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✚ CRITICAL THEORY BEYOND NEGATIVITY

*The Ethics, Politics and Aesthetics of Affirmation:
a Course by Rosi Braidotti*

AGGELIKI SIFAKI

Were a possible future attendant to ask me if the one-week intensive course, entitled *Critical Theory Beyond Negativity: The Ethics, Politics and Aesthetics of Affirmation* and directed by Rosi Braidotti, is a critical theory- or philosophy-oriented course, I would have to answer that it has little to do with either of the above. Instead, I would claim that it is mainly a course about dance. It is above all else a dance course: its vitality looks like a rock and roll performance; its intellectual subtlety and fertility of invention brings to mind the delicacy and elegance of a waltz; whereas its precision, distinctness, and passion, especially when the rhizomatic development of concepts and cartographic readings of our era are foregrounded, resembles a tango. Hence, to a greater or lesser extent, it is up to the participant to leave themselves free to experience the rhythm and intensity performed by the tutors.

This summer was the second time that I attended this critical theory course offered at Utrecht University. Situating myself in the social sciences—more specifically, the educational sciences, with a special focus on gender studies—at the beginning I caught myself wondering if I would manage to meet the academic requirements of the course. Having been taught that the traditional division between theory (i.e., humanities) and practice (i.e., social sciences) is still effective, I expected that the works of the major figures of Continental philosophy tradition, such as those of Gilles Deleuze, Luce Irigaray, Henri Bergson, and Rosi Braidotti herself, would be difficult to grasp. Fortunately, my expectations proved to be wrong.

If the aforementioned course could be easily slotted into any of the academic disciplines, it would fail to achieve one of its fundamental commitments: *interdisciplinarity*. As it is, its interdisciplinary character does not emanate from or correspond to the need of our time to cross disciplin-

ary boundaries in an instrumental way, meaning interdisciplinarity for the sake of interdisciplinarity. Rather, it comes from the course leader's genuine concern:

in postmodernity, what is needed are new transversal or intersectional alliances between postcolonialism, poststructuralism, and postgender theories. This would correspond to new interdisciplinary dialogues between philosophy and fields such as legal studies; critical studies, and film theory, social and political thought, and economics and linguistics".¹

Indeed, Braidotti's course does break down the false divide between academic disciplines, on the one hand, and theory and practice, on the other, while keeping at the same time a lively and continuing dialogue going between them. Breaking out of methodological "territorialities," which she herself calls "methodological nationalism," is the condition *sine qua non* for overcoming negativity and bringing affirmation to the fore as the political urgency of our era.

It is at this point that a crucial question arises: in the context of the forenamed course, what exactly do we mean by the term "negativity," and why is it important for us to move beyond it? In the framework of Hegelian dialectics, difference, in the sense of "being different from," has come to mean pejoration, meaning to be "worth less than," and desire is defined as lack. The challenge we face is both how to find alternative representations for the kind of subjects we are in the process of becoming that avoid either/or dualisms, and how to articulate and activate these representations in theoretical terms. Here is the moment of the course where the politics of location, creativity, intensity, and passion are introduced, and where they play a major role in the process of building oppositional consciousness, meaning criticism and *creativity* as a way of resistance to the challenges of our era. In other words, or to put it in Braidottian terms, here is the point where the figuration of the nomadic subject emerges in order to redefine desire not as the site of lack and otherness, but instead as the meeting point of interconnectedness and affirmation.

1 Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 106.

The course consists of keynote lectures in the mornings and thematic tutorials during four afternoons. Arranged thematically, the sessions of the course explore the different aspects of critical theory debates about contemporary subjectivity: the function of the negative and the need for more affirmative praxis. During each lecture the reading material is analyzed and discussed in depth, while the students actively participate by addressing the issues that emerge. The crucial concepts introduced here are those of “practical philosophy,” “cartography,” and “experience.” Starting from the assumption that we are in the midst of a “posthuman turn”²—meaning that intense technological mediation and global networks have blurred the traditional distinction between the human and the non-human—the assumption that philosophy is constituted by a set of obscure notions and legitimizing practices that exclude everyday experience breaks down. Braidotti, acting above all as a charismatic teacher, manages to illustrate the different approaches historically developed by different philosophical streams of thought. She connects these streams to embedded and embodied experience, demonstrating their effect on the different social positions of the subject, and in so doing she offers an escape from the canonized and institutionalized version of classical philosophy.

Braidotti, a philosopher, feminist theorist, and distinguished university professor at Utrecht University, co-taught the course together with Dr. Iris van der Tuin and Maria Hlavajova. Van der Tuin is Associate Professor of gender studies and the philosophy of science in the graduate Gender Programme of Utrecht University, with a special interest in epistemology and New Materialism. Having recently initiated the COST action *New Materialism: Networking European Scholarship on “How Matter Comes to Matter,”* her lecture and tutorials addressed concepts such as matter, materiality, materialism, diffractive reading, and cartography. In the framework of New Materialism, many qualitative shifts have taken place and “the dualist gesture of prioritizing mind over matter, soul over body, and culture over nature that can be found in modernist as well as post-modernist cultural theories” have been challenged.³ Thus, “how do we engage in epistemology differently?” asks van der Tuin. Understanding matter as a major factor in feminist theory, she explained how we can effectively get involved in the

2 Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

3 Rick Dolphijn and Iris Van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2012), 119.

procedure of breaking down dualistic oppositions. She actively participates in the dialogue between second- and third-wave feminism and explores the possibility of finding “examples of a positive generational feminism around us,” moving beyond the influence of the politics of negativity.

Last, Maria Hlavajova is the founding artistic director of BAK, Centre for Contemporary Art in Utrecht, and she has initiated and developed numerous exhibitions and projects through an international collaborative effort involving a dense network of researchers and art institutions. In the context of contemporary neoliberalism, Hlavajova reflected upon the essential role of art and asked the following question: “How can we—with and through art—trace from here the prospective itineraries pointing towards what we once used to call the ‘future?’” Through the screening of the film *Ausländer raus, bitte liebt Oesterreich* (“Foreigners out, please love Austria”), released in 2000, and the discussion that followed, Hlavajova stressed the subversive and provocative role that art can play.

One guest lecture was also given by Nicole Dewandre, an Advisor for Societal Issues to the Director General of the Directorate General for Communications, Networks, Content and Technologies (DG CONNECT) at the European Commission. Her talk engaged with Hannah Arendt’s affirmative philosophy and its implications for contemporary society and politics.

If we take seriously Vincent Descombes’ statement that “the text we fall in love with is the one in which we never cease to learn what we already knew”⁴ then without a doubt the course Critical Theory beyond Negativity is one worth attending. The participants who are already of an advanced level, and who have a critical and curious intellectual disposition, will have the opportunity to expose their beliefs to “a healthy dose of a hermeneutics of suspicion,”⁵ learning at the same time how to make more rigorous distinctions between different categories of thought and the theoretical tools that they engage. Becoming aware of the political implications of one’s involvement in knowledge production leads to greater accountability. Participating in the course amounts to an active endeavour to learn to think differently, to taking the risk of throwing oneself into the water: “thousands

4 Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, trans. L. Scott-Fox & J. M. Harding (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 14.

5 Braidotti, *Nomadic Subject*, 159.

and thousands of variations on the theme of walking will never yield a rule for swimming: come, enter the water, and when you know how to swim, you will understand how the mechanism of swimming is connected with that of walking”.⁶

⁶ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (New York: Dover, 1998), 193.