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Film Review: Judith Butler: Philosophical Encounters of the Third Kind

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Judith Butler: Philosophical Encounters of the Third Kind. Paule Zadjermann (filmmaker). 2007. First Run/Icarus Films. 52 minutes, VHS, color, Closed Captioned.

Reviewed by Cierra Olivia Thomas-Williams¹

Judith Butler² is one of the pivotal voices of contemporary feminist scholarship. She has been lauded as “one of the world's most important and influential contemporary thinkers in fields such as continental philosophy, literary theory, feminist and queer theory, and cultural politics (Zadjermann, 2007).” She is also one of the most awe inspiring scholars in the now specialized field of gender studies.³ Her twenty-five year career of groundbreaking scholarship officially began in 1982 but she is perhaps best known for her bestseller *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (GT) published in 1990. Her works, which she warns “cannot be reconciled,” also include 1993 *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (1993), and most recently, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* and *Undoing Gender* (UG) both published in 2004 (Zadjermann). With such an outstanding and intimidating record of scholarship covering an extensive range of topics, Judith Butler has been widely criticized for producing “high” theory that is not useful to the feminist movement. The complexity of her works further lends strength to the implication that Judith Butler the person is unreal, not easy to relate to, and indeed inhuman. Paule Zadjermann’s documentary film *Judith Butler: Philosophical Encounters of the Third Kind* could not have entered on to the academic scene at a better time.

Zadjermann’s creative title, according to Marcie Bianco, refers to the work of Ufologist Dr. J. Allen Hynek whose hypothesis proposes there are several levels of interaction between humans and alien life forms: an encounter of the first kind, for example, “is defined as ‘sighting,’ the second as ‘evidence’ and the third as ‘contact’ (Bianco, 2007).” The implications of the title and Butler’s alterity as a scholar go beyond the blog’s observations, however, to refer to the wider academic debate about the relevance of theory in the social sciences. This is a debate that has been raging since the 1980s and early 1990s when *GT* was published and serious postmodern scholarship began to emerge from academia.

Postmodern scholarship is characterized by its complex ambiguous nature and feminists, most notably Martha Nussbaum in “The Professor of Parody,” have accused Butler of practicing the “lofty obscurity and disdainful abstractness” of postmodern scholarship (Nussbaum, 1999). Nussbaum’s central complaint is that while second wave feminist scholars, such as Catherine MacKinnon, focus on politics and legal policy change—which are helpful social acts—Butler merely promotes a melancholic sort of “symbolic verbal politics” that gets feminists nowhere fast (Nussbaum, 1999). While the politics of Nussbaum and Butler are seemingly divergent, they encapsulate two ends of

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² Judith Butler now teaches at U.C. Berkeley as the Maxine Elliot Professor in the Departments of Rhetoric and Comparative Literature. A complete bibliography of her works and a list of her current interests can be found at the following website: http://rhetoric.berkeley.edu/faculty_bios/judith_butler.html

³ In 2006, Indiana University Bloomington became the nation’s inaugural PhD program focusing solely on Gender Studies and in fall 2007 Arizona State University hosted its inaugural class for their new Gender Studies PhD program.

the “identity debate” continuum and are but a small part of an academic argument that began more than thirty years ago.

Historical Context for Film

In the 1970s and 1980s feminist agitation in many forms changed the structure of the institutions of higher education. The contributions of “power feminists” like Catherine MacKinnon to feminist and critical legal theory permeated universities and even court rooms. Women’s Studies programs were established within institutions to provide women with specialized education centered on women (usually) taught by other women. Also for the first time, anti-rape legislation made “justice” possible for women as victims of rape (and other sexual harassment crimes). Despite the gains won by these women (commonly called “second wave feminists”), rape and sexual harassment remain pervasive and the number of convictions of these crimes remains low. Younger feminists, often pigeonholed into the “third wave” category, are criticized for inciting change in very different ways – for example, through cultural criticism or fashion choices.

These “generational wars” draw attention to the shortcomings of other women in their pursuit and performance of feminist agitation. Because the feminist activism of the 1970s and 80s brought change that permeated throughout various social institutions, younger feminists are called upon to continue the momentum of the second wave movement. Perhaps there are no bra burnings, but the movement within scholarship, including the work of Judith Butler, is and has been rousing. Throughout the years since the civil rights movement, the academy has produced an abundance of scholarship on women. Furthermore, there are now research specialists in other disciplines such as gender and queer studies.

These emerging specialties exemplify the types of movements located within the halls of the academy that snowballed from the momentum of the civil rights era. Much of the scholarship available to women’s or gender studies scholars today was written by women and men from the “second wave” who had no larger body of literature to draw from nor were they specialized in women’s or gender studies. Today, however, students in the discipline of gender studies (for example) have a wide body of literature to draw from and are receiving specialized training in different areas within the discipline, such as *Cultural Representations and Media Practices*; *Medicine, Science, and Technologies of the Body*; and *Sexualities, Desires, and Identities*.⁴ Professional (graduate) students can now draw from the vast and growing body of knowledge and synthesize it to make claims about social experiences and the culture at large today.

It is an exciting moment in the development of gender studies, because there is enough literature to draw from and build on in a way that can avoid, or at least acknowledge, some of the pitfalls of past scholarship, such as making monolithic claims about all women, thus promoting a (now avoidable) type of sexism. Further, Peter Weingart, in “Close Encounters of the Third Kind: Science and the Context of Relevance,” reminds readers that debates over the active or passive usefulness of ideas (theory) are rooted in a specific epistemological system that “has acquired social reality”; social science has become institutionalized as a part of a particular social system with

⁴ These examples are based upon the areas of specialties available at the Gender Studies PhD program at Indiana University Bloomington.

specialize practitioners, thus, it is now difficult to “look at science as an indeterminate set of meanings for which no clear boundaries can be set (Weingart, 1998).”

This is perhaps why Judith Butler’s work has been utterly contentious, because she eradicates, dismisses, and indeed troubles boundaries making them amorphous. The language of modern “science” determines that less concrete (or amorphous) ideas are analogous to that which is unreal and the jump is then made to characterize the theory as less useful. Here we are back at the beginning of the identity debate and the feminist essentialist argument,⁵ which accuses Butler of producing abstract drivel.” This is truly a moment that exposes the inherent paradox of discourse that remains rooted in the phallogocentric scientific model of knowledge production where only the “real” counts. But what is real?

Close Encounters with Judith Butler

Enter the “real” Judith Butler. Snapshots and grainy home movies of Judith Butler as a child flip as a male narrator asks “What is a Man? What is a Woman?” The graininess of the old home movies and photographs paired with the narrator’s deep voice offers a brief nostalgic moment for some viewers reminiscent of the experience of watching fifth grade sex education movies. The irony in this cinematic move by filmmaker Zadgermann is the movement away from the central tenet of those old sex education movies, which teach about the inherent biological workings of the human body, toward the infinite possibilities that lay beyond being a man or being a woman.

What does it mean to move beyond the limitations of identity? This is the philosophical question posed by Judith Butler. The central purpose of the film, though, is not to answer this question but to humanize Judith Butler. Early on in the film, viewers find out that Butler grew up in Cleveland, Ohio as the “problem” child of a Jewish family. Characterized by the school system in her youth as an individual “likely to become a criminal,” Butler describes what it was like to “belong and not belong.” Viewers are left to imagine if Butler was criminalized for her appearance and the possible connection to a non-normative gender identity; in her early photos she appears ambiguously gendered. As someone who did not like authority, Butler was kicked out of school and forced to study with her Rabbi. The film establishes that Butler is indeed human, but here we begin to see that Judith Butler was not the average fourteen year-old interested in existential theology.

The film cuts to Butler teaching her class at University of California-Berkeley, where she vacillates between speaking English and poorly articulated French. Students look on as Butler explains that gender and sexuality are both “linked and not linked” and that the interconnectedness of these identities is dangerous and limiting—but also inspirational. For example, her family owned a movie theatre which she posits inspired her parents to embody the gender norms of certain movie stars: as Jewish people they wanted to become American and thought movie stars was the pinnacle of the American Dream. Butler noticed that her parents actually overemphasized or exaggerated their performance of Hollywood-type gender roles and it was then she become aware of of the

⁵ Essentialist refers to the argument that there is a certain truth about bodies. Here it is meant to infer that there are truthfully male bodies and female bodies and by extension that there are truly men and truly women. For more information and points of view from the feminist essentialist camp read the works of Luce Irigaray, Catharine MacKinnon, and Martha Nussbaum among many others.

ways in which her parents failed in their gendered performances. Judith Butler claims “these failures are sometimes more interesting than their successes,” and thus are the inspirations for *Gender Trouble*.

As Butler walks through a gallery viewing the photography of Cindy Sherman⁶, she discusses (in fluent German) the central theme of *GT*, which involves the act of becoming a gendered person. As the book clearly states, Butler was influenced by Simone De Beauvoir’s 1948 book *The Second Sex*. The difference between De Beauvoir’s most famous line—“one is not born a woman, but rather becomes a woman”—and the view that is the impetus for the frustration about Butler’s work is that Butler insists that the act of becoming is continuous, and without a locatable origin, end or goal. This was her thesis that became *Gender Trouble* and indeed trouble is what it caused. Though there are sixteen years and many publications between *GT* and her most recent book, *Undoing Gender*, the film skips the interim years and follows Judith Butler on a book tour through France and Germany where she lectures about *UG*: a collection of essays and conference papers that discusses how gender norms both “do and undo” people.

In discussing the critiques of her work, Butler confesses that some of the comments “hurt her,” because they were so personal. Butler acknowledges that people expect her to embody her theory, but she does not and cannot. Is that not the point of her work anyway? “I am interested in transvestites, transsexuals, and drag queens, but I am not one of those people. . . . Although [it is said that] I should be happy in my body I am always slightly dissatisfied with it. I do not do well in any category, nor am I in favor of happy transcendence.” It is Judith Butler’s very ambivalence, though, that brings her work criticism from transsexual feminist scholars like Viviane Namaste in *Sex Change, Social Change: Reflections on Identity, Institutions, and Imperialism*.

Judith Butler in *UG* (not covered in the film), for example, upholds transgendered people as true boundary “troublers” and develops theory using the gendered embodiment⁷ of transsexual and intersexed people (who are born with ambiguous genitals) to highlight the tentativeness of identity categories (Butler, 2004: 121). Namaste, a very vocal critic of Butler’s work, privileges the feminist essentialist point of view, because, she argues, it allows the focus of scholarship and activism to be taken off trans-bodies and placed back on institutions where effective policy changes can be made; Namaste wants to be considered a woman, not a gender radical (Namaste, 2005: 6). Being read as “normal” possibly makes one safe from a myriad of events, such as violence. Therefore it is entirely understandable why some transsexuals want their bodies to reflect a sense of normalcy. Judith Butler in *UG* acknowledges this very fact, however, and claims these coercive events are exactly why she thinks and theorizes about gender.

Clearly there is much work to be done by gender, transgender, and feminist theorists of every camp, and although it is helpful to be critical of theoretical works, criticism to spite the work of others seems antithetical and unnecessary to the “cause,”

⁶ Cindy Sherman is an American photographer who uses social role playing and sexual stereotypes as inspiration.

⁷ “Gendered embodiment” used here refers to the overwhelming encapsulation of transsexual people in their bodies as representatives of gender and sex issues across academia and within the popular imagination. There is seemingly no escape from their liminal embodiment.

which is proliferating knowledge and access to knowledge. The film indicates that there is a tentative connection among the polemical arguments set forth herein—a connection involving gender and its very real impact on people—and it is this link that should be more thoroughly explored. Butler’s future projects include a “Jewish criticism of twentieth century state violence” where she will ask questions such as “what is it about gender that is so coercive as to inspire state violence?” This is the point of Judith Butler’s work—to eradicate silence, “to make a trace, to disrupt the notion of the unseeable, to make a lot of noise”—and that it does. The film, however, does not and perhaps should not.

The film does not necessarily serve the purpose of answering the highly theoretical questions posed by Butler, and this will likely be perceived as the film’s weakness. However, *Judith Butler: Philosophical Encounters of the Third Kind* does establish a necessary “contact” with the revered scholar reminding viewers that she is, indeed, only human and this is the film’s greatest strength. *Philosophical Encounters of the Third Kind* will serve well in the undergraduate classroom as a precursor to reading either *GT* or *UG* because Butler discusses the central tenets of both books in a very basic manner, which will then allow undergraduates a more informed reading of either book. Further, the film illustrates the usefulness of being multilingual (Butler speaks three languages in the film) in a world that very much privileges the English language. While the film is perhaps not thorough or theoretical enough to take space in a graduate seminar, it does help to humanize Judith Butler, a woman who is very much revered in academia. This statement may seem to promote a celebration of Judith Butler as spectacle or celebrity, but this is clearly the aim of Zadjermann’s film. There is a definite parallel between her early childhood experiences with notions of movie celebrity, which guided Butler toward writing her theory of gender subversion, and her later international celebrity in academia. Ultimately, the film is worth seeing just to make contact.

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