it evokes the idea of the visual field as contrived by fresco painting, in which depth is depicted on the surface. The beginning of *Film* is supposed to evoke this. Beckett's instructions specify that the first thing we should see is a street "dead straight, no sidestreets or intersections." In other words, no perspective, no depth. The wall we see at the beginning is another instance of the flat world; Buster Keaton's body is not supposed to be in front of the wall, with the wall as background, but back- and fore-ground should merge. That is why Beckett specifies that there is an "insistent image of wall," a persistent surface. In the third part of the film, when Keaton/Berkeley in his room finally sits down in the armchair, he is disturbed by a drawing of the "face

of God the Father," pinned to the wall. The drawing, being a two-dimensional representation of God, is a reference to medieval icon-painting. The absolute thus becomes a surface. This whole contrivance imposes almost insoluble problems both on the cinematic medium (to the extent that it is almost impossible to imagine a two-dimensional cinematic space, for it would have to place the camera within the things filmed), as well as for the spectators, since in order to see the two-dimensional surface they would have to be differently positioned within the movie theater. Beckett's understanding of the visual, and by extension of subjectivity, requires a different architecture; not only theaters, but, as *Film* suggests, our own rooms as well as streets and cities would have to be differently constructed.

The surface Beckett wants is an effect of the angle of immunity. As long as the convention of seeing at an angle of less than 45 degrees is obeyed, there is only surface. The question is why does he need the angle of immunity, immunity from what? Until the end of the film we are allowed to think that the O wants to be immune from the gaze of God. And we are not mistaken in this. "E" can be the gaze of another. But at the end of *Film*, and that is, I suppose, Beckett's reading of Berkeley, when the person has successfully escaped from the Absolute, the Absolute turns out to be interiorized, it is in the room hunting the person down. At that point the person realizes that it has to find a way to escape its own gaze. The immunity in question is protection from one's own gaze. What Beckett calls an "anguish of perceivedness," the overstepping of the angle, the exposure to the gaze, is the agony caused by what we see when we see ourselves, when we produce a depth in us. It is at that moment that we break down.

This raises crucial questions about the visual in general, about the constitution of the self and more specifically about the relation between the visual and the spoken. For example, if E is the look of our reflexive gaze, something like apperception, the question then is how self-reflection is possible at all if the object supposed to be reflected is immune to reflection. What happens to our self-consciousness when there is no consciousness to be conscious about?

Whether E is God or our apperceptive gaze, during the first part of the film its object is mostly the dead straight street and a flat wall. Both of these represent the unrepresentable or what resists objectivation; they are images supposed to signify the absence of the visible. The reflection is thus blinded or better still, turned into a kind of unconscious, for it moves and so is alive, but does not see anything, just like desire. It is then by convention – by introducing the angle of immunity rule – that we turn self-consciousness into the unconscious.

But the position of the O is perhaps even more interesting. In the third part of the film perception oscillates between the seeing of the O and the seeing of the E. Beckett calls it "the problem of dual perception." Thus, spectators assume both positions, they are sometimes O, sometimes E, and by switching positions they realize that the Object actually sees. The Object (the eyes) that lives its own life, sees its own world. The Object, it seems, is a type of self, for it is less blind than the E; it sees animals in the room, it "inspects the photographs," which means that the object is the one invested with the past and memory to remember it. Its world may be blurred but it seems that it is traversed by emotions, affects, dreams (he takes a nap) and memories. Thus, on the one hand, objects are alive, they are clusters of sensations, which is yet another version of Beckett's empiricism. On the other hand, judging by the fact that the Object in the film has a photographed past, objects seem to transcend the "now" of sensation, which makes it possible to call Beckett's empiricism "transcendental empiricism."

This relation between the object-like mind, which sees two-dimensionally, and the absent subject of speech remained one of the most urgent questions of Beckett's thinking. It is reformulated and posed again as late as *III Seen III Said*, which I mention here because it can be seen as a later version of the notes for *Film*. There, however, only O has "survived," a female figure who, like O, is not conversing with herself anymore, and is no longer blindfolded (as Buster Keaton was), but has managed to enter what Beckett calls the "zone of stones" (as if she were successfully remaining within the angle of immunity). She "trembles imperceptibly without cease," perhaps like stones, like the alive

Object in *Film*, and she doesn't speak, because language as we know it requires us to leave the zone of stones, to encounter our own gaze, to reflect, to produce depth. Since such an encounter doesn't take place, *Film* too has to be silent. Or, when it finally happens, it will be the O into which the E sinks. The last truth of our persons is the black screen, the presentation of the unrepresentable encounter with ourselves.

Rabaté: What you do very well in your book is connect this dialectic with Derrida's magnificent book *Memoirs of the Blind*. In that book, Derrida tries to show that each self-portrait is somehow the allegorization of one's own blindness.

To return to the very basic technological element of *Film*, it's rather surprising to see in 1965 a silent film of deliberately poor, grainy quality. It was the first film made by Alan Schneider and Beckett had never really worked with that medium. What you realize is that this deconstructs the medium itself, something that Beckett would do regularly, as in *Krapp's Last Tape*, where he uses a tape recorder at a time when he barely knew what a tape recorder would be like or function like. I should also just clarify that *Film* is not totally silent. Normally one should hear, and we did hear in the screening, "Shh!" Which leads me to the following question: what is Buster Keaton looking for fundamentally? Why is he doing this? We remember the slapstick scene with the dog, the cat, the fish, all the animals. What does it mean that he cannot stand this gaze?

Arsic: The most obvious explanation, which I've already touched upon, would be that Beckett (somewhat like Berkeley) was suggesting that true horror comes from the experience of seeing oneself. A less obvious but perhaps more precise explanation would be that the awfulness of this "fixed" gaze, or the idea of a stable personality, derives from the fact that it violates both perception and speech by imposing on them firmly contrived habits of thinking. We think in notions and concepts and those notions routinely erase the minute changes registered by our perception which break off the continuity of our thinking. Our very personality is habitual, "that habit that we call person," Beckett sometimes

says. Far from being alive and perceptive such a habitual personality is only "that symptom that we call life." Thus, the major interest of Beckett's literature was its move from symptom to life itself, breaking with one of the main habits of the continuous self, namely narrative. All the stories we keep telling are the results of certain bad habits, most specifically a habit of saying "I". As a voice proposes towards the end of part four of *Texts for Nothing*, it is our speech and our stories that claim that life has to be one ("There is my life... there has to be one, it seems, once there is speech," the voice says), but this "has to be" is the injunction imposed by speech that we habitually identify with narrative logic. The ideology of personal continuity is thus the effect of the ideological presumption that we need narrative, not vice versa. It is narrative that needs a responsible personality in order to be told. Certain narrative-driven literature is thus like the E in *Film*, a badly contrived habit hunting down its object, a badly contrived apparatus, a *crappy last tape*.

On the other hand, Beckett's main question is how can we emancipate ourselves from continuous speech in order to access life, perception, and language? As somebody in *Texts for Nothing* voices, "stories" are not compulsory, "just life," and so the question is how can we invent words for the sensations life is made of, and then let them go in a discontinuous way? There the problem is doubled: for we are affected by words too, which means that in order to utter an experience we would have to invent words for words. As forces of affection, words are nameless too; hence the question: what is a good word for a word? The words are "heart-burning" but how "shall I name my unnamable words?"

This strategy of constant renaming of words in order to name them more precisely, a practice that follows the affective word wherever it goes, forgetting at the same time its connection with other words—what we experience as a discontinuity in Beckett's writing—is in fact his effort to get us out of the habit of continuous reading and in so doing to get us out of the habit of being a continuous person. His literature practices Berkeley's and Hume's thesis that "I is nothing but a bundle of sensations." In order to say "exactly" each of the

sensations this incoherent bundle is composed of, each sensation and each word would have to be rewarded with a word to name it. And so the words would have to multiply, not in a coherent but in a "compulsory" way, in the way life lives. In this sense, I see Beckett's literature as an effort to invent and practice a specifically empiricist writing.

Film visualizes this practice of ridding oneself of habitual personality. To escape self-perception is to forsake the habit we call the "self." The third part of the film, when the protagonist sits down to inspect his photographs, depicts his process of de-contriving the habit called memory. For how are we going to escape self-perception if we are still constituted by the gaze of the past? In the film we see what is in the photographs and so can surmise something about the life of the protagonist. But even though Beckett's notes for *Film* specify the content of the photographs it seems to me that Beckett was more interested in a type of numerical progression, which represents not only linearity but also an increase in quantity: we are linearly continuous as if there were "more" of us that way. In order to disturb this logic his screenplay specifies that the protagonist should inspect the photographs in order from 1 to 7, and then tear them into pieces in the reverse order. The process is not regression but extinction of the habit: 7-6-5-4...1...0. Zero is the signifier of the impersonal. How many persons are there now, at the moment when the whole past is torn into pieces, or how many habits contrive us?

Rabaté: It seems that for Bishop Berkeley, God is always the ultimate agency that justifies the language of nature. To return to the very plot of *Film*, it appears as if Buster Keaton or O, as you just suggested, was trying to empty out, or get rid of images, to destroy the reflections, to get rid of all the eyes. This leads me to a term that you often use and return to in your book, namely "exhaustion" and the idea of exhausting something. And you quote from a very important article by Deleuze focusing on exhaustion that was groundbreaking, at least for me, in my reading of Beckett. For Deleuze, Beckett presents the archetype of the exhausted subject. Is this something that you consider to be important?

Arsic: For me too Deleuze's essay *The Exhausted* was decisive, for it managed to avoid the dead end of all those readings that referred to the tiredness of Beckett's figures and then proposed various ideological readings of it (Beckett's figures as images of alienation, Beckett's literature as social critique, etc). Deleuze proposed not an existential but an ontological distinction between tiredness and exhaustion, in saying that "the tired person can no longer realize, but the exhausted person can no longer possibilize." Exhaustion refers to a world in which the "possible" is exhausted. Such a world is not dead, empty, motionless and still less meaningless. The fact that there is no longer anything possible does not refer to what some critics call Beckett's modernist disenchantment but is, as Deleuze specifies, a form of "relentless Spinozism." In saying that he had in mind the 7th Proposition of Spinoza's *Ethics*: "The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things." In other words, each thing has its own idea, but there are no ideas of ideas, there are no reflexive ideas (reflexive ideas being for Spinoza only a certain form of the ideas of things). For Spinoza there cannot be ideas of ideas because in that case there would be more ideas than things, there would be truly abstract or merely possible ideas (ideas are therefore literal and "exact"). And so, the world of exhausted possibilities is a world in which there are no ideas of ideas, no syntheses of those ideas into an idea of "person," for there is no thing that corresponds to such an idea ("person" is a mere possibility or abstraction, something that Spinoza calls a "common concept"). There is only an endless proliferation of things with their corresponding ideas. Each thing is thought of by its own idea, not by a person who reflects it and represents it. It is an endless universe in which things happen to no one in particular and are thought by ideas that do not belong to anyone in particular. An impersonal world.

I used Deleuze's term "exhaustion" but tried to redefine it into something I called the "passive synthesis of exhaustion," which rather than being a Spinozism I saw as a transcendental empiricism. My proposal is thus closer to the way Deleuze reads empiricism. I wanted to suggest that even though exhaustion in Beckett eliminates reflexive subjectivity, or the active synthesis of reflection by which we recognize certain thoughts as our own and in so doing recognize the

existence of our selves, there is in exhaustion still a certain type of synthesizing, however not one that is performed by any person. In other words, there would be motion, as in a relentless Spinozism, but there would also be some synthesizing, which would not be performed by an intentional subject, which is why I call it passive. An impersonal synthesis.

Certain habits are contrived in what Beckett calls the "zone of stones." In fact, stones are such an impersonal habit of the Earth. A stone is an example of what I call the passive synthesis of exhaustion. An ocean is such a habit, such a passive synthesis of exhaustion, with its own multiple syntheses (corals, seaweed). This explains the profound importance of the Earth and everything earthly (stones, water, etc) in Beckett. But Beckett thought, I believe, that what we call "human" is also such a passive synthesis. In Beckett, if I can risk such a generalization, not even pain contracts a personality but is rather a pain contrived in itself, existing independently of any "I." The eighth text for nothing, for example, raises that question: There is a pain, but is it my pain? "Am I in pain, whether it's me or not, frankly now, is there pain?" This is a radical proposal, for if anything, pain would "gather" our person. But in Beckett there is a pain (if there is a pain, which cannot be determined because it does not quite hurt anybody in particular), that is as if synthesized on its own, like a seagrass. Thus, perception contrives a habit, a feeling or a thought before we can attend to it. In that sense our thoughts are *ante-meditated*, impersonal, passively synthesized. Something is also synthesized when the protagonist in *Film*, after tearing up the photographs, sits in a rocking chair, and abandons himself to that rocking.

Rabaté: This will be my last question and then I'd like to ask if people in the audience have further questions. This calls up for me, since you were mentioning the rocking chair, a number of texts by Beckett, his later texts for television, but also *Murphy*, in which the hero is always rocking himself to death, as it were, to reach some kind of oblivion. In *Murphy*, we see the hero often trying to reach this state of non-being, and there is a scene which is perhaps the seed or germ of *Film*, in which he sees a psychotic in a mental hospital and

realizes that he is finally not being seen by the psychotic. If I am not mistaken, he says there that you have this rare post-natal treat of not being seen. And that's to abuse a nice distinction, not of perceiving but of being perceived, not of *percipere* but of *percipi*.

In *Murphy*—and I'm not sure what your impression is of this, Branka—we know this is a catastrophic moment that leads to the death of the hero in a very difficult passage somehow. The experience of absolute freedom is also the experience of absolute horror. In that sense, how do you read the ending of *Film*, with the face of Buster Keaton? Some of you may have read in the recent biographies of Beckett that Buster Keaton was almost completely shocked that he was always shot from behind. He told Alan Schneider, "look, I made a living with my face, just use my face a little more." But no, the idea is precisely that you only recognize Buster Keaton, one only discovers it is Buster Keaton, at the end. The face emerges at the end, when it's almost not really a face. So how do you see the ending? Is it horror? Is it peace? Is it both?

Arsic: You are absolutely right, *Murphy* prefigures *Film* in many ways; there is a whole reading of Descartes vs. Berkeley going on there. Murphy, for example, studied under a man called "Neary," which I read as a name for Bishop Berkeley's person who couldn't see distance and who can rid himself of all his habits, his life included, so that Neary, Beckett says, "could stop his heart more or less whenever he liked and keep it stopped, within reasonable limits, for as long as he liked." Murphy on the other hand, is closer to Descartes, and claims "all life is figure and ground"; everything is a geometrical projection.

And then there is the curious sixth chapter in *Murphy* that aims to justify the expression "Murphy's mind," where Beckett engages in an ingenious criticism of Descartes' rationalism. Leaving aside the Cartesian dualism between body and mind he introduces a dualism within the mind, between the actual and the virtual of the mind (I believe that distinction is the background to Deleuze's difficult little article "The Actual and the Virtual"). Virtual, as the narrator specifies, is not a type of unconscious waiting to be actualized, it isn't

formlessness "yearning for form," but "really" and clearly existing mental experience contrived without a physical experience serving as its model and without the assistance of the "I." This mind is also divided into three zones, two of which belong to the actual; the zone of light, composed of thoughts based on physical experience, and the zone of half-light, which is the zone of contemplation. The third zone, the dark zone, is described as a "flux of forms, a perpetual coming together and falling asunder of forms." The narrator specifies that the reason for calling this zone "dark" is not that there is no light in it but because its light travels so fast it cannot be seen. There, forms are perpetually becoming: "but the dark neither elements nor states, nothing but forms becoming and crumbling into the fragments of a new becoming." The experience is described as pure commotion, turning Murphy's body into a "missile without provenance or target, caught up in a tumult of non-Newtonian motion." The motion is non-Newtonian because Murphy's body does not move, but being immobile is traversed by it, by a commotion compared to the "passing away of line." It is a motion of intensities, rather than atoms and it certainly has nothing to do with gravity because there is no falling but only flying, a missile without provenance or target.

In order to "enter" this zone Murphy had to leave the other two or, in other words, everything that is personal (in this third zone becoming are so fast, the narrator specifies, that no love or hate can be contrived). Such depersonalizing becoming is described as "so pleasant that pleasant was not the word." But I don't see this leaving of self-perception as an escape into non-being but rather as an entrance into a different being, a being that is a pure becoming, made of waves of impersonal pleasure so pleasurable that no story can narrate it. *Film* too ends on the brink of this zone that Murphy enters. As Beckett's screenplay specifies, after O faces E, and after we see a face of "acute *intentioness*," "he sits, bowed forward, his head in his hands, gently rocking. Hold it as the rocking dies down." Those are Beckett's last words in the screenplay. The protagonist, just like Murphy, has entered this virtual zone of non-Newtonian motion; we should hope that for him too, as for Murphy, it is a zone of the endless becoming of pleasure.

Rabaté: If anyone in the audience has questions, it's our last chance to postpone the second screening of the film.

Audience question: In *Film*, we see people react to this person that we've never seen before and turn away. But all the animals seem to be drawn to looking at his face and they don't look at his face in horror and turn away. Instead, they keep running back into the frame. Should we make something of this, as the intrusion of the world when you're trying to isolate yourself?

Rabaté: I'd say animals don't have a soul for Descartes. There is no self-consciousness for animals. They are just eyes, or O. They are not brought up in the same dialectic of "*Esse est percipi*." I'm not sure what Berkeley would say about that, but Descartes would say that since animals don't have a soul, therefore they do not worry about self-perception.

Audience question: You said *Film* was blurred in monocular vision. How do you mean?

Arsic: I meant that the way Alan Schneider used the cameras was supposed to "imitate" monocular vision, a vision that would presumably, according to Bishop Berkeley's theory, be two-dimensional. Schneider explains that the secret of *Film* was in its "highly disciplined use of two specific camera viewpoints," but in such a way that each would represent a visual field of one eye, not an image produced by the intersection of images obtained from two eyes.

Beckett here references the way Berkeley answered Molyneux's question. Molyneux, a Dublin lawyer, a member of the Irish Parliament, and author of the celebrated book *The Case of Ireland*, whose son was Berkeley's student at Trinity College, asked the following question: could a blind man, immediately after recovering his sight, name certain shapes or bodies, such as a cube or a globe? The question is not only about naming, but about the connection between touch and seeing. If we presume that the blind man was touching certain bodies before recovering his sight, would he be able to name them once

he saw them, on the basis of his experience of touching? And, if he was unable to recognize them, what exactly would he see?

Berkeley's answer is the one Beckett adopted. There is no connection between touching and seeing. We should not use the same words for the object of touch and the object of seeing and by extension the object of hearing, etc. Berkeley also proposed that a recovered eye would not at first be able to tell how distant the object was, and could not differentiate among shapes or figures. The visual field would be close and blurred. That's the idea Beckett plays with in *Film*.

Audience question: How about someone who only sees through one eye? Will they eventually see like anyone else upon learning?

Arsic: I suppose so, because Berkeley's privileged example is monocular vision. And since he never claimed that there is no distance, but that what we perceive as distance is the effect of a certain type of learning, is the result of experience, I believe that what he had in mind was precisely monocular vision.

Audience question: What is the meaning of the first and last eye that he sees? Is that Buster Keaton's eye?

Arsic: Well, it's not clear who actually sees that eye, which is Buster Keaton's. It can be a presentation of an eye seeing without seeing itself seeing, and it can be an image seen by the eye of the spectator. According to the logic of *Film* it can be the object we see, thus, our own eye. Or, closer to Berkeley and presuming that *Film* is shown in an empty theater, with no one to perceive it, it would be an eye that had finally managed to escape perception. One can play with that idea.

Audience: I think he's trying to get away from the idea of representation, and he's trying to question what kind of film he's making...

Arsic: I agree. The point is that the film is called "Film." It's a proper name that

appropriates the whole generic thing. A proper name, as it were, that names what film is all about, or what film should be about. It seems that film should be about questioning the position of the spectator, the impossibility of watching something from a certain distance. The question necessarily affects the position of the camera. If the camera movement is bound by the convention of the angle of immunity then it has to film an objectless visual field and so represent the unrepresentable. That would be a real challenge for film as medium.

Rabaté: I agree completely. This is about the presentation of something that is fundamental in the filmic disposition as such. What is remarkable is that you reach this via a relatively absurd or random point of departure. A certain angle would allow E not to be seen, which is almost impossible to perceive, as you may have noted, as soon as we don't have a wall as a backdrop figuring the ground.

The device works well at the beginning, because you can't see the angle and there is this striking shot. But as soon as we are in the room, and we are not following the character along the wall, you can't tell at which angle we are located. This is a convention that is exploited by the very narrative, but it allows Beckett to question one basic convention of most films: certain shots are supposed to be objective while others are subjective. We see Buster Keaton and we see what he sees, and then the camera is supposed to be Buster Keaton's eyes. But we also see Buster Keaton seeing his eyes, seeing himself, and so on. There is an endless mirroring of the viewing process.

Arsic: According to Alan Schneider there is a fundamental difference between the eye at the beginning of the film and the eye at the end. In the first instance, he says, "the texture of Buster's own eyelid was beautifully creased and reptilian." He sees the eye as a very old reptile's eye, perhaps a fossilized eye that is supposed to show the whole (impersonal) history of its seeing. Something like a natural history of an eye. The final close-up of the eye, Schneider specifies, was supposed to be "much more vital." They wanted to suggest a transformation, then. At the end, there is a life and its seeing.

Schneider relates how they had a feeling that Keaton put all his life into that last face and last close-up. It is at that moment, he says, that the face paid off, even if you don't know it's Keaton's.

Rabaté: Beckett wanted Charlie Chaplin originally. Buster Keaton was a very good substitute for Chaplin, however. Obviously, Beckett wanted somebody who would be associated with slapstick film and silent film, the early age of Hollywood. This is part of *Film*. *Film* is about film, and Buster Keaton is a sort of synecdoche, he represents film.

I was thinking again about *Murphy* in connection with the question of Buster Keaton's participation in *Film*-at one point in *Murphy*, two characters in a Dublin pub, Wylie and Neary, discuss Bishop Berkeley and immaterialism, since he's known for an immaterialist philosophy, and one character says, "Oh, it's a defense mechanism. Immortalize or bust." Basically, that would be the only choice left to the Irish: immortalize or bust.

Now we will watch *Film* a second time. But first, I would just like to thank Branka and all of you very much for your questions.



Film as Critical Practice

*Thomas Y. Levin, Keith Sanborn, and Anthony Vidler
In Conversation with Jean-Michel Rabaté*

Thomas Y. Levin: I thought we could begin by my telling you a little story of which you have a trace in this newly released box set of Guy Debord's film works on DVD. A version with English subtitles should be coming out eventually, hopefully with some of the corrections to the transfers that Keith Sanborn, who is here with us tonight, has noted in his excellent review article in *Artforum* in February 2006.

One of the most wonderful things about this set of DVDs (besides finally giving us access to Debord's films) is that it includes a useful booklet with all kinds of documents and unedited pieces around the film works, which is a treasure trove. The first thing you see when you open the little volume is a preface by Debord's widow Alice Debord; the second item is a letter to me dated May 29, 1987, when I was living in Paris. Good things sometimes happen when you are avoiding finishing your dissertation, and I was avoiding writing mine by getting involved with a group that was putting together the first exhibition on the Situationist International which began at the Centre Pompidou and then traveled to the ICA in London and the ICA in Boston.

My responsibility was to write about Debord's films, but these were, as many of you may know, radically unavailable at the time. Until quite recently they had been utterly available –shown continuously and exclusively in the Studio Cujas, a cinema that Debord's patron and friend Gérard Lébovici had bought for just that purpose on the Left Bank. But, in 1984, the Hollywood-style French film producer Lébovici was suddenly and mysteriously assassinated in a parking garage off the Champs Elysées, a murder case that was never cleared up and

which Debord was understandably outraged by, not least because some journalists went so far as to accuse him of being somehow involved. In a book commemorating his deceased friend Debord then announced, "I'm going to withdraw my films. They will never again be shown in France, and this will be a fitting tribute to a man whose death I am mourning."

As a scholar, I took Debord at his word and wrote him a letter saying: "Look, I completely respect the gesture of mourning, etc., but I really need to see these films because I am writing about them. Is there any way you would consider showing them to a young American graduate student outside of France—say, in Germany or somewhere else?" I sent my inquiry to his press, the Éditions Champ Libre (which had also been financed by Lébovici), and, to my amazement, Debord replied. This letter is the one reprinted in the booklet accompanying the DVDs. In it, he basically says, "You know, actually, I was wrong. I should not have said never again in France, I should have said never again anywhere, or at least as long as I live, because after all nobody can fault me for what happens after I am no longer alive." In retrospect this was a chilling description of exactly what would happen years later. Not two months after his suicide in November 1994, on January 9, 1995, two of Debord's films, *La Société du spectacle* (*The Society of the Spectacle*; 1973) and *Réfutation de tous les jugements, tant élogieux qu'hostiles, qui ont été jusqu'ici portés sur le film 'La Société du Spectacle'* (*Refutation of All the Judgments, Pro or Con, Thus Far Rendered on the Film "The Society of the Spectacle"*, 1974) (which we are going to see here tonight), were shown together on television for the first time with a collaborative *télé-film Guy Debord: son art et son temps* (*Guy Debord: His Art and His Times*; 1994) that he made with a French film television film producer named Brigitte Cornand. Astonishingly, these three films were shown on the commercial channel Canal+ in a program entitled *Soirée Guy Debord*. Of course Situationist freaks all over the world eagerly taped the broadcast, which became the basis for the dissemination of these films for the subsequent decade.

It is on the basis of those videos that Keith Sanborn made the admirable

subtitled version which is largely responsible for the dissemination of both *La Société du spectacle* and *Réfutation* in the United States. Alas this was well after I had published my long essay on these films in the catalogue for the ICA Boston Situationist exhibition. And so, in a sense, what we are marking here tonight with this event, is the end of the condition of complete unavailability of Debord's cinema since the death of Gérard Lébovici.

An unavailability with one amusing exception: there was in fact one of Debord's six films that I was able to see, having learned through my correspondence with Debord that there was one print of one of the short films in the archive of Asger Jorn in Silkeborg, Denmark. I made a pilgrimage up to this tiny town, got the 35mm print, rented the local cinema and had the projectionist screen it for me four times. He thought I was a madman, but this rather obsessional excursion later became the basis of my friendship with Guy Debord who deeply appreciated the extent of my philological devotion to the project. One of the results of that friendship are the artifacts you see in the Slought Foundation installation in the room immediately behind us (many of them gifts to me from Debord), which became the basis of my collection of "Situana."

So, tonight, we are all in the happy position of being able to actually see high-quality DVDs of these films, however comprised some of the transfers may be. We thought this was an excellent occasion to bring together some people who have written about, and have an interesting critical take on, the Situationist material to talk about what these films are all about. How are we to approach the films of Guy Debord today and what does it mean to talk about "theoretical cinema"? What relevance does this set of works spanning from the early 1950's to the early 1990's have for critical practice of all sorts today? What is the Situationist International and how does that important but short-lived formation relate to this strange body of works? These are some of the questions that we would like to talk about. I'm really delighted to welcome you all to this event; there will, of course, be time after our discussion for you to raise questions and make comments.

Jean-Michel Rabaté: The challenge for all of us here at Slought tonight is to consider not only the availability, but also the meaning, of these films today—politically and also artistically. We are interested in interrogating the main concepts underpinning these practices.

Keith Sanborn: Debord says it quite well himself: he talks about the lack of accessibility to the collective art of our time, by which he means the cinema. *Critique de la séparation* (*Critique of Separation*; 1961), the next film that he made after *Sur le passage de quelques personnes à travers une assez courte unité de temps* (*On the Passage of a Few Persons Through a Rather Brief Unity of Time*; 1959), is even more explicitly about situations. I would say this is definitely a period when he is articulating this theory, and it seems quite clear that he's going to great pains to show how problematic it is to communicate that via a film.

It's articulated in an indirect manner, however. It's always, as he says, "just like this bad tracking shot." There's always this gap that occurs. I don't remember exactly where, but he compares this tracking shot to bad newsreel footage of Saint-Germain-des-Prés. If you've seen any French newsreels from that period, it's pretty obvious what he's talking about. I don't think it's just a case of making a virtue of necessity. I think it seems fairly deliberate that he uses what he does.

Rabaté: Without further ado, perhaps we can just start by screening *Sur le passage*, and then resume our discussion.

Screening of *Sur le passage*

Anthony Vidler: There seems to be a very strong contrast in this film between the *société du café* and the society of the bourgeois outside. It's very interesting because one finds that between 1951 and 1953 Debord is rediscovering the society of the *précieux* in the 17th century. And he's precisely looking very hard at the *Carte du Tendre* or the Map of Tenderness.

He writes about it in *Potlatch*, around the same year he makes this film. It's interesting because he says the society of the *précieux* is oppositional in the same way as Pascal countered Descartes. It's a society which is counter to the rule, the norm, the geometrical, and so on. And it is a society established through conversation. By being established through conversation, it becomes an *other* society which can produce almost a kind of utopian existence. It also discovers, he says, the architectural promenade. The notion of the architectural promenade through the garden, conversing secretly, becomes also synonymous for him with the promenade through the city. This is developed into the form of the *dérive*, as we know.

The *dérive* is that moment in a kind of group psychological dynamic of winding one's way through the city. It's a kind of automatic writing by means of actual physical movement in a city—quite randomly, but of course unconsciously (and therefore not by chance) and with a little inebriation (usually after lunch)—tracing a city as if it has an unconscious. As you remember, the first map that Debord and Asger Jorn make is also subtitled with a Pascalian title, "The Passions of the Soul." It's a matter of trying to find the passions of the soul in a city which is rapidly transforming. There's an element of nostalgia in all his shots of Paris, even in the '50s, especially the shots of Les Halles which are already being planned for destruction. So it's almost like the moment when Aragon looks at the *passages* of Paris in the *Paysan de Paris* as if to say, 'Well, it's all gone already so I'm looking, even though I'm here and looking at it physically, it's already a dream.'

Levin: The city is the site of all kinds of possibilities—some lost forever, only to be nostalgically mourned. It is also the site where various tactical interventions such as the *dérive* can take place and be put into operation. One of the variations of that practice that I love the most is the rigorous navigation of, say, the city of Paris using—and strictly following—a map of London: an encounter of newness in something that is in fact familiar, all too familiar. There's also the possibility precisely in *dérive*, as he puts it in this film, of discovering architectures for slightly less mediocre games.

Vidler: *De mettre en place le paysage urbain*. So it's a landscape, an urban landscape, but another use of it. You can't transform the buildings, right? We've given up, actually, on large scale urban renewal. We can't transform the buildings but we can transform the psyche of the city from Baudelaire to Breton to Debord.

Rabaté: This calls up Surrealist group activities in a broad sense. One of their games was to go to the Paris boulevards and there move from cinema to cinema, seeing films at random without following any consistent story. What surprises me again each time that I see these images and hear the soundtrack is the classicism of the form, something that I think is particularly Debord's—it comes out quite strange when you see it coupled with his brand of neo-Marxism. There is also something that goes beyond Surrealism, it is extremely poetic, a poem to Paris you might say with a lot of nostalgia. Is this something that you see as productive or symptomatic?

Sanborn: I want to back up a little bit. I have to object somewhat to this. Although there's clearly a line that passes through the Surrealists, the Situationists are very skeptical about the richness of the unconscious. And so, we're not talking about *Nadja* here; it is a tactic, a purposeful one: if you are walking around even someplace you know very well and you are completely wrecked, you're going to get a different view of it, but there is still always this project of a theoretical positioning and articulation of things. I would say you might want to substitute the social for the unconscious. There's always a sociological aspect to psychogeography even if it's coined somewhat problematically or somewhat offhandedly. I would say (and this ties in with the issue of nostalgia), there's a point at which Debord says something about small groups and their own private languages, which sounds very much like an essay that appeared in one issue of the SI journals, by Michèle Bernstein, in which she talks about the need for secret languages. And the language that they are talking about is really the language of the *Coquillards*. It's the group of thieves that François Villon associated himself with in the latter part of his life. And it's interesting that both Michèle Bernstein and Alice Becker-Ho have written

extensively on this. There's a book by Alice Becker-Ho, that I just happen to be reading at the moment, it's called *Argot: The Inheritors In Bastardy* and she talks about the relationship between the *Coquillards* and the Knights Errant, which, I would suggest, is a nostalgic connection, but one developed with a very disabused understanding of both. She develops a very interesting and non-traditional sense of the secret allusive language of the Provençal troubadours called *trobar clus*. And there's a way in which there's a direct comparison made between these new words like *dérive* and *détournement*, formulated by the Situationists, and this older tradition of secret languages. The Situationists even give a dictionary for those interested. They are articulating a new language which is deliberately set at variance with certain other traditions...

Levin: Maybe I could just interrupt for a moment, just to make sure we are on the same page: *détournement*. Let's just develop a quick working definition. And since we have a beautiful catalog of *détournement* in this film, at least in its cinematic manifestation, what is *détournement* and why is it so central to the SI project, and certainly to Guy Debord's cinematic project?

Sanborn: In French, *détournement* has three basic meanings. The first one is embezzlement, like "*détournement de fonds*." The second one is hijacking, like "*détournement d'un avion*." The third one is corruption of a minor, like "*détournement d'une mineure*." And with these meanings in mind they provide their own definition, which is: "the reuse of preexisting materials in a higher construction of the milieu." Said a little less opaquely, it means quotations both in the sense of verbal quotations and filmic quotations.

Levin: In a word—tactical plagiarism.

Sanborn: Exactly.

Levin: So in other words, in terms of the film we just screened, there are many citations of other works. A lot of the voice-overs are texts taken from all kinds of sources. Some of the images we saw were taken from other films and

photographs. Even the blank or white screen is itself, you could say, a citation, a plagiarism, a recycling of perhaps the key feature of Debord's *succès de scandale*, the 1952 *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* (*Howls for Sade*). As many of you may know, this is a film that was technically described as a film without images. When there was a voice on the soundtrack, you saw a white screen, and when there was silence on the soundtrack you saw a black screen, up to and including the final 24 minute long black silence, which as you can imagine caused quite a bit of unease in the audience. Indeed, here I would say this film in its citation of that moment, a kind of *reductio* moment of cinema, not only refers to this early experiment in another moment in Debord's career, his Lettrist phase (and we can talk about the Lettrists in a moment), but this question of, as one of the phrases at the end of the film says, "*le cinéma devra être détruit aussi*": "cinema too must be destroyed." So we are witnessing here an attempt to think through the destruction of a certain cinema and the invention—however tentative and exploratory this may be—of a different kind of cinema. What kind of a new cinema is it? How does it compare to other work being done at the time, early Godard, etc.? This is also something we can talk about, in the context of *détournement* and *dérive*.

Rabaté: And then there is this rhyme that I think is more obvious in French, *vie/ville*, concerning everyday life and the city. Somehow I think this has to be negated or critiqued. There were obviously lots of quotes from Marx. Which leads me to my actual question—since you all know Debord's works far better than I do—about the role of Marx or of a certain Marxism. Would you say that Marx is also *détourné*? Is he no more than just a text that will function next to Pascal and lots of other writers?

Vidler: Well, 1952. Paris, 1952, with the Algerian War at its height and oppression of both demonstrators in Algeria and in France and across Europe at their height. With very antique methods, we come out of the Second World War—we are only seven years out of the Second World War—and Charles de Gaulle is still at the height of his power. And yet, at the same time, we're living in a pre-war world with pre-war attitudes from the ruling classes and opening up

to the society of consumption which is parodied in the soap and the fingernails and the sort of beauty efforts and the car efforts and so on and so forth. Those kinds of clashes are brilliantly portrayed in this film. I mean the politics of this film is on the one hand incredibly overt, but on the other hand extremely subtly mediated to show how those worlds are in fact living not just side by side but inside each other in that Paris, and it is very difficult to extract each of those things. And of course the Surrealists—Breton and Aragon—were Marxists, communists in fact, PC members. So I think that the Marxism of Debord and his generation is a very select Marxism. It becomes in the late fifties the Marxism of the early Althusser and the young Marx—a post-Hegelian Marx. And I think there's a whole discussion to be made actually about Debord and Hegel and, if you like, the Marxization of Hegel as the young Marx's manuscripts, the *Anti-Dühring* and so on, are being discovered at that moment and translated in the very bookstores that *Potlatch* is being distributed in.

Sanborn: Yeah, absolutely. I think it is a rereading of Marx, who is definitely part of the intellectual horizon. But there is also a kind of rereading of Marx through Hegel and specifically through the neo-Hegelians. In *Society of the Spectacle*—I was mentioning this earlier—there's a quotation from August von Cieszkowski, from his book called *Prolegomena to Historiosophy*, in which Hegel is described as thinking basically that he had arrived at the end of philosophy; philosophy ended with him. And he also thought that art had suffered a similar kind of fate. So what von Cieszkowski talks about is what comes next. And he calls it post-theoretical synthetic praxis. And I think this complexity that you're talking about there is precisely that. Debord is not philosophizing over an image as Godard sometimes does, rather he's making a complex use of the cinema. There's some place in their definitions where they say that there can be no Situationist cinema, there can only be a Situationist use of those means. Now of course they do contradict themselves later on—René Viénet does call for a Situationist cinema. In a way, it's a small point, but it's also a kind of important point, about finding their own particular place. Building their own reading of history out of these fragments and creating something, that's meant to be fun but is also meant to be something that you

can't express any other way.

Vidler: And continuously resisting reification. No Situationism, only the use of Situationist means. There's no labeling, although they label like crazy. The labels are continuously taken off and floating and repositioned in a different image.

Sanborn: Right. They refused to be labeled while they're quite willing to label other people.

Levin: Maybe it might help for me to quickly list some of the authors cited in the voice-over of the film you just saw, at least according to those identified for me by Debord. One of the first voiceovers is by Henri Lefebvre, then a quote by Marx, then a quote by what he calls pseudo-Pascal, Huizinga, Marx, Lenin, and the sociologist Edgar Morin whose work *L'homme ordinaire au cinéma* just came out in an English translation last year. He's a very interesting figure. Anyway, it gives you a sense of the landscape.

Vidler: And I've very recently found that the black screen and the white screen are actually quotations from his favorite English novel, Laurence Sterne's *Tristam Shandy*. He uses the play on narrative in the novel as a comment on the whole problem of mapping and how in fact you can't actually narrate anything without a map but you can't make a map of a narration. And then you suddenly realize that the black page in *Tristam Shandy* which cuts the narrative in a particular way, at the statement "Alas poor Yorick" completed by the black page that stands in for "he is dead." For Debord this in turn stands in for the screen of no more cinema.

Levin: So you've already given us a hint about one of the key tactical moves of the cinema-to-come that is in a sense Debord's project: the refusal of a certain kind of narrative logic. In the first white screen of the film we just saw, he says, "In order to really properly critique a social formation you have to critique or refuse all forms of language of that social formation." So if the dominant

cinematic language is what film theorists and narratologists have called "classical Hollywood narration," it refuses that. Yet he evokes at least two other genres. (The meta-theoretical or film-theoretical comments always occur over the white screen, which is a good flag.)

First of all, he talks about a theory of the documentary. What would it mean to make a documentary about a particular historical moment? This is a question which this film can also be read as in some sense also an answer to. Over another white screen, the voice-over also invokes another genre, which is the art film. And Debord's relationship to aesthetic practice, indeed the entire Situationist project and its relationship to what was initially a series of avant-garde formations, even in their refusal of dominant critical artistic practice, is nevertheless an artistic practice. This was of course the problem for the curatorial team that was putting together an exhibit in a museum. What do you do with a formation where the question of works, in the sense of something you would put on a wall, drops out very fast, and where the notion of the aestheticized framed pamphlet is in fact anathema? It is in fact a gross caricature of everything they were trying to do—aestheticization, reification, commodification, etc.

Vidler: One of the things that is left out of our analysis is the voice-over of the quotations in the images, the actual voice-over, and the voice-over of the musical quotations, for of course all the music is in quotations. All the music is absolutely and precisely quoted. There's one magnificent moment at the end, when Handel's Royal Fireworks music arises in the Place Louis XV. There's a kind of extraordinary evocation of the power of the *Ancien Régime*... and then back to the café.

Rabaté: I have a more conceptual question: "*situation*" had already been used by Sartre in his own critique of reification and yet Sartre is never quoted as far as I know. Perhaps because Sartre is the dangerous double of what they are trying to do. But what I was trying to think through here is how can this critique of alienation, reification, and commodification be wielded in the name of a group

that is obviously outside the cycles of production? Does negation have to be radical—does everything have to be destroyed—or can there be something like a dialectical negation or a political negation?

Levin: One way to begin, and perhaps Tony can speak to this, is as complicated and seemingly contradictory as the project of what it means to make Situationist Cinema. It is also the question of what it would mean to think Situationist Architecture. At early points in the project there was the notion: "Well, we could actually build something!" and the relationship with Constant seems to promise, or hold out the promise, of another way of building. Anyway, do you see that as a way of perhaps talking about the constructive possibility of limits?

Vidler: There is obviously an elaborate theory of the construction of situations, which is very non-Sartre. But of course the construction of situations is also aleatory, partly chance, partly psychic, partly group dynamics, partly the environment, and so on. But occasionally it has the ring to my ears of an earlier Futurist moment where the Futurists used to provoke their audiences by throwing pepper into the audience, or putting glue on the seats so the audience couldn't get up, and so on. The provocation of situations...

Levin: 24 minutes of black silence.

Vidler: Right. Exactly. So there is a kind of action there in terms of provoking situations. And I think there's a moment when a sort of analytical moment of the psychic organization of the city does intersect with a moment in a kind of post-war utopianism in architecture. I think that there is a brief confluence of these two. I remember going to a conference at the ICA in London where the Situationists came to explain their ideas and they were skeptically received by the more utopian of the architecture groups in London—the Archigram group in particular—and entirely dismissed by the establishment in Architecture and especially by the members of Team Ten. But there was a moment where there was a kind of utopian confluence—and I think it was all around, everybody at that time was absolutely excited by Fourier and the rediscovery of a notion of

an alternative voluntary collective which could arrange things psychically (and sexually), in a way that had never been done before, precisely because, in a sense, natural inclinations could be followed. The architects and the activists in these sort of small group movements in society had this illusion that they could build it first—an illusion which was very quickly dispelled when the buildings of Constant looked very much like the buildings of Van Eyck or the buildings of Team Ten. And suddenly Debord had to pull back and say, in fact...

Levin: "No way!"

Vidler: Very quickly. In one year.

Levin: But it explains why one of the first buildings that was acknowledged as potentially something of a model for Situationist architecture was Constant's model for a gypsy camp—talk about a mobile alternative for social configuration! This building was ultimately never built, but I think one finds resonances in the later project for the Fun House, of a building for the Construction of Situations that would be staffed by a team of "professional Situationist managers" who would be responsible for constantly changing everything, from spatial arrangements to what they called "atmospheres." Everything was modular and changeable and you could produce environments and spaces and literal climates to provoke new forms of situations.

Vidler: Debord had to pull back from this sort of almost Disneyland fantasy.

Sanborn: I think there's a strong negative-utopian impulse in the work and in some of the architectural interventions they talk about. As opposed to things that are actually built, they talk about putting a dimmer switch on a street lamp so you can adjust it to the brightness you'd like, or making stairways across the roofs of buildings so you can go different places at night.

Levin: Reconfiguring the city?

Sanborn: It's a repurposing of the extant city rather than the building of the New Babylon that was Constant's project.

Vidler: And that's the difference between the SI and the Surrealists. The Surrealists want to re-semanticize the city whereas the Situationists want to re-functionalize the city in a completely other form. They want to open up the city to use...

Levin: Where use is a use of game, of play, of abandon, of craziness.

Sanborn: Debord is also a bit of a social engineer himself. And the Situationists never operate entirely by chance. Debord's a great social engineer; he's a student of Balthasar Gracián, and others, but in particular Gracián because he talks about how to succeed and it's a little bit more like what Bakunin says about being the pilot at the secret center of the storm. His version of anarchism is one where he plays an off-screen role; the social engineering he practiced is one where he creates the situations. Ralph Rumney talks about a game that Debord proposed about people trying to cross a certain street. And Debord's the kind of person who likes to specify the rules for a game and then see what happens when you play it. There's an element of chance, but really, every situation is a kind of loose laboratory situation.

Levin: But that seems so at odds with the film that we just watched. Where is the notion of playfulness, of humor, of *les passions de l'amour*, of which you see a marvelous example in the psychogeographic map of Paris displayed in the room behind us? Maybe I'm missing it, but do you see that playfulness in these films? And if not, what does that tell us?

Vidler: Is there a shift, do you think?

Sanborn: I think there's a certain amount of playfulness here. I think there's also, as he says in *Critique*, a number of in-jokes. If you recognize the players, there are certain players he keeps focusing on. His then-partner, and later wife,

Michèle Bernstein is there. And there's the still that he focuses on where Michèle is sitting across the table and he has his arm around the neck of this other woman. There's a lot of these. He's referring to a lot of little games that go on within the café world. And it's playful in a very sharply ironic way.

Levin: This points us towards one way of understanding how a film could produce, as he puts it in the beginning of the film we just saw, a *micro-société provisoire*—a provisional micro-society. It's through a certain often ironic wink-wink, a private language, a new form of language, but also a kind of encryption. This is a film where every image is a kind of cipher. For instance, it's about recognizing that one of the first houses and streets you see from the Left Bank is the building that Debord lived in all his life, or even the recognition of certain spaces, for instance what was later called the *Le Continent Contrescarpe* around the Pantheon where the SI had its offices and which then became the space of the May '68 insurrection. The more you know, the more you are part of the group, and the more, as it were, it speaks to you. Like the journal itself, you begin to recognize the creation of a community through a kind of collective production...

Vidler: And a continuum, inclusion followed by an exclusion. Talk about social engineering...

Sanborn: Throughout the whole history of it...

Vidler: There was only one left at the end.

Sanborn: Well, actually three I think. Three! There was Viénet, Michèle Bernstein, and Debord. And they finally dissolved it at the end.

Levin: Perhaps this is not too thematically coherent, but could you also read his own suicide as a kind of auto-exclusion? "I want to have the last word, not mere biology. Thank you very much. Goodbye." And I say that as somebody who, myself, was also excluded! Having become friends with Debord at one point I

was meeting with him regularly to talk about the research I was doing. And then I made a mistake. I had some friends at Zone Books who were trying to publish the new translation by Donald Nicholson-Smith of the *Society of the Spectacle*, and Debord was not giving his permission. So they said, "Tom, would you please intervene on our behalf and see if you can get him to give his okay?" The next time I went to his house for dinner, between an incredible number of bottles of wine, I said to Debord, "Look, I've checked this translation, and really it's very good. It's not necessarily how I would translate it, but it's serious and we need a new translation. Would you please let them go to press with it? Why are you objecting?" What I hadn't realized was that the translator, Nicholson-Smith, was an ex-Situ. And thus by advocating the work of someone he had excluded, I had gone over, as Debord put it, to the side of *les gangsters*.

Sanborn: Wasn't it a matter of money? They didn't want to pay him?

Levin: I don't know; perhaps. This could be the melodramatic high-moral-groundization of what was ultimately pecuniary. Whatever it actually was, the result for me was that as Debord put it, in classic Debordian fashion, "*je me vois forcé de te rayer de la liste de mes amis*"—I have no choice but to cross you out from the list of my friends. And indeed, much to my regret, I never saw or spoke to him again.

Vidler: He probably meant it literally, too.

Levin: "NEXT!"

Rabate: To have been excluded by Debord, that already justifies a whole career. But I think we could take two questions now before moving on...

Audience question

Levin: The question that has just been asked concerns the relationship of Debord with the more or less contemporary works of Godard.

Sanborn: I would say two things in response. I'm not a profound scholar of Godard, but I think if you look at what Godard is doing in 1957 and what is happening here, I think you'll see that this film—and it's what I asserted in my recent piece in *Artforum* and what I believe to be true—has almost all of the cinematic tropes of the French New Wave in one film. Godard works through some of those eventually...

Levin: Give us an example or two.

Sanborn: Well, for example, I can cite the white screen and the black screen that I believe Godard uses in *Le Gai savoir*. What set Debord off was somebody praising the use of a black screen for "a nearly interminable amount of time," which was maybe 15 seconds when he, Debord, had already made a film where the last 24 minutes of a feature length film was absolutely black and absolutely silent in a way that you can't even do in a 35mm film. It was a very special thing that he did.

The other kind of thing that I am talking about is *One + One*, where Godard has these guys talking to the camera, reading Marxist tracts, talking into their Nagra. It's amazing to think they could even stand up that long with a Nagra, those things weigh 25 pounds at least. Anyway, just reading these tracts in a very flattened way, to do the whole thing justice would be more than I can do extemporaneously.

Levin: But there's one important detail which we have to mention, *por favor...*

Sanborn: You're the one who noticed it first of all, though.

Levin: I hope we're not talking about the same thing. Did you notice the soap ad at the end of the film? Did you notice who the actress was? Anna Karina!

Sanborn: Who shortly thereafter married Godard. So, I mean, it's amazingly prescient in a weirdly personal way. This is a young actress who is working her

way up through the French system from fashion ultimately to cinema, and Debord points at her as being a kind of paradigmatic case, even at this stage of her career.

Levin: And of precisely everything that Debord and Godard are ostensibly attempting to critique, at least in her incarnation as a Bathwater Babe. But maybe we need to ask, to the extent that Godard's project can be understood as a theoretical intervention, or an intervention in cinema of a theoretical sort, is what sense these films—this film, and the other films by Debord—can be said to be a practice of theory. Not film theory, per se, but theory as film. And not only at the level of reading of a theoretical text in the voice-over, but in their very practice themselves. In the very complex and essayistic use of new forms of sound, image, and text, they are configurations—constellations.

Rabaté: Is there another question?

Audience Question

Vidler: The question that was just asked was about the members of the SI that were struck off the list of Debord's friends. The first time I ever heard about the SI was when Donald Nicholson-Smith and T.J. Clark, who were both at Cambridge at the time I was, came up to me at a political fair at Cambridge and wondered if I was interested in joining a group that was parallel to the sort of late-Potlatch early-SI group in Paris. Of course, I declared myself far too much of a Leninist to have anything to do with such things. But then in '67 just after we'd all graduated, they became members of the SI and immediately one year later were excluded. I believe it was because they wanted to publish in America.

Sanborn: Who knows what the real reason was. As Michèle Bernstein said, the reasons given were not always the real reasons.

Vidler: Who knows what Debord would have thought. He probably would not

have liked it.

Sanborn: I do think that Debord continued to think that his critique [in *The Society of the Spectacle*] was extremely useful. He modestly called it "the most important book of the twentieth century." And he did, in fact, revise his notion of what he calls the concentrated and diffuse spectacles into the integrated spectacle. But what would he think about it? Given those politics, he might object, but he probably would just not comment on it. That would be the most civil response.

Vidler: I think there's been a very, very quick assimilation of the word "spectacle" to the word "image," and I think this is not what he was about.

Sanborn: In typical fashion, he uses it to critique Daniel Boorstin who was in Paris at the time, promulgating his critique of "the image." Also, there is a long history of the SI in the Bay Area and so it wouldn't be surprising if there were yet another group that came out of there. There's a continuing tradition.

Audience Question

Levin: I think nothing could be more appropriate to a discussion of the SI than to always pose a question concerning the contemporary political situation. Moreover, any discussion of the SI that ignores the contemporary political situation, I would argue, has descended into a kind of self-serving musealization which is deeply antithetical to the kind of commitment to the contemporary political struggle which is always of paramount importance.

To give a kind of schematic answer to the urgent question that you pose: recall that for Debord the spectacle is defined not in terms of the image, but as a way of discussing a social relation mediated by images. If we think this question in contemporary terms, as one possible avenue into that social condition, perhaps one of the most urgent conditions that we need to consider is the increasing abrogation of civil liberties in the name of security, homeland or otherwise.

Which is to say the proliferation without legislative restraint of surveillance in all its forms. And most importantly non-phenomenal surveillance, which is not of the order of the image at all, which is to say data-veillance. That is one of the significant features of our landscape, and I would say Debord's project today has an urgency of enormous contemporary significance precisely because it requires us to think about the relationship between the production of *spectacles of security*, such as the theatrics which we encounter every time we get on a plane. I hope that nobody here is under the mistaken impression that what this is really about is actually preventing certain objects from getting on planes, since the return of metal knives on airplanes in just a few short years after 9/11 demonstrates that this is not the case. Rather, this is about the theatrics of security and similar kinds of *mise-en-scène* of the political. These are the kinds of questions that Debord and his always *collective* project would, I think, be interested in today.

Sanborn: And let us not forget that there are plenty of images of surveillance as well in *Society of the Spectacle*. The media as surveillance, for example.

Levin: As we bring this conversation to a close, we are now about to see a very strange kind of film, *Réfutation de tous les jugements*.

When *Society of the Spectacle* comes out, not surprisingly all kinds of journalistic responses are published. Some of them are laudatory, some of them are critical, but for Debord all of them equally and fundamentally misunderstand what the work is about, and what it would mean to translate, or to cast, or to revisit *La Société du spectacle* as a theoretical work, as a piece of cinema. One of the interesting suggestions Debord makes is that "People shouldn't be surprised that I would make a film, *La Société du spectacle*, since the book itself is already constructed as a scénario." Namely, as a script.

This is interesting to think further about. To what extent is the book already cinematic? In any case, what does Debord do? After the death of Lebovici he publishes a kind of compilation, a *détournement* if you like, concerning all the

journalistic responses to Lebovici's assassination. Similarly, here he literally responds to all the criticisms of the film. He does so by making the act of film critical practice itself part of the machine of the cinematic apparatus. And the film itself becomes the subject for a critical, analytical, and symptomatic analysis.

Interestingly enough, today political filmmaking has increasingly migrated into the museum. The museum has become, for better or for worse, a place where political filmmakers find something they could never find for the longest time—a space where their films can be shown on a regular, and indeed continuous basis to an audience of however many. But of course it is under an entirely different set of conditions—often ambulatory or flâneurial as Raymond Bellour has once said. My point is that what we had in Debord's cinema during the early Studio Cujas period was a kind of early film installation, a form of *ciné-Bayreuth* where you made a pilgrimage to see the films of Debord.

Afterword: Auditions for the Future
Catherine Liu

This volume represents an extraordinary record of an extraordinary achievement—the production of a space in which theorists/critics dilated or thought out loud before a “public.” The “author” of this achievement is collective—Slought cultivated a public and permitted academics, theorists, and critics to speak before an attentive, but unpredictable group of interlocutors. The public intellectual has become a highly sought-after creature: and as desirable and elusive as the golden hind. Various parties are blamed for the lack of public figures who can speak with intellectual authority—it’s the fault of the callow and crass media, it’s the fault of insular and self-serving academics. Slought gave intellectuals a public that was not exclusively a professional or institutional audience—that is to say, one disciplined by enforced collegiality or the threat of “evaluation and assessment.” What does Slought promise to academics and theory-heads, but a way out of the echo chamber of the usual modes of exchange, the usual performances of academic credentialism, competence, and mastery. Theory, which did present itself in the earliest days as a challenge to disciplinarity, was surrounded by the nimbus of an anti-institutionality. Its charisma had something to do with its radically disturbing lessons. Jean-Michel Rabaté demonstrated in his *Future of Theory* that there was something unbearable about “theory” as such—that unbearability I would argue has something to do with the way theory repeats and resonates with the languages and subterfuges of everyday life, with the way in which it undermines the “authority of experts” without ceding the ground of interpretation and synthesis. In short, theory drives, drove people crazy—it hystericalizes its readers and its interlocutors who might expect something more reassuring, more in tune with ambient platitudes. In fact, theory at its boldest offers a

rhetoric of mastery—but a negative theology, if you like, that we are used to hearing only from the mouths of religious leaders.

Theory produced all sorts of symptomatic reactions as well as acts of devotion. It did provide some way of lifting the burdens of “specialization” and fragmentation that we had assumed, consciously or unconsciously, as members of and aspirants to a profession. Even if “theory” resists totalization, grand narratives, and even the dialectic, it allows for an inventive and gratifying act of thinking that is truly intellectual because it re-creates its own ground heuristically at every step of the process, while in its very microscopic intensity, it produces whole new tiny worlds out of tropes, texts and invisible structures more complex than the most luxurious palaces or the most luscious coral reefs.

Slought exists in a tactical relationship with the spaces of academic authority, whose institutional shape was cast in an era when most contemporary institutions and American modernity itself were forged in the tumult of the Industrial Revolution. During the second half of the nineteenth century, the American University was wrested out of its somnolent seminarian mediocrity and cast in the shape of the modern institution for a modern world. It was at this time that the American University turned its back on the chaos and crisis of the modern city and saw itself as a refuge from the confusion and disorder of urban life, with the charlatans, amateurs and con-men who competed for the attention of a public avid for excitement and entertainment. This public, as Lawrence Levine has demonstrated, was not at all indifferent to questions of culture. Far from it: in New York City, the Astor Place riots of 1848 broke because of the crowd’s passionate condemnation of a British actor’s interpretation of Shakespeare’s Macbeth, after all.¹ It was proposed that the University, like the Museum, the Park, the Theater and the Concert Hall become places that would have a civilizing influence on what was perceived to be the increasingly unruly urban masses. Cultural hierarchy was invented as a mode of crowd control. No wonder that the populist rebellion against economic oligarchy of 1893 could be so easily turned into the cultural resentments of 2004. In history, nothing is forgotten, everything displaced.

Henry P. Tappan proposed in 1851 that a great metropolitan University be established in New York City to be the center and the leader of the city’s and the country’s intellectual life. His vision was never realized: Tappan would go on to found the University of Michigan, far distant from the city’s crowds which he had hoped to educate. If the original project of the University was intimately associated with demonstrating to the public what real scholarship was, the University would also be the site of the most advanced research. The latter function would triumph as plans for the great metropolitan University of the city dissolved into thin air. The American Research University’s particularly insular character took shape during these years, when almost every engaged thinker—writers, scholars, and social workers—defended and justified the nature of research in ways that while ostensibly different served to define the manner in which we unconsciously experience University life today. First, the University is removed from the tumult of the “world”—attempts by Cultural Studies to break down the wall between inside and outside merely proved how deeply we believed in the divide. Second, the University, despite its remove from the society, will serve it, if only by producing scholars whose very research would ennoble and dignify them with a higher standard of ethics than the businessman. G. Stanley Hall would describe the American scholar in positive terms as a combination of priest and soldier. The impressive research Universities established in the late nineteenth century would have something of both the monastery and barracks to them. It was not an accident of history that American cities were increasingly seen by the bourgeois intellectuals as inimical to “the life of the mind.” There was a gradual abandonment of civic culture for professional culture that accompanied the rise of the “disciplines” and specialization within the organization of modern knowledge.

Intellectual life in eighteenth-century America was an urban affair, and one shared by a homogenous group of cultivated gentlemen who participated in the advancement of civic life through a wide array of heterogeneous institutions—libraries, agricultural associations, historical societies as well as informal discussion groups. In fact, the learned world of Philadelphia was paradigmatic: Benjamin Franklin “best represents the activist, pragmatic, and institution-

founding character of early American civic humanism.² The small size and density of the eighteenth century city produced a diversity of spaces where serious discussion could be carried on. The gentleman was an amateur, and vice versa. This model, however, could hardly be sustained. The genteel Historical and Agricultural Societies were not homes to anything like passionate intellectual ferment. They were bound to fade into obsolescence as a new sense of egalitarianism and pragmatism swept through Jacksonian America.

The aura of the familiar eloquence of the eighteenth century was seriously frayed by the social and cultural changes of nineteenth century. American scholars from Charles Sanders Peirce to Charles W. Eliot, the reform-minded President of Harvard, enthusiastically embraced the professionalization and specialization of research in order to defend the "disinterestedness" of scholarship against the venality and ignorance of the teeming masses of the new American city. Institution building became one of the most important activities within the American Academy at the end of the nineteenth century. The establishment of the disciplines and the policing of their boundaries also produced the city as an object of knowledge, whose problems only researchers could solve, not as residents, but as outsiders, or experts. This is not at all to say that we should be trying to engineer a return to the sociable exchange of ideas of the eighteenth century, even if it does occasionally seem to be an "alternative" to the suffocating professionalism of the present. But in contemporary academia and its discontents, we can see the traces of the past—the civic-minded gentleman, member of a homogeneous and urbane community of learners and the professionally driven, collegial and disciplinary figure of the expert compete for supremacy in the academic imaginary. The discourses of "transgressive non-normativity" evoke the heterogeneous figure of the queer in order to disrupt the space of the institution while academics must adopt the position of expert of the outside in order to gain a hearing and a job within the academy itself.

Slought's singular relationship to the city and the Academy is what I want to emphasize here, through this very roughly drawn historical sketch. What

Slought has done is something civic-minded with theory—if that sounds terribly pedestrian, it is, in the most literal sense of the term. Its location does promise something to the flâneur of Walnut St., the curious person just out for a walk. Rather than wander a campus with map in hand looking for such and such a building, the potential audience member of Slought might have wandered in from off the street. This aleatory encounter with something anachronistic like a "society" or "academy" or a cult takes place in a white cube space meant for the display of contemporary art.

Theory has proven disappointing not because it has not necessarily led to great social, political or cultural change, but because it seems to have been fully institutionalized. If some of us felt called into academia because of theory's auratic power, it turned out that our jobs were—well, jobs, and not callings. But there is still the possibility that something happens within this way of thinking and talking that is both expansive and explosive when it addresses the instability and the historicity of the institutions in which it finds itself precariously at home. And in a very important sense, theory has become history, a powerful history, that is not reducible to any set of empirical facts. In a classic Weberian sense, theoretical texts are fully institutionalized, required reading for graduate students in the humanities, disseminated through the halls of academe in curricula, and on Ph.D. exams. This is where theory must encounter critical theory. If theory blew open what was "audible" or "recognizable" as scholarly, academic discourse, it risks now becoming a "refrain" or leitmotif on the MLA soundtrack. We all know that institutions tend to reproduce themselves: theory's institutionalization guarantees a certain amount of repetition and rationalization. We all know that we hear only what we have heard before—we've all been to conferences where ostensibly rational people start repeating "catchwords" like the best Stalin- or Mao-era propagandists. We all know that familiarity cuts deep grooves into our auditory capacities so that the authentically unfamiliar sounds vulgar, ugly, dissonant, and unbearable. Sometimes, theory itself sounds outdated—like beloved tracks from some recently repressed past—greatest hits of the 70's, 80's, and 90's.

Slought's attempts to displace or dissociate theory from the Academy, to bring theory into active contact with other constituencies, other audiences, other media, other archives—call it a public if you will—puts into practice the de-professionalizing and de-authorizing power of theory's destructive and productive potential to address everything and nothing—all at the same time. The future of critical theory sounds like a mash-up: it demands a hearing that exceeds the expansion of aesthetic receptivity. It restores us to a historicopolitical vigilance against that which would exterminate our capacity for thought itself.

Notes

1. Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow and Lowbrow: the Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).
2. Thomas Bender, "The Erosion of Public Culture." *The Authority of Experts*. Ed. Thomas L. Haskell. (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1984), pp. 84-106: p. 86.

Acknowledgements

The Future of Theory?

Gregg Lambert in conversation with Jean-Michel Rabaté on the occasion of the publication of Rabaté's *The Future of Theory* (Blackwell Manifestos, 2002) and the opening of Slought Foundation in Philadelphia. This event took place on November 1, 2002 and was curated by Aaron Levy. A transcript of this conversation is also available online from the *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* (Issue 4.2, April 2003), and in print in the issue "Theory Trouble" of the journal *Symploke* (Vol. 11, No. 1-2, 2003).

On Revolutions

Rebecca Comay and Eduardo Cadava in conversation with Jean-Michel Rabaté on the occasion of the publication of *The Claims of Human Rights: An Introduction*, edited by Eduardo Cadava and Ian Balfour, featuring an essay by Rebecca Comay entitled "Dead Right: Hegel and the Terror" (*The South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 103, No. 2-3, 2004, 375-395). This event coincided with the November 2, 2004 presidential elections in America. It took place on November 4, 2004 and was curated by Aaron Levy and Eduardo Cadava.

On Testing, Torture, and Experimentation

Avital Ronell and Eduardo Cadava in conversation with Jean-Michel Rabaté on the occasion of the book launch for Ronell's *The Test Drive* (University of Illinois Press, 2004). This event took place on March 15, 2006 and was curated by Eduardo Cadava and Aaron Levy.

The Future of Feminism

Dorothea Olkowski and Gregg Flaxman in conversation with Jean-Michel Rabaté. This event took place on May 8, 2003 and was curated by Aaron Levy. The proceedings were sponsored by the Program in Comparative Literature and Theory at the University of Pennsylvania.

The Politics of Mourning

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Eduardo Cadava in conversation with Jean-Michel Rabaté on the occasion of the 2004 Modern Languages Convention in Philadelphia and the passing of philosopher Jacques Derrida in October 2004. This event took place on December 27, 2004 and was curated by Eduardo Cadava and Aaron Levy. The event was followed by the Philadelphia premier of the film *in which the thinking man finds himself in a gigantic orphanage...*, a Slought Foundation production directed by Aaron Levy (2004). The video explores an archive in disarray and was shot on location in historic Founder's Hall at Girard College in Philadelphia, with a monologue adapted from Thomas Bernhard's *Gargoyles* and read by Gary Indiana.

Beckett and the Unfilmable

Branka Arsic in conversation with Jean-Michel Rabaté on the occasion of the publication of Arsic's *The Passive Eye: Gaze and Subjectivity in Berkeley (via Beckett)* (Stanford University Press, 2003). This event took place on February 12, 2004 and was curated by Aaron Levy. It was preceded and followed by a screening of Beckett's *Film* (1965), courtesy of Producer Barney Rossett and Evergreen/Foxrock.

Film as Critical Practice: The Cinema of Guy Debord and the Spectre of the Situationist International

Thomas Y. Levin, Keith Sanborn, and Anthony Vidler in conversation with Jean-Michel Rabaté, on the occasion of the release of the complete film-theoretical cinema of Guy Debord on DVD by Gaumont vidéo (*Oeuvres Cinématographiques Complètes*, 2005). The conversation was preceded and followed by the Philadelphia premiers of the newly restored versions of Guy Debord's second film, *Sur le passage de quelques personnes à travers une assez courte unité de temps* (1959), and Debord's fifth film, *Réfutation de tous les jugements, tant élogieux qu'hostiles, qui ont été jusqu'ici portés sur le film 'La Société du Spectacle'* (1974), both shown as DVD projections. This event took place on April 6, 2006 and was organized by Thomas Y. Levin in conjunction with 'The Arts of the Future will be radical transformations of situations, or they will be nothing': Guy Debord Cineaste, a Slought Foundation installation curated by Thomas Y. Levin and Aaron Levy (April 6-May 25, 2006) featuring original documents and publications of the Situationist International from Levin's personal collection of SI rara.

Selections from the Conversations in Theory Series

Aaron Levy, Series Curator

Audio recordings of these events, as well as the complete *Conversations in Theory* series, are available online at the Slought Foundation website (Slought.org)

Who Am I For Myself? Anxiety and The Tyranny of Choice

Renata Salecl, Charles Shepherdson, Patricia Gherovici, and Jean-Michel Rabaté consider the anxiety of making choices in late capitalism. In a society that prioritizes individual freedom over group causes, one incessantly asks: "Who am I for myself?" (February 16, 2006)

Zizek! and the Public Intellectual Craze

Daniel Dayan engages Eduardo Cadava, Anne Norton, Jean-Michel Rabaté, and director Astra Taylor in a conversation about public intellectualism that introduced the Philadelphia film premier of "Zizek!," about the Slovenian philosopher and cultural critic. (December 1, 2005)

Cities: Public Seminar by Hélène Cixous

Co-curator: Jean-Michel Rabaté

A public seminar by the French poet, playwright, and founding Feminist philosopher Hélène Cixous. She addresses the relationship of art and literature to cities and their destruction, on the occasion of Maria Chevska's related installation in the galleries. (October 8, 2005)

PAIN-FASHION

A conversation with Branka Arsic and Gregg Lambert about pain and fashion in Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault. Rather than fashion being understood as an aesthetic practice, it is theorized as a micro-politics of pain involving anorexia, drugs, and alcohol. (March 17, 2005)

On Body & Performance

Hal Foster and Brigid Doherty examine body and performance in contemporary art, focusing on the Viennese Actionists. This conversation was organized in conjunction with a retrospective exhibition at Slought of performances by Actionist Hermann Nitsch. (March 3, 2005)

Literary Honeycombs: Storage and Retrieval of Texts Before Modern Times

Co-curator: Thaddeus Squire

This lecture by Anthony Grafton examines the storage and retrieval of texts before modern times. Organized on the occasion of "The Revolt of the Bees," an exhibition that proposed a new culture of memory and archiving in the true spirit of the beehive. (February 17, 2005)

The Mechanism of Death

Dorothea Olkowski engages Jean-Michel Rabaté in a conversation about the work of Gilles Deleuze. Deleuze's thought allows for a maximum of freedom and creation, but a maximum of freedom and creation in relation to what? What is this maximum? (September 30, 2004)

My Lacan is Burning: Revisiting 'Television'

In the style of Lacan's playful, impassioned, and evasive seminars, Catherine Liu and Charles Shepherdson perform 'Television' live, alongside a projection of the original broadcast of the 1972 Jacques-Alain Miller and Jacques Lacan television interview. Followed by a conversation with Jean-Michel Rabaté. (June 2, 2004)

Neurotic Cities: Barnes in Philadelphia

Jeremy Braddock and Kimberly Camp, then president of The Barnes Foundation, discuss public resistance to Dr. Albert Barnes' educational methods and his battles with University of Pennsylvania psychologists Francis X. Dercum and Charles W. Burr. (April 1, 2004)

The City as Art-Work of the 21st Century

Co-curator: Marjorie Welish

A conversation between architects Diane Lewis and Deborah Gans engaging the literary parallels between Surrealism and twentieth century architecture. Preceded by a presentation from Lewis's *Mind to Matter: The Literary Dimension of Architecture*. (March 26, 2004)

A Civilian Occupation: The Politics of Israeli Architecture

Co-curator: Eduardo Cadava

Israeli architects Rafi Segal and Eyal Weizman examine the role of Israeli architecture in the Middle East conflict. Their conversation reveals the central role of Israeli architecture in settlement practices and political discourse. (March 13, 2004)

A Conversation on Joyce and Duchamp via Jarry with Anastasi

Since the early 1960s, Conceptual artist William Anastasi has grounded his work in the ideology of chance. His conversation with Jean-Michel Rabaté at the Rosenbach Museum & Library explores intersections in the work of James Joyce, Alfred Jarry, and Marcel Duchamp, on the occasion of "me alter's egoes," his exhibition at Slought. (February 28, 2004)

North

Co-curator: Catherine Liu

For the first event in the *Conversations in Theory* series, Laurence Rickels introduces the premier of "North" (2001), a film by artist John Boskovich, in which Gary Indiana reads from Louis-Ferdinand Céline's novel "North" (1960). Followed by an informal discussion with John Boskovich, Laurence Rickels, Catherine Liu, and Gary Indiana. (October 26, 2002)

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Literary Theory / Cultural Studies / Art Criticism

Conversations on contemporary art and theory with...

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Thomas Y. Levin, Dorothea Olkowski, Jean-Michel Rabaté, Avital Ronell,
Keith Sanborn, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Anthony Vidler**

Edited by Gregg Lambert and Aaron Levy, with an afterword by Catherine Liu



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Image: Maria Chevska, Rrevolutionnaire, 2005 (detail)