

## *Ecce Cocker Spaniel!*

by Dorothea N. Schlegel

*The following excerpt is part of chapter 11 of my current dissertation B ANAL. This section was written in October 2018. A couple of date-marks and notes have been added to signal the temporal margins on this 'piece of actuality,' as it were. It still applies fairly well to the timeframe June 2018 to April 2019. For the current future...*

“Wir sehen uns an der Körperöffnung”<sup>1</sup> is the title of an article published by *Die Welt* on September 10th, 2018.<sup>2</sup> The Ronell Affair, which, as the name suggests, concerns Avital Ronell, reached its peak after Zoe Greenberg’s article for the *New York Times* appeared on August 13th.<sup>3</sup> Both journalists, Greenberg and Jan Küveler from *Die Welt*, received their degrees (the former presumably an M.A., the latter a PhD) in 2014, in English and Comparative Literature. While Greenberg studied at Yale, Küveler was at Columbia, NYC. They both refer, like perhaps every other article ever written on the case, to the letter of support that Judith Butler, as first signatory, along with fifty other eminent scholars sent to the President and Provost at NYU in support of Ronell (in fact, this letter and Ronell’s case seem to have become part of the same crime). The two articles don’t have much in common at first glance, yet they both champion simplicity. Küveler even takes the step of accusing Ronell’s closest field of study of banalization, counterpoising to it the value of simplicity, explanations and clarifications. This state of affairs was allegedly brought about by Derrida, who – according to Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, who is quoted, “sich nach dem

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<sup>1</sup> “I’ll see you at the orifice.” See for example the newspaper article “Gay Graduate Student Files Sexual Harassment Suit Against His Aging Lesbian NYU Professor” by Shane Croucher. Newsweek. August 17, 2018. Link: <https://www.newsweek.com/avital-ronell-nyu-nimrod-reitman-new-york-lawsuit-1078319>.

<sup>2</sup> Link: <https://www.welt.de/kultur/plus181475586/Der-Fall-Avital-Ronell-Die-Dekonstruktion-des-sexuellen-Missbrauchs.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Link: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/13/nyregion/sexual-harassment-nyu-female-professor.html>.

ersten durchschlagenden Erfolg seiner Lektüremethode angewöhnte, ‘kaum einer Protestnote aus der akademischen Welt seine Unterschrift zu verweigern’ und damit die ‘fortschreitende Banalisierung’ seiner Disziplin betrieb.”<sup>4</sup> Deconstruction complained a bit too much. Yet, traces of banalization are indeed easy to detect in both articles. In the Twitter world precisely “complexity” has become an issue, splitting the field into those for whom harassment is harassment, as simple as that, and a rose is a rose, and a pipe definitely a pipe, and those who have tried to say that the media reduction to a “Ronell Affair” constitutes a bad banalization of the events. Some have called it *The Ronell Case*, which is a description particularly felicitous in German, where it has become *Der Fall Ronell*.<sup>5</sup> Since rumors run much faster than scholarship, and scandals are quicker than close readings, in the following it will be assumed that the reader, differently than with Benjamin’s “Idee eines Mysteriums,” ‘knows everything’ about the case. The *New York Times* piece titled “What Happens to #MeToo When a Feminist Is the Accused?” Both articles – like almost every other article available on the subject – addressed the Ronell Affair as if it had the enlightenment power of finally throwing clarity on something else. The MeToo movement in this case. Küveler’s piece is particularly interesting because it makes this passage explicit. In his reading, it will be deconstruction to finally be clarified. He writes: “Eine besondere Tragik des Falls besteht im Zusammenprall zweier Welten, der Dekonstruktion und der justiziablen Wirklichkeit. Die Aufgabe eines Gerichts liegt ja gerade darin, Undeutliches zu verdeutlichen, Verworrenes aufzulösen, den Nebel zu lichten, das heißt, ein Masternarrativ zu entwerfen, das fortan für die Wahrheit gilt.”<sup>6</sup> Guilt. Double meaning: gilt-guilt. The author of the

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<sup>4</sup> “...after the first resounding success of his lecturing style got used to ‘hardly ever refuse his signature to any document of protest of the academic world’ and thereby led his discipline to a *modus operandi* of ‘progressive banalization.’”

<sup>5</sup> See for example “Der Fall ‘Avital Ronell’: Die Doktormutter” by Patrick Bahners, in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, updated on August 27, 2018. Link: <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/hoch-schule/die-doktormutter-der-fall-avital-ronell-15755645.html>.

<sup>6</sup> “A particularly tragic aspect of this case consists in the clash of two worlds: the world of deconstruction and the world of justiciable reality. The task of a court of law is precisely to clarify what is unclear, solve what is intricate, lighten up the fog, and all this means to draft a master narrative that have henceforth a truth value.”

article, who, according to *Die Welt* info page, got his B.A., M.A. and PhD at Columbia, is familiar, uncannily so, with deconstruction. In the first lines of the article available also to non-subscribers, the bait piece, it is written: “Bei einer mittlerweile im Aussterben begriffenen Subspezies von Literaturforschern, den Dekonstruktivisten, gehören Schlüpfrigkeiten... seit jeher zum Kerninventar. Diese Leute waren immer schon der Meinung, die Botschaft von Texten sei genau da zu finden, wo ihr Sinn sich entzieht. Und sie haben, als Schüler ihres Gurus Jacques Derrida, eine penetrante Vorliebe für Wortspiele.”<sup>7</sup> The accusations that follow are the ones that accompanied deconstruction since its birth, labor pains. The lament can be summed up in a few keywords: obscurantism, rumor of sectarianism, humorless humor, smokescreen, pretentiousness, hypocrisy, a bunch – all in all – of eccentric liars. Perhaps a salient note is represented by Küveler’s pleasure in identifying in the plaintiff’s lawsuit material “eine Dekonstruktion der Dekonstruktion” (“a deconstruction of deconstruction”). The plaintiff (who will not be named here to preserve his privacy) did in fact present a 56 page long “Klageschrift,” that is, complaint. This fact appears to be very relevant since possibly nowhere where the *Klageschrift* has been mentioned, was its length ignored. Should a complaint be registered here? Was it too much material to read for a journalist’s commission? Or should knowledge of the length of the complaint be evidence that the journalist read it? At least she looked at it. Or, instead, should the length alone add credibility to the complaint? Would have it been different if the complaint were one page long? How bad can it be, if it is one mere page? How credible then? Not much. It’s only one page. Perhaps 56 pages means that the plaintiff is very upset. Or very injured. Or very well legally lawyered up. In this case, as in other cases, the journalist seems to suggest not that the plaintiff has a very long penis,<sup>8</sup> but that

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<sup>7</sup> “As for this subspecies of literary critics, in the meantime going extinct, the deconstructionists, salaciousness and slippages have always belonged to the quintessence of their inventory. These people have always believed that the message of texts must be looked for precisely there where their sense withdraws. And they have, as scholars of their guru Jacques Derrida, an obtrusive predilection for wordplays.”

<sup>8</sup> (as I was told once because of the length of my texts)

he is also a deconstructionist after all, and he spent definitely too many words to spell “harassment,” that is one word and clear and easy to say. The journalist of *Die Welt*, as with many others, especially in Germany, liked to read in the Fall Ronell the fall of deconstruction. In this piece alone we find two sui-citations, as Rickels would say. “Ein Tanz der Différance” (“a dance of différance”) and then, in the end, an “Akt der Différance” (an act of différance). Whether the *Akt der Différance* might be as apocryphal as the German capitalization (and decapitation) of *différance* (but what can one do?), “Tanz der Différance” would sound almost precise, if only its reference were not jolting. The current complaint of harassment would be a *pas de danse* with the former case of ‘harassment’ between Avital Ronell and the minor-aged son of the previously mentioned guru of deconstruction. This says it all about the authority of deconstruction, and authority for deconstruction (when she sleeps with His son; a bit like sleeping with Jesus – oh shit, he had a behind!). The conclusion comes next, and it’s an *Akt*, this time, of *Différance*. Here the legal document comes forth. Is it a sentence? Is it the deed, the crime? According to Küveler, the Ronell Affair is the return of the De Man Affair – and, this is indeed the last sentence of the article: “Nun stirbt die Dekonstruktion ein zweites Mal, leicht verschoben, in einem Akt der Différance, der ihr gebührt.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, the vampire has been put to rest. This is the author’s wish, at last. That “Dekonstruktion” and its “Tradition,” was charged and had to pay back his due (*Gebühren*, fees) – that was clear since the very beginning of the article. Now deconstruction dies a second time. The universal judgment of the media, in Krausian sense, has pronounced the verdict. Deconstruction goes to Hell. It is a pity that actually Kraus’s furor was mainly directed against journalism.

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<sup>9</sup> “Now deconstruction dies a second time, slightly deferred, in a deserved act of différance.”

Journalists. Zoe Greenberg wrote an article for the NYTimes in which she doesn't seem to *realize* (if there is any – unlikely – truth in Küveler's report) that deconstruction lies behind the entire ordeal of the Ronell Affair. Towards the central core of his piece, Küveler observes: "vielleicht hat die Disziplin der Dekonstruktion mehr mit dem Fall zu tun als bisher beschrieben."<sup>10</sup> The mediatic more than the legal proceedings (unless we are to understand that all writers and philosophers and literary critics sympathetic to deconstruction will be collectively sued) will precisely have the task of clarifying obscurity, finding the master thread, bringing deconstruction to take responsibility, throwing the inquisitor's light of reason on the deconstruction fog (and fox), and, above all, unpinning all those bothersome puns. "Der Dekonstruktivist Derrida soll wenig amüsiert gewesen sein, dass sein Sohn mit der Metaphysik ins Bett ging."<sup>11</sup> That's the truth, when we get real, the *Welt* journalist seems to say. Let's get real. It is fascinating that the entire proceeding on deconstruction takes the length of an article. Summary proceedings perhaps? Greenberg realizes something different for the NYTimes, and sets the case more cautiously. The title of her piece, "What Happens to #MeToo When a Feminist Is the Accused?" insinuates what her entire article merely hints at. "The case seems like a familiar story turned on its head," she asserts, to conclude that "coming in the middle of the #MeToo movement's reckoning over sexual misconduct, it raised a challenge for feminists." Nevertheless the challenge, as far as her article goes, doesn't seem a serious one. She even leaves the last word to the accused, as one hands over the gun to someone who just wrote her adieu note. "In March 2018," she writes, "Professor Ronell pointedly complained that Mr. X had a penchant for 'comparing me to the most egregious examples of predatory behaviors ascribable to Hollywood moguls who habitually go after starlets.'" The conclusion that innumerable articles will hurry up and explicate, in the clearest

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<sup>10</sup> "perhaps the discipline of deconstruction has more to do with this case than has been noted until now."

<sup>11</sup> "The deconstructionist Derrida must not have enjoyed very much that his son went to bed with Metaphysics."

terms, because what is obvious is obvious, a conclusion that the Ronell Affair is there to reveal, is that #MeToo and harassment in general are not about gender but power (thus leaving behind, coopting it with nonchalance, a history of feminist struggle). The media world has never been as crowded as it is right now with committed Foucauldians ready to do justice. The remaining part of the article is mainly about facts – let’s get real – and evidence, namely excerpts from the plaintiff’s complaint passed on in the mist of the final judgment of the University proceeding. Since the entire article is about the relevance of this case for the MeToo movement, one of the professors who supported Ronell is interviewed. The professor will later complain via facebook that her contribution was sliced and diced. Similarly, the lawyer of the accused and several other supporters of the accused will say that every piece of information they contributed to the NYTimes article was ignored by the journalist.<sup>12</sup> The modality in which the Ronell Affair reveals that the MeToo movement is not about women but about power is also rather short, and not many lines long. (The fact that Ronell is feminized in her role of ‘teacher’ or ‘star’ in almost all articles – to the detriment of her international position as a philosopher and literary critic – must of course be considered merely occasional). This article will open an entire category of articles, where the simplicity and banality of the “no woman but power” assertion concerning MeToo is wrestled and established with great dignity and victimhood all at once. The third category of articles might have also been initiated in Germany by a relatively small newspaper, with an article by a made-in-Princeton current PhD student.<sup>13</sup> Yet it reached a wide audience thanks to the *Los Angeles Review of Books*,

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<sup>12</sup> See especially “NYTimes Refuses to Publish Ronell Letter to the Editor” by Ronell’s lawyer Mary D. Dorman, Esq., published in Theory Illuminati on August 23, 2018. Link: <https://theoryilluminati.com/texts-and-contexts/f/nytimes-refuses-to-publish-ronell-letter-to-the-editor>. See also Cheung and Santucci, “Filling in the Gaps.” Link: <https://theoryilluminati.com/texts-and-contexts/f/filling-in-the-gaps>. A press release in support of Ronell was published on August 16, 2018 with the title of “An Eleven Month Denial of All Nimrod Reitman Allegations,” administered by Mangalika de Silva. Link: <https://theoryilluminati.com/texts-and-contexts/f/an-eleven-month-denial-of-all-nimrod-reitman-allegations>. This piece also played virtually no role in the ongoing mediatic discussion.

<sup>13</sup> “Arroganz spricht Hochschule Einer Professorin der NYU wird sexuelles Fehlverhalten vorgeworfen. Geistesgrößen wie Judith Butler und Slavoj Žižek erklären sich solidarisch mit ihr. Vorschnell?” by Anton Pluschke, in *Der Freitag*. June 13, 2018. Link: <https://www.freitag.de/autoren/der-freitag/arroganz-spricht>.

which played pal with the *NYTimes*. Two articles in the *LARB*, one after the other, opened wide the eyes of their readers. The second, by Marjorie Perloff, published on August 29th, enunciates its direction already in the title: “What the Avital Ronell Affair Says about The State of the Profession.”<sup>14</sup> Needless to say, it seems, reading the subtext, that the author played a great role in academy hierarchies, before retiring and witnessing with contrition the downfall of the entire educative enterprise – after her. A third more recent article in the *LARB*, namely the October 5th “The Apprentice in Theory: Fan, Student, Star,” kept expanding (raking the internet for insights) this line of enquiry from the left side.<sup>15</sup> The intellectual question of whether teaching the books, the work and the research of Ronell and her defenders is still appropriate has been raised. Shouldn’t the professors, prior to feeding their students’ hunger for knowledge with Ronell’s books, at least tell them about this harassment case? Shouldn’t her books perhaps be censored altogether? Aren’t there in them traces to be found of her abusive behavior? Not even Goethe will be safe if the media are victorious! His head might fall down together with the endeavors that initiated the *Athenaeum* (the journal, paradoxically) and a certain idea of education. In fact – so the critique goes – given not only deconstruction’s notorious anti-authoritarian stance (according to some), but also (according to others) its badly concealed propensity for supporting the most intimate neoliberal frameworks, given, in other words, the deconstruction star system academic world (see Weinstein...), isn’t abuse already implied in teaching Theory? This questioning style has the third category border with the first but was not strong enough, as it was advertised, to impose its own genre. Instead, both corruption and the structure of academy itself – with special attention to the adviser-advisee dynamic – have entered the eye of the storm. After all, for so many the case had to ring as a powerful trigger warning: What? do kids have sexual desires? This third category,

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<sup>14</sup> Link: <https://blog.lareviewofbooks.org/essays/avital-ronell-affair-says-state-profession/>.

<sup>15</sup> Link: <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-apprentice-in-theory-fan-student-star/#!>.

namely “How the Avital Affair throws light on Academic corruption,” also quickly became very popular and in need of student body evidence. Fortuitously, a previous article in The New Yorker, “An N.Y.U. Sexual-Harassment Case Has Spurred a Necessary Conversation About #MeToo,” published just a few days before, on August 25th and written by Masha Gessen<sup>16</sup> provided exactly what was most needed, following perhaps as a follower Zoe Greenberg, who in fact – what a chance – had enlisted via Twitter a student of Ronell, who, according to her, was running a thread “worth reading.”<sup>17</sup> Masha Gessen must have read the thread worth reading, since she contacted this person, she says. “Two graduate students had earlier circulated a petition in support of Ronell, but now other students began speaking out against her. One of them...” One of them, whom she contacted, is precisely the one whose thread Greenberg defined “worth reading,” while the other one, an anonymous source, might have found the Twitter feed via the same one student.<sup>18</sup> This is the student material supporting “How the Avital Affair threw light on Academic corruption” category. It is worth mentioning that both Greenberg and Gessen were aware of the existence of a massive student petition in favor of Avital Ronell by students who actually know her.<sup>19</sup> Evidence of it was available to them both.<sup>20</sup> They both chose to ignore that material which would have clearly clashed with their interpretation. It is important to stress that the events concerning Asia Argento’s presumed sexual assault of a 17 year old actor and then Kavanaugh’s allegations of sexual harassment, helped to expand the criticism of academic life (thanks to Ronell’s case) to the level of a new hierarchical revolution. The Ronell Affair not only helps to understand how

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<sup>16</sup> Link: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/an-nyu-sexual-harassment-case-has-spurred-a-necessary-conversation-about-metoo>.

<sup>17</sup> Link: <https://twitter.com/zoegberg/status/1030189977114763264?lang=en>.

<sup>18</sup> The very same anonymous words were in fact quoted by the same student on Twitter (at 4:40 PM on August 18, 2018) with the introductory comment: “pretty much the only thing you need to read on avital ronell.”

<sup>19</sup> Both William Cheung and Elisa Santucci, first signatories of the student petition in support of Ronell, repeatedly complained about it on <https://theoryilluminati.com/>. See especially “Filling in the Gaps.” Link: <https://theoryilluminati.com/texts-and-contexts/f/filling-in-the-gaps>.

<sup>20</sup> Again see Cheung and Santucci on <https://theoryilluminati.com/>.

corruption works in Universities but also in every other system of power. Two articles in a row, from the *Atlantic* and then the *Washington Post*, went in this direction. On September 23rd, nothing less than a professor of strategic studies at Johns Hopkins University, Eliot A. Cohen, wrote an article for the *Atlantic* titled “The Crisis of the American Elites.” Subtitle: “Judith Butler and Ed Whelan share little in common – save their willingness to direct cruelty against ordinary people in defense of eminent colleagues.”<sup>21</sup> The *Washington Post* followed suit, thanks to a professor of international politics at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, Daniel W. Drezner, who, acknowledging his debt to Eliot Cohen’s piece, on September 25th published: “What everyone misses about American elites. A few observed blindspots among the meritocracy.”<sup>22</sup> Both pieces compare the interventions of Butler and Ed Whelan. In the words of Drezner, the comparison is between “Judith Butler’s unthinking defense of fellow scholar Avital Ronell despite evidence that Ronell had abused her power as a senior scholar, and Ed Whelan’s badly misguided effort to claim that Christine Blasey Ford must have confused Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh with some other dude. Both Butler and Whelan have apologized for their egregious blunders, so this is not a case of Cohen attacking people who think they did no wrong. Rather, he asks how two very smart people could have messed things up so badly.” In order to find an answer, which the author of the article of course has at hand, one has to consider “two additional, interrelated elements that need to be fleshed out to truly understand Butler and Whelan’s failures.” First element: “The first one is banal but still important: American elites do not admit that they are elites.” Banal, but important. The second one: “This leads to the second factor at play; even people who qualify as elites in every sense of the word can find a way to think

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<sup>21</sup> Link: <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/09/the-crisis-of-the-american-elites/571060/>.

<sup>22</sup> Link: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2018/09/25/what-everyone-misses-about-american-elites/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.f053acef6150](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2018/09/25/what-everyone-misses-about-american-elites/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.f053acef6150).

of themselves as an outsider.” Examples follow: “I suspect that Butler and Whelan also feel like outsiders. Butler is a big cheese in the academy, but I am sure she looks out at the country from her academic sinecure and views herself as part of an aggrieved minority.” In other words, Butler had better stop saying “we, the queer,” or “we, the Palestinians.” In Nazi Germany there were rich Jewish families who thought of themselves as belonging to the elites. They held this belief straight to the extermination camps. Butler, Drezner seems to suggest, should learn from them. Eliot Cohen’s piece appears to care very little about the Ronell Affair. The only thing that matters about it is merely the precondition for his piece, namely that Ronell is guilty. This being given, Butler’s gesture is horrible. “Of the many forms of cruelty,” he writes, “that directed against those who are weak or powerless is one of the worst... Societies and governments will have elites—that is simply inescapable... But in a free society, for those elites to exercise their power... they have to do so with restraint and good judgment. The alternative is, sooner or later, revolt, which is why higher education often finds itself battered by angry citizens who, in a different setting, conclude that the legal system, too, is rigged. Butler and Whelan deserve credit for admitting their mistakes and apologizing. But there is not much evidence that they have thought about the broader point here. The issue goes well beyond the graduate student and Kavanaugh’s classmate who got an undeserved accusation. It is, rather, the broader setting that caused two eminent people to choose tribalism, hyper-ideology, and personal attachment over fairness, a moderate willingness to withhold judgment, and merest decency.” Hence, to rename this third category, it should be considered that, according to it, the Ronell Affair is revealing of the corruption not only of the academy but of the mob of elites in general, which are currently being assaulted by angry citizens. “Eminent friends are being taken down at the peak of their professional career by someone who is, in their [Butler and Whelan’s] world, a nobody. It’s outrageous, and it has to be stopped. And

if, by so doing, you defame a classmate of Kavanaugh's, accusing him of attempted rape, or effectively threaten to obliterate a graduate student's career by lending a mob of literature professors the imprimatur of the MLA, so be it." Having catalogued the four main categories, it can be added that *The Chronicle of Higher Education* kept shooting out articles, one for every category.<sup>23</sup> Of course, an article by the previously mentioned student was immediately published in the *Chronicle* and spread wide and large in the web. The fourth main category of articles was most likely inaugurated by the first piece that the *Los Angeles Review of Books* came out with, on August 20th, written by Jon Wiener.<sup>24</sup> It is perhaps the only category that questions the credibility of the complainant and the complaint itself. The title, namely "Avital and X: Sexual Harassment and 'Campy Communications' at NYU," thanks to the inverted commas, makes the message clear. "Campy Communications," it can be argued, is a quote, namely from one of Ronell's descriptions of the language in use between her and the plaintiff. This fourth category, focusing on language, dismisses it, and keeps producing a great body of literature with the increase of available evidence. The collective main point, via straightforward lunge or spiralwise, which spilled out in the smallest doses also into other categories, is that harassment is harassment and that either language doesn't matter (lunge), or that language speaks by itself (spiral trajectory). This fourth category could be subsumed under the first, or vice versa, yet, since very often they took very different trajectories, and since the latter expanded widely without any direct mention of deconstruction, it is perhaps opportune to file it separately. After all, all these categories are greatly intertwined and, in fact, inseparable. Clear mix categories have been provided by one representant of the analytical school in Chicago, at the Law School, who, like the Chronicle, produced in his blog a lot of material fitting all categories, and was widely read. He had the honor to leak the news of the Ronell Affair

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<sup>23</sup> Sorry, they're too many and too boring. Look them up yourself if you care.

<sup>24</sup> Link: <https://blog.lareviewofbooks.org/essays/avital-nimrod-sexual-harassment-campy-communications-nyu/>.

first, together with the letter petition that Butler initiated. The Law School professor also spread the news of an article by a former chair of the department employing Ronell, a very much damning article to be placed between the *downfall of Academy* category and the *horrible deconstruction* category. Perhaps, to fill the most important interpretations of the Case Ronell, also the extreme right-wing positions should be mentioned. It is not enough to make of them a category, since they can be subsumed under the heading of the second category, namely “the Ronell Affair & MeToo” even if they actually insist on the motif of the revolution eating its own children, or, in other words: a mocking style, now that women themselves fell victims of their own liberation machine.

To my knowledge, beside the sporadic but relevant cases, explicit defenses of Ronell in the several months following June 2018 came only from Slavoj Žižek in a rather marginal space, *The Philosophical Salon* (which, even if published by the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, is not the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, which instead published the two articles mentioned above)<sup>25</sup> and a blog, *Theory Illuminati*, which was opened for the occasion by a former student of Ronell. Perhaps the same reason that led Žižek to *The Philosophical Salon*, led Jean-Luc Nancy to *Theory Illuminati*. Žižek: “Not only were my (and others’) texts defending Avital [Ronell] serially rejected (I was only able to publish mine in *The Philosophical Salon*), but also the letter of support signed by 120 of her students went unreported – a clear indication where the power resides in this case.” The student petition actually found a late mention at the bottom of a belatedly updated version of a *Chronicle* article, where it was buried and forgotten. The *Chronicle* also published (in the Letters section, of course) a piece by another student of Ronell’s at NYU, the first signatory of the student

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<sup>25</sup> “Why Did I Sign the Letter in Support of Avital Ronell?” June 27, 2018. Link: <https://thephilosophicalsalon.com/why-did-i-sign-the-letter-in-support-of-avital-ronell/>. “A Brief Post-Script on the Case of Avital Ronell” August 19, 2018. Link: <https://thephilosophicalsalon.com/a-brief-post-script-on-the-case-of-avital-ronell/>. “Yes, It’s Really About Power!” August 30, 2018. Link: <https://thephilosophicalsalon.com/yes-its-really-about-power/>. “Two General Concluding Remarks on the Ronell Case” September 6, 2018. Link: <https://thephilosophicalsalon.com/two-general-concluding-remarks-on-the-ronell-case/>.

petition.<sup>26</sup> Occasionally different minor journals gave space for explaining or apologizing to the signatories of the petition written by Butler et al., as they got caught in complaints at their institutions, as Butler herself did by the MLA for the use of that affiliation with her signature. Outside the United States, three articles took a very different stand early on, more or less explicitly sympathetic to Ronell, namely: in France, “Harcèlement: Avital Ronell et la question du langage,” by Robert Maggiori, August 28th, for *Libération*;<sup>27</sup> in Germany, “Unter Verdacht,” by Anna-Lena Scholz, June 27, for *Die Zeit*;<sup>28</sup> in Great Britain *The Guardian* offered a piece on the cases of Asia Argento and Avital Ronell by Laura Kipnis, “What happens when a #MeToo victim like Asia Argento is the accused?” published on August 24.<sup>29</sup> *The Guardian... Die Zeit... Libération...* Food for thought, citoyens (US) américains!

Whether Jan Küveler’s article for *Die Welt* from September 10th, 2018 titled – a marvelous title – “Wir sehen uns an der Körperöffnung,” these were also the last words of Patrick Bahners’s article for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, “Der Fall ‘Avital Ronell’: Die Doktormutter,” from August 27, 2018.<sup>30</sup> This *FA* article offers a close reading of scholarly pieces by the plaintiff: “Der Satz in Xs [the plaintiff’s] Kittler-Aufsatz, auf den sich Fußnote neun bezieht, lautet: ‘Niemand wird bestreiten, dass de Man, allem Anschein zum Trotz, mit den verführerischen Aspekten der Rhetorik befasst war und in vielen Einzelfällen dieselbe Wirkung auf die Studentenschaft [‘student

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<sup>26</sup> See William Cheung, “In Defense of Avital Ronell,” which, addressed to the Editor for lack of a better option, of course was sort of bypassed by publishing it online in the Letters sections. Link: <https://www.chronicle.com/blogs/letters/in-defense-of-avital-ronell/>. William Cheung is actually a PhD student in the German department at NYU where Avital Ronell teaches. His voice – which mainly attracted criticism – should have been given a bit more credit than others in consideration of his personal acquaintance with Ronell in the student-teacher relation.

<sup>27</sup> Link: [https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2018/08/28/harcelement-avital-ronell-et-la-question-du-langage\\_1675044](https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2018/08/28/harcelement-avital-ronell-et-la-question-du-langage_1675044).

<sup>28</sup> Link: <https://www.zeit.de/2018/27/avital-ronell-vorwurfe-literaturwissenschaftlerin-title-ix>.

<sup>29</sup> Link: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/aug/24/metoo-victim-asia-argento-jimmy-bennett>.

<sup>30</sup> “The case of ‘Avital Ronell’: the female PhD adviser.” In German, the PhD adviser, if this is a woman, is called ‘Doktormutter,’ which literally means PhD-mother. Link: <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/hoch-schule/die-doktormutter-der-fall-avital-ronell-15755645.html>.

body'] hatte wie Friedrich Kittler.' X bedient sich hier eines der gängigsten Kunstmittel der dekonstruktivistischen Prosa: des Wortspiels. Der Begriff 'student body' ist doppeldeutig. Die Gesamtkörperschaft der Studenten darf man, da ja von Einzelfällen verführerischer Effekte die Rede ist, durch den studentischen Körper ersetzen. Dass die Professorin Ronell auch an den Körper ihres Doktoranden Forderungen stellte, belegen die in der Klageschrift zitierten E-Mails, deren Echtheit Ronell nicht bestreitet. In diesem Textkorpus begegnet man der Technik der wortspielerischen Zweideutigkeit im privaten Kontext. So erhielt X von Ronell einmal die Nachricht, man werde sich an der Körperöffnung, nein, im Büro treffen: 'I'll see you at the orifice, I mean at the office.'"<sup>31</sup> These are the last words of the article and this is Ronell's "Technik der wortspielerischen Zweideutigkeit" ("technique of punning ambiguity") she practiced and taught her pupils.

This article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, as much as the following in *Die Welt*, trace a bond between the harasser and the harassed. Whether Ronell worked for years on her own last book, *Complaint*, one could say that the plaintiff wanted his own *Complaint*. This was filed a second time to the Supreme Court of the State of New York on August 16th, following the result of a first 11-month long investigation by NYU. It is interesting to notice that both the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* and *Die Welt* opted to read the email exchange between the parties literally – see the reference to the "student bodies" – instead of actually addressing the impossibility of determining

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<sup>31</sup> "The sentence in X's [the plaintiff's] Kittler essay, to which note nine refers, says: 'No one will dispute that de Man, in spite of all appearances, engaged the enticing aspects of rhetoric and in many individual cases had the same influence of Friedrich Kittler on the student body.' X [the plaintiff] makes use here of one of the most frequent artifices of deconstructive prose: wordplay. The concept 'student body' has a double meaning. The sense of collective student corporation can be substituted by the student body in an anatomical sense [the translator must give a hand to this German sentence], right there where the talk is about the enticing rhetoric of some cases. The fact that [female] Professor Ronell made demands also on the bodies of her students is shown by the complaint probatory material where emails are quoted, whose authenticity Ronell doesn't dispute. In this textual body one confronts the technique of punning ambiguity in a private context. Thus, X [the plaintiff] received from Ronell once the message that they would meet at the orifice, no, in the office: 'I'll see you at the orifice, I mean at the office.'"

the borders. They are in fact out to set borders. As Küveler asserted in his article, the law (the media law especially) must bring clarity over the obscure and, having found the main interpretative direction, spell out the facts. This is very important not only in itself but because the Ronell Affair is so clear that it throws clarity on everything else: on the damages made by deconstruction, on academic corruption and malfunctioning, on systematic power corruption and elites' abuses, on the MeToo movement, on the useless and misleading complicatedness of abusive language... No one more than academics (journalists apart perhaps) have been insisting on the simplicity of the case. Evidence is there in front of everyone's eyes. The Ronell Affair is bacon and beacon in these dark times. Complicatedness, obscure language, enough with that! The truth is clear, is at everyone's hand, there's only to do justice to it.

The truth, in this case, is impossible. It is impossible to believe. As soon as the first news of the case appeared, confusion sparkled, since, as a Title IX case demanding confidentiality, only whispers circulated. As more information came in and the NYTimes inconsiderately created the precedent of revealing confidential matters on a harassment case, incomprehension spread even farther. The cocker spaniel became immediately famous: "she referred to him as 'my most adored one,' 'Sweet cuddly Baby,' 'cock-er spaniel'" etc. In spite of alleged clarity, the readers of the complaint filed at the Supreme Court of the State New York, might have noticed that in fact, according to the plaintiff's lawyers, it was Ronell who referred "to herself as his 'cock-er-spaniel'" (the context, of course, is not provided). The 56 page long complaint reads, according to the journalist of *Die Welt*, as "ein postmodern-akademischer Sexroman."<sup>32</sup> Great part of the confusion generated by the Ronell Affair is the lack of a credible threat corresponding to endless

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<sup>32</sup> "a postmodern academic sex novel."

humiliations. The plaintiff defines himself as a slave, as it were. He seems to affirm that he had no decisional power to reject the terrible harassment situation he had entered. It is fine to enslave institutionally a student to the extent that he has no power to say “no” to anything anymore: this is what university is. But it is the responsibility of the professor to be fair and just with her or his slave, or, at least, don’t demand intimacy. Of course, it is when innocents are wrongly accused that political actions are often undertaken. Butler never sympathized with Title IX, without even mentioning its application to a female, queer professor. She actually openly spoke against its indiscriminate usage. Yet the political aspects of her decision to intervene have been ignored in favor of her friendship with Ronell, with whom she would not have been a friend to start with if she thought she could be a harasser.<sup>33</sup> Political decisions in their entirety require an act of faith, to minor or major extent: trust in the past, the present and the future. This case didn’t demand a big leap from anyone. Yet society is testing, has been tested for its capacity of holding the ban and following the law of the system by the letter. Banality has been tested on the stage of the Ronell Affair. And it has been a wild victory. Everything has become very simple, and the evil figure has been burned at the stake, by the fire of her own books. We are as far from the student revolution against the elites (which, by the way, are hardly to be found in the humanities) as revolution can be achieved by way of dehumanization – unless you invent a new concept of life. The blind schematism used in this context – such as: victim in underprivileged position is harassed by boss – shows that it is not relevant anymore whether humans occupy these positions or who they are. The “if it’s a woman instead of a man it doesn’t matter” hides another, deeper truth: “if it’s a machine instead of a man it doesn’t matter either.” And vice versa. A mechanized truth administers disposable people. One could call it populism, since it’s fashionable, yet it resembles very much

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<sup>33</sup> At the current moment, spring 2019, Butler’s position seems to have changed.

that synchrony of technicity and fascism that some of us experienced not long ago: the synchrony of the law, or life, “Leben wie es im Dorf am Schloßberg geführt wird,”<sup>34</sup> establishing its eternal present of re-enforcement.



A Cocker Spaniel in Livorno. Photo by Asja Piergiacomini

“Wir sehen uns an der Körperöffnung,” wrote Ronell to X sometimes between 2012 and 2015. She actually wrote: “I’ll see you at the orifice, I mean office, and we’ll have our sacred and beautiful time together, something that each time exceeds all expectation.” It is interesting how ‘orifice’ should be taken literally while ‘sacred’ shouldn’t. The author of the *Die Welt* article skillfully refers to Ronell’s nickname for several years, since her first meeting with Derrida. She said: “Me, metaphysics.” This is a quote from Derrida’s 1982 *L’oreille de l’autre*, as “a statement of identity (‘Me, such a person,’ male or female... ‘Me, metaphysics’).”<sup>35</sup> Ronell translated this section,

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<sup>34</sup> Walter Benjamin, letter to Scholem, 11 August 1934 in *Gesammelte Briefe* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995–2000). “Life as it is lived in the village at the foot of the hill on which the castle is built.” Letter to Scholem, 11 August 1934, *The correspondence of Walter Benjamin: 1910-1940* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 453.

<sup>35</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 10.

“Otobiographies,” for the English edition of the book, *The Ear of the Other*. Ronell, metaphysics... proper names and homonymic masks... “It would suffice, that is, to lead all the affiliated threads of the name astray in a labyrinth which is, of course, the labyrinth of the ear.”<sup>36</sup> Perhaps a musician, such as X, might be more attuned to the sense of these words. “Orifice” etymologically relates as much to mouth as to prayer (see *ora et labora*, pray and work). But “the ear is uncanny. Uncanny is what it is; double is what it can become; large or small is what it can make or let happen (as in *laissez-faire*, since the ear is the most tendered and most open organ, the one that, as Freud reminds us, the infant cannot close); large or small as well the manner in which one may offer or lend an ear. It is to her – this ear – that I myself will feign to address myself now in conclusion by speaking still more words in your ear, as promised, about your and my ‘academic freedom.’”<sup>37</sup> He proceeds to address, via Nietzsche, ‘academic freedom,’ if there is such a thing. “Through the said ‘academic freedom,’ it is the State that controls everything... The State wants to attract docile and unquestioning functionaries to itself... If today such an apparatus is on its way to being in part replaced by the media and in part associated with them, this only makes Nietzsche’s critique of journalism – which he never dissociated from the educational apparatus – all the more striking.”<sup>38</sup> Today many policies, not to mention curricula and evaluations... determine what can and cannot be done, what can be taught and how.<sup>39</sup> The orifice sentence above is perhaps the most

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 33, 34.

<sup>39</sup> On a side note: As I am writing this, JHU is discussing a new policy I have been explicitly ordered by the Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs at Hopkins not to share with non-affiliated; a policy shamelessly carrying the title of “Personal Relationships Policy.” It was explained to me that, far from being an ethical concern, consensual amorous and/or sexual relationships must be (severely) policed by University to avoid nepotism, with clear blindness even to the mere (male-oriented) etymology of the term ‘nepotism.’ My contribution to the ‘democratic’ drafting of the policy was the feedback I report here in its entirety:

“Berlin, February 22, 2019. Feedback.

Thank you for valuing students’ opinions on something that concerns them directly and significantly. Unfortunately, I found so many issues with this draft that I strongly recommend a new and more felicitous start from scratch.

The current version of this Personal Relationships Policy (whose title unavoidably reminds the reader of bio-politics to start with) is said to implement “the University’s commitment to maintaining the integrity of its educational and working environment.” Syntax apart, which is heavy, the vaunted integrity merely reveals integralist asides that will come down the line. No policy should mistake ethical concerns for legal arguments. Ethical principles cannot be enforced, otherwise the enforcing

incriminating in the Ronell Affair (repeated three times in the text of the complaint), beside the cocker spaniel (mentioned there twice, which was so simple and clear that, at first misunderstood, turned out not to be a pet name for the plaintiff but a self-description by the accused). ‘Orifice,’ as

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institution compromises itself not so much with a highly questionable support of puritan values, more with dangerous fundamentalist attitudes. In fact, not only religious beliefs but also political views can easily become fundamentalist, independently from their conservative or progressive orientation. It should not be forgotten that Nazism meant National Socialism and fascism was a movement of the people too. From this point of view, the current draft presents a politically rogue policy. But this is only a first serious issue.

The policy also mistakes consensual relationships for harassment. For cases of harassment or assault, specific policies already exist. A consensual relationship can be based on harassment (as it is the case in heterosexual relationships almost on principle), or can develop abusive tendencies with time, but it is a logical fallacy to subsume the whole under one of its parts, and it is certainly a legal crime to persecute a consensual relationship because it could be or could become something else that it is not, namely non-consensual. For example, it is like taking away the driving license from a woman because she had a bottle next to her while driving, on the basis of the possibility that there might be wine inside the bottle. In the specific case, not only any liquid whatsoever could be inside the bottle, but the bottle happens to be a water bottle, with “water” (or “consensual”) written on the label. This policy behaves like the police officer that would take away the driving license from the woman anyway, on the legal basis that water could always turn into wine.

No policy can reduce human beings to their functional role or read them only in terms of the alleged power allotted to them. Humans have rights, and a constitutional right not to be considered instruments or vectors of forces but subjects (with feelings and emotions). And, neither feelings nor emotions are wrong in themselves. We are in desperate need of a policy addressing nepotism, which is notoriously (and etymologically) entirely a male thing and has very little to do – or only occasionally – with romantic and/or sexual relationships.

This brings me to the next scandal of this policy as it is currently drafted. The definition of ‘romantic and/or sexual’ relationship is very vague and therefore too discretionary, to the extent, which it touches, of being abusive from a legal point of view. Not only it would invade the privacy of the people working or studying at the university, carrying over the specter of censorship, but it would do so in very deliberate and questionable ways. The integrity advertised in the policy, which prides itself of pure success-based merits, buys in the idea of a neutral work dynamic. This myth of neutrality (as feminism, gender, queer and critical race studies have thoroughly demonstrated) hides and benefits, as it is most often the case, white heterosexual men. They are those reflected in the integrity statement, that is, in “the University’s commitment to maintaining the integrity of its educational and working environment.” Similarly, “the integrity of the student-teacher relationship” still reflects (and still hides) the reality the policy protects, namely the puritan idea of a real man only (almost military) brotherhood. Needless to say, it is old-fashioned, but, as everything that is old-fashioned, it is also always on the brink of returning with vengeance. And, clearly, it is returning, with dad’s strengths.

Cases of favoritism as much as cases of harassment are very often dependent on the “tits” logic, or the “big dick” counterpart. Facing this issue, an issue of discrimination, requires deep and thorough political and educational work, which is actually the contrary of policing the humanity of people, there were it should be fostered. As much as harassment doesn’t flourish on lively human relationships (it dies there), it is the excremental end result of so called “environmental integrity,” where neutrality means the old regime of accepted and regular harassment, that goes without saying, not being even perceived as such, and that this policy, as it is currently drafted, would actually enforce and reinforce. Serious work against normalized harassment must be done. This has no relation to the emotionally or even erotically charged life and learning experience one might meet at school and everywhere else. It is precisely in order to defeat cases of harassment that this policy should be significantly modified if not even obliterated, since conflating harassment with consensual relations of basically any kind (romantic and/or sexual: you do not need a psychoanalyst to know that almost all relations, to major or minor extent fall in this definition) does not help in the important task of defeating either harassment or nepotism; it actually does the opposite.

What can be the sense of a Personal Relationships Policy? This is definitely the wrong way to go about dealing with liability issues and only serves to cover them up clumsily: economic concerns cloaked in heavy-handed moralism is dealt out in bad faith. There is already a policy against harassment and assault, which should be improved. The vacuum the Personal Relationships Policy could and should occupy – to the vantage of all members of Hopkins University – is constituted by the serious issue of nepotism. Obviously, if nepotism were based on romantic and/or sexual relationships, the glaring disparity on the market between women and men would not be the injurious reality it is. I would greatly appreciate a serious policy against nepotism, which of course shouldn’t mean abusive invasion of one’s own emotional life, but protection against undeserved mobbing and injustices in the work and study environment.

Did philosophy scholars help with this draft of the policy? Psychoanalysts? Historians? They all might constitute a great resource for improving it. Sorry for the harsh criticism; it comes in pure constructive spirit.”

‘office’ plus ‘hour’ (hōra), short for ‘office hour,’ was a common joke hinting at the students’ invasion of the professor’s office clearly demanding attention at those times. The great attempt to make things banal!