

“Language remains a weapon that anyone can reclaim”:
French Theory, Sade and Surrealism

An interview with Annie Le Brun¹

Philosophie magazine: You have a doctorate in philosophy and you had the promise of a brilliant university career. Why did you turn it down?

Annie Le Brun: If a world is revolting to you, must you agree to be an employee of it? “Thinking is a poor job,” claims Jacques Rigaut,² and I would add that it is the only luxury we have. When you have an intuition about this at the age of 17, it is difficult to follow the route that they say has been traced out for you, starting with going to college. I only attended one to get out as soon as possible. And I still find it impossible to take seriously the idea that a university degree is required a fortiori to exercise some kind of power in the domain of ideas. If you begin this way, you remain a bad subject. At least that’s all I flatter myself with being.

Q: Is that the price for the freedom to think?

A: Of course such freedom implies living in a way that is often very uncertain, but with the certainty that “who loses wins.”³ That is to say, with the strange pleasure of being both outside, or at least far away from, the ruling order and in the midst of, at the center of, the whirlwind, the battle, where quite naturally I encountered – from 1968 until today – the splendid people who “refuse to play the game.”⁴

Q: Why was it necessary, in your words, “to ascertain the bankruptcy of all the rational systems of thought that have purported to change the order of things”?

¹ “Annie Le Brun : ‘Le langage reste une arme que chacun peut se réapproprier,’” published in *Philosophie magazine*, 29 January 2009: <https://www.philomag.com/les-idees/entretiens/annie-le-brun-le-langage-reste-une-arme-que-chacun-peut-se-reapproprier-3793>. Translated into English by NOT BORED! on 7 January 2019. The subtitle and all footnotes have been added by the translator, except where noted.

² Jacques Rigaut (1898-1929), a French Surrealist poet and advocate of suicide.

³ *Qui perd gagne* is the French title for Rouben Mamoulian’s film *Rings on Her Fingers*, which was released in 1942, the year that Ms. Le Brun was born.

⁴ *refusent le pli*, literally “refuse the [card] trick,” a quote from *The Surrealist Revolution* (1929).

A: These days, one of the most serious forms of alienation lies in the fact that people don't see that everything is connected [*se tient*]; mass culture corresponds to reconstituted crabmeat, media overkill to acid rain, urban renewal to cosmetic surgery. . . . Nonetheless, all this doesn't come from wicked capitalism alone, but also results from a utilitarian conception of life that the West has elaborated, century after century, and that revolutionary theory has never truly questioned, since it is essentially upon economic relations that social critique – motivated by an aspiration for Progress – has been developed. Everything has happened as if critical thought has believed that it could gain its efficacy, if not its dignity, as well, from distancing itself from the perceptible world.

Q: Today we are invaded by “too much reality,”⁵ this “excessive reality that the saturation of information has given to events in a smash-up of an excess of time and an excess of space.” What form does it take today?

A: This “excessive reality” appears, first of all, as an unprecedented form of censorship that isn't based upon removal [*le manque*], but excess: a *censorship through excess*, tied to the requirements of the excessive commodification expected by technical rationality, which today determines all forms of consumption. This consumption, before it establishes itself as a simulacrum of freedom, is not a domain that reminds us of the obligation to gorge ourselves, whether it is a matter of food, information or sex. . . . To the point that this censorship through overload gets confused with a full-time mobilization that equates each person with self-expropriation. And this training begins at a very early age. Because, beyond the particularly aggressively ugly toys in which childhood today is submerged, no time is left unoccupied. Here the little ones as well as the big ones are straightaway condemned to “live without dead time.”⁶ When it's not game consoles, it's a multiplicity of playful activities – involving culture or even sports – that reduces the time for dreaming.

Q: What is the role played by “French theory,”⁷ embodied by authors such as Foucault, Deleuze and Derrida, in this “incoherent rationality” that, according to you, dominates contemporary thinking?

⁵ “Reality overload,” in the words of the translation published by Inner Traditions in 2008 of Ms. Le Brun's book *Trop de réalité*, first published in 2000.

⁶ *Vivre sans temps morts* was one of the situationist-inspired slogans that was spray-painted on walls in Paris during the May-June 1968 uprising. The author's ironic reference to it suggests that the society of the spectacle has managed to “recuperate” a demand that was revolutionary at the time it was made.

⁷ English in original.

A: Starting from the end of the 1960s, I have had the greatest distrust of those who became the heroes of *French theory*,⁸ who, by the way, developed very different approaches [*pensées*]. Right away they asserted themselves as tools of power, just like all the others. And this critique of critique – it had little difficulty becoming the latest cultural fashion, when, for the first time, theory was presented as a great role-playing bedroom game for amateur subversives. Its “principal theoretical interest” – as one of its American promoters, Paul de Man, phrased it in 1986 in “*l'impossibilité de sa définition*”⁹ – was its ability to play on the “indeterminable,” even as far as claiming, as Jacques Derrida did, that “nothing is certain.” This prepares the conceptual bed for an incoherent rationality that allows for affirming everything and its opposite at the same time.

Q: But why do you support the idea that it is perfectly soluble in the new spirit of capitalism?

A: It is, in any case, legitimate to wonder if both the structuralists and the deconstructionists – by asserting, outside of any perceptible [*sensible*] consideration, the effacement of the subject, the vanishing of history and the disappearance of meaning to the profit of structure and function – didn't end up serving the technical civilization that they claimed to be critiquing. It isn't only their choice of the rhizome as a model for thought,¹⁰ which gets confused with that of the network, that causes me to wonder if they didn't furnish the incipient global order with the theoretical instruments that it needed to attain hegemony. Especially since, with the passing of time, from the Foucaultian “care of the self”¹¹ to the

⁸ English in original.

⁹ To my knowledge, Paul de Man (1919-1983) did not write anything titled “The Impossibility of Its Definition,” but in 1986 he did publish a major posthumous work: *The Resistance to Theory*. In “Too Much Theory” (2006), an essay included in *The Reality Overload* (2008), Le Brun provides the full quote from Paul de Man (“The main theoretical interest of literary theory consists in the impossibility of its definition”) and, in a footnote, correctly cites the source as *The Resistance to Theory* and gets the publication date correct, as well (1986).

¹⁰ Note by the magazine's editor: “In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari proposed a critique of the Cartesian vision of the tree of knowledge, whose roots would be metaphysics and whose branches would be the sciences, preferring instead the botanical notion of the ‘rhizome’ in order to show that all discourse advances in several directions and through several sedimented layers of meaning.”

¹¹ *Le souci de soi* is the title of a book published by Michel Foucault in 1984; it was translated into English in 1990 as *The Care of the Self*. The truly attentive reader will note that this book was the third and last installment of *The History of Sexuality*, the very title of which, not to

“monitoring of oneself”¹² recommended by management, from the “desiring-machines” of Deleuze and Guattari to online sexuality, or even from the flows to the computer circuits in which everything is equivalent,¹³ *French theory*¹⁴ provided the theoretical foundation for the “connectionist” society that is in the process of triumphing.

Q: You refuse to see a philosophy in the works by Sade. Is this because it shows how intellectual ideas are “subordinated to the physics of nature”¹⁵?

A: Sade is not a philosopher. Neither a philosopher of nature nor a philosopher of negation, as has been stubbornly repeated. His approach is not at all conceptual. He says, “People rail against the passions, without dreaming that it is with their torch that philosophy lights its own.”¹⁶ What interests him is seeing how thought is rooted in the body, how desire is at the origin of all representation and how forms are invented in the course of a battle between the head and the body. Let’s recall that *Philosophy in the Bedroom* is presented as the sexual initiation of a gifted adolescent girl by a couple of libertines. Nevertheless, there is a particularity: this extracurricular educational activity is suddenly interrupted by the reading aloud of a political text, *Frenchmen, one more effort . . .*¹⁷ And it is here that the majority of commentators, such as Gilbert Lely¹⁸ and Maurice Blanchot,¹⁹ lose their footing. Lely only wants to see in it a particularly successful erotic education and Blanchot

mention its contents, indicates that, far from believing in “the vanishing of history,” Foucault was concerned with seeing and writing history in a new light.

¹² Cf. “Self-monitoring,” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-monitoring>.

¹³ Readers of Gilles Deleuze’s 1990 essay “Postscript on the Societies of Control” (*Post-scriptum sur les sociétés de contrôle*), for example, might have good cause to take issue with Ms. Le Brun’s characterizations of the work Deleuze did alone and with Felix Guattari, who “end[ed] up serving the technical civilization that [he] claimed to be critiquing” by co-founding in 1977 the *Centre d’initiative pour de nouveaux espaces de liberté*, which was concerned with fighting against the extradition of political refugees from Italy during the repression of the Autonomist Movement, especially in Bologna.

¹⁴ English in original.

¹⁵ A quote from the Marquis de Sade, *Philosophy in the Bedroom* (1795). The context for this remark is quite interesting, given the discussion of rhizomes above: “What becomes of *the tree* that you transplant from a terrain that was full of vigor to a sandy and dry plain? All intellectual ideas are so subordinate to the physics of nature that the comparisons furnished by agriculture will never deceive us when it comes to morality” (emphasis added).

¹⁶ *L’Histoire de Juliette ou les Prospérités du vice* (1791-1801).

¹⁷ *Français, Encore un effort si vous voulez être Républicains* (“Frenchmen, one more effort is you want to be republicans”).

¹⁸ Gilbert Lely, *Vie du marquis de Sade*, Mercure de France, 2004.

¹⁹ Maurice Blanchot, *Lautréamont et Sade*, Éditions de Minuit, coll. “Propositions” (n° 6), 1949.

only retains the “serious impropriety” of the political reflections, while everything gets played out in the dramatic confrontation between these two registers, which are, in reality, tied together by the notion of *corruption*. The corruption of a young body by libertine ideas and the corruption of the new ideas of the Revolution and their embodiment. It is this double testing of the body by ideas and ideas by the body that we witness in *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, which leads to the first critique of the political by the erotic.

Q: Attacking prudishness, the works of Sade, are they also an affront to the omnipotence of reason?

A: Sade in fact leads us to another scene whose emptiness is inseparable from the energy that is likely to appear there. “All of mankind’s happiness is in its imagination,” he says,²⁰ but he knows that the imagination has no other theatre than the body. It is precisely the power of this tragic imagination that so many philosophers have tried hard to neutralize as a principle of negation. Because, with this devastating [*bouleversant*] wager on the imagination, Sade attempted an attack on the order in which reason maintains its haughtiness. And there it is, the “crime of offending philosophy” mentioned by his contemporary, the German pre-Romantic Lichtenberg:²¹ in the fact that Sade succeeded in establishing that there are no ideas without bodies and no bodies without ideas. There it is: philosophy *in* the bedroom.

Q: According to you, is disembodied thinking merely ersatz thinking?

A: It is certainly mutilated thinking, which only refers back to itself, but it is also mutilating thinking, which reduced the body to a merely functional existence. In this sense, thirteen years ago, Elisabeth Badinter²² – in *L’un est l’autre* – had already advocated nothing less than “the eradication of desire” and was pleased to announce that “passion is on the way to disappearance, as is sensual giddiness [*vertige sensual*].” Thus, in the name of the equality of the sexes, sexuality is put back into its place. Which is something that is not at all in contradiction with the astonishing sexual inflation currently invading books, newspapers, films, etc., but its appalling realism leads to the homogenization [*indifférencier*] of bodies, sensations and participants. Bodies encounter each other, penetrate each other,

²⁰ *L'Histoire de Juliette ou les Prospérités du vice*.

²¹ Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1742-1799), a physicist, writer and satirist.

²² A French feminist, philosopher and politician (born 1944). Her book *L'Un est l'autre* was published in 1986.

even have orgasms, but one can only retain from all that a superabundance of flows, secretions and moistures that efface all singularity in the most dreadful *unisex eroticism*, which is on its way towards turning into convivial cloning.²³ We couldn't find a more dazzling example of the censorship through excess that I've already mentioned. This low blow to [*main basse sur*] eroticism works towards its elimination through an unprecedented attempt at standardization that is part of the crushing of all representation through the reproduction of the Same.

Q: In your view, in what sense was Surrealism “more likely to disturb people than any other radical approach”?

A: If Surrealism is still disturbing, that's because it wasn't the artistic movement to which people want to reduce it. Surrealism was not an avant-garde; it was an attitude towards life, the true radicalism of which consisted as much in its refusal of misery as in its search for amazement. It is in this sense that anyone can find something they like in it. There's a text by Breton, written in the 1930s, in which the thing he always returns to is “clearly” identified; it is even the text's title.²⁴ “Life, such as I understand it, not even being the ensemble of acts attributable to an individual, regardless of whether they are determined by the scaffold or the dictionary, is but the manner in which the individual seems to have accepted the unacceptable human condition. That's it right there. I don't know why, but it is still in the domains bordering literature and art that life, conceived in this way, tends towards its true realization.” In reality, everything comes from there and returns to it – this “unacceptable human condition” and one's manner of responding to it. We must also remember that at the beginning of Surrealism, there was the famous inquiry: “Is suicide a solution?” which, in fact, marked the passage from Dada to Surrealism. And this is enough to see that we are far from some aesthetic preoccupation that is in play when the question is, “How to live?” This is indeed why Surrealism hasn't stopped accounting for the entire human being, his passion and his despair, his reason and his madness, his dreams and his rebellions, by betting as much on the recovery of lost powers as on the discovery of unknown horizons.

²³ Le Brun is virtually quoting from her essay “Too Much Theory” (2006), an essay included in *The Reality Overload* (2008), p. 199.

²⁴ The lines that follow appeared first in *Clairement*, published in 1922, and later reprinted in *Les Pas perdus*, published by Gallimard in 1924.

Q: “Doesn’t the mediocrity of our universe essentially depend on our powers of enunciation?” André Breton asked in 1924.²⁵ How can we recover this power today?

A: If André Breton’s utterance is correct, well, we are great danger, if we observe how – after having anesthetized us with acronyms and ritualized formulae (“the obligation to remember,” “the grieving process,” “civic-mindedness” [*esprit citoyen*], “sustainable development,” “precautionary principles”) – language today seems to develop in a continual denial of reality, the principle function of which is to evoke things that no longer exist or never even existed in the first place (“rest stops” and “landscaped offices,” but also “smart bombs,” “the instrumentalization of the law,” and “surgical strikes,” not to mention the vogue for the word “space,” which people use to decorate the nooks and crannies, such as “free spaces,” “health spaces,” “leisure spaces,” and “beauty spaces,” that have been inserted into the *non-places*, such as airports, service stations and parking garages, that this industrial society creates everywhere). Thus, I have spoken of a *synthetic language* that doesn’t refer to [real] things or beings. And we mustn’t be surprised by the increasing tendency to account for attitudes and feelings by means of a pseudo-scientific vocabulary, which bets on a technological intimidation that denies what remains to us of singularity. Thus the psychological utilization of terms such as “motivation,” “to manage,” “to valorize” and even “to negotiate” leads to the devalorization of any sensible approach. A managerial language is being substituted for the language of one’s inner character. Here language has been “turned,” in the way the police use this term, since it aims at disinforming us about ourselves, by mis-teaching us to feel better about unlearning our ability to discern.²⁶

Q: So, what’s left for us to resist the ascendancy²⁷ of the rational? Poetry? The marvelous?

A: Only revolt guarantees the passionate coherence that, today, everyone is summoned to give up in order to pledge allegiance to the world of voluntary servitude. And we are particularly defenseless to resist it. But language, though damaged, remains a weapon that anyone can reclaim, here and now. Through it, it is possible to retake from this world a part of what it takes from us day after day. A

²⁵ I have located this remark in André Breton, *Point du Jour*, which was published in 1934 [*sic*].

²⁶ The French here is *en nous désapprenant à ressentir pour mieux nous désapprendre à discerner*.

²⁷ The French word used here, *emprise*, can also mean “expropriation.”

little like the anarchists at the beginning of the 20th century who engaged in individual reprisals, seizing every occasion to retake from society a part of what it had taken from them. Because language is a strange treasure that doesn't belong to anyone in particular, but everyone can enrich it and be enriched by it. Let's recall the Zen apologue that Breton cited in 1948:²⁸ “ ‘A red dragonfly / Tear off his wings / A chili pepper,’ the student said. ‘A chili pepper / Give it wings / A red dragonfly,’ the master replied.”²⁹ While the student quite simply mutilates the dragonfly to try to make it roughly resemble a chili pepper, the master destroys nothing, he only considers a quite real chili pepper, but, by adding nonexistent wings to it, he invents a dragonfly that has never been seen before. There it is, the marvelous, and that's the difference between poets and fake artists: the former transfiguring the world by adding to it a small thing, a very small thing, that changes it; the latter not hesitating to tamper with reality in order to impose their impotence through a powerful gesture. “Once upon a time,” the story says. The continued existence of this time depends on us. The particular characteristic of the marvelous is that it suddenly arises where we least expect it. Perhaps it is our last hope, but it is immense. If servitude is contagious, freedom is even more so.

²⁸ André Breton, *Ode à Charles Fourier*, published in 1947 [*sic*]. Cf. also Annie Le Brun, *The Reality Overload* (Inner Traditions, 2008), p. 21.

²⁹ In the text cited here, the master is identified as Bâshô and the student, Kikakou, as “his humorist disciple.” They are trading haiku.