

Katerina Kolozova
Cut of the Real: Subjectivity in Poststructuralist Philosophy
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In *Cut of the Real: Subjectivity in Poststructuralist Philosophy*, Katerina Kolozova turns to speculative realism as a way of “rethinking the real” and “building on the legacy of poststructuralist feminist philosophy” (9). In this relatively short work (roughly 150 pages), the author advances the claim that the poststructuralist language game is not neutral. Rather, this game has always been governed by a set of tacit norms of discursive production that regulate what is doable, sayable, and thinkable within poststructuralist circles, by a “domicile ideology” that places an almost moralistic ban on certain philosophical concepts that are deemed “profane” in poststructuralist culture. This ban—which, according to Kolozova, is “hijacking” contemporary theory, including feminist poststructuralist theory—foments certain “intellectual habits” (81) among professional philosophers that cause them to accept certain assertions as “true” and reject others as “false” in a dogmatic rather than critical fashion.

Kolozova’s prime objective is to work against the grain of this ideological scaffolding and reclaim, with the help of “speculative realism” and “object-oriented ontology” (hereafter “SR” and “OOO,” respectively) (Harman 2010; Morton 2011), some of the concepts (she calls them “bad words” [79]) that have been dogmatically extricated from contemporary feminist theory and rendered philosophically inoperative. Kolozova zooms in on five specific concepts: the one, the real, the limit, the transcendental, and the same. Each of the chapters of the book (five in total) is devoted to one of these concepts and is framed as a feminist reappropriation of it *in the wake of poststructuralism’s ideologically modulated ban*. Before summarizing each chapter and expressing some concerns about two of Kolozova’s most salient conceptual maneuvers in this book—namely, her discussion of agency and her analysis of the notion of love—it is important to say something about her methods and clarify that although her argument is situated within the context of contemporary poststructuralist debates in feminist theory, its overarching framework is modeled after recent developments in “post-poststructuralist theory,” especially SR and OOO.

From the start, Kolozova turns to several speculative realist and object-oriented philosophers who are critical of poststructuralist discourse—such as Alain Badiou, Jacques Lacan, Quentin Meillassoux, and François Laruelle—to overcome what she considers to be the current shortcomings of poststructuralist feminist theory. Following these thinkers’ lead, she argues that poststructuralist philosophy is, by design, constitutionally incapable of thinking “the real” *as*

real, that is, as that which exists independently of its own representation in thought or language, as that which predates, postdates, and exceeds representation itself. Poststructuralism, in other words, reduces “the real” to just another term within an economy of signification, and fails to consider how “the real” can (i) offer *resistance* against the force of representation, thus acting as its limit, and (ii) determine, at least partially, what concepts *mean*. In the bluntest of terms, what Kolozova does in *Cut of the Real* is mobilize this critique of poststructuralism’s impotence concerning “the real” to, as it were, awaken contemporary feminist thought from its poststructuralist slumbers.¹

In chapter 1, “On the One and on the Multiple,” Kolozova calls into question poststructuralism’s ideological aversion to the concept of “unity,” arguing that neither poststructuralism nor feminism can do without a basic notion of the “unitary subject.” Drawing a distinction between “the Subject” (that is, the compound effect of the activity of various signifying structures) and “the I” (that is, the concrete, living, material agent who can resist existing social forms), she defends a poststructuralist account of agency in which agents are not simply *upshots* of a-subjective forces (as Foucault might have it) but also *causes* of resistance and revolt.

In chapter 2, “On the Real and the Imagined,” the author articulates an original (though, I think, highly controversial) interpretation of Judith Butler’s work. Inspired by SR’s assertion that poststructuralism fails to think “the real,” Kolozova claims that Butler’s early work is lopsidedly constructivist and, as such, fails to think the real in any meaningful sense. In all of her pre-2000 works, she says, Butler conceives of that which is unconstructed (that is, reality) only *in relation to* or *as derivative from* that which is constructed (that is, fiction). In her early works, the real remains unthought because everything is fiction, play, and performativity *all the way down*. It is only after 2000, especially in *Precarious Life* (2006) and *Frames of War* (2009), that Kolozova claims we find a richer account of “the real” in Butler’s works. Here, the real—understood as embodiment, flesh, and trauma—emerges as something that cannot be reduced to the logic of performativity that afflicts her earlier works.

Although this is where Kolozova directly engages the sex/gender distinction that grounds so much feminist theory from the second half of the twentieth century onward, this chapter on Butler is often hard to follow and, at times, simply unconvincing. For instance, I am not sure that *all* of Butler’s pre-2000 works are radically constructivist in a way that thwarts consideration of “the real.” What shall we make of, say, Butler’s analysis of materiality in the “Introduction” to *Bodies That Matter* (1993) or the robust theory of performativity already outlined in part 1 of *Gender Trouble* (1990)? Also, it is unclear to me that *all* (or really *any*) of the pre-2000 texts operate with the simple “fiction vs. reality” formula or “fiction > reality” hierarchy that Kolozova attributes to them.

In chapter 3, “On the Limit and the Limitless,” Kolozova continues her strategy of conceptual appropriation, but this time in the direction of the concept of “the limit.” Poststructuralism understands thought (as construction) as unlimited—thought thinking thought. Through a reading of Lacan and Laruelle on limits, however, Kolozova questions this “futurist fundamentalism” and presents the real as that which *limits* and *checks* the activity of thought without being related to it. In defense of her position, Kolozova turns to Drucilla Cornell’s *The Philosophy of the Limit* (1992), where Cornell expressly goes for the jugular of poststructuralist

theory—that is, its assumption that thought and language are infinitely self-reproducing machines without any concrete anchors in real life. Inspired by Cornell, Kolozova suggests that to think “the real” means to think that which underdetermines thought and language while still functioning as their “limit.”

Chapter 4, “The Real Transcending Itself (through Love),” is Kolozova at her best, as well as one of the main reasons her book is being reviewed in the special issue of *Hypatia*. Here, Kolozova reimagines the classical opposition between immanence and transcendence via the category of *love*. Using language borrowed from Hegel (mediation), Marx (base vs. superstructure), and Irigaray (*chôra*), she advances the innovative thesis that thought and language are products of a materiality (*chôra*) that immanently transcends itself (self-alienates) in the critical act of love. Less than describing a human emotion or a social bond, then, “love” refers to a *metaphysical principle* that explains how immanence becomes transcendence and how something like “thought” and “language” can emerge from the deepest depths of a “reality” that is itself originally devoid of epistemic and linguistic content. Love is a principle of *becoming*. It is how something (literally anything) morphs into something other than itself. It is the blade with which the real, in a sense, *cuts itself*.

In the fifth and final chapter, “The Real in the Identity,” Kolozova discusses the ethical and political implications of the theory of agency she introduced in chapter 1. There, she argued that we are not only “Subjects” trapped in the house of language. We are also material “I’s” (with bodies, shared histories, legacies of trauma) who can, in theory, fight this entrapment. Here, Kolozova develops this theory of agency further by using the Freudian notion of “the Ego” to discuss the ways in which the fact of trauma—that is, the mere fact that trauma *exists*—proves that there is more to subjectivity than the raw force of external subjectivation.

To be sure, *Cut of the Real* is to be praised for its originality since it provides an ingenious interpretation of the state of contemporary feminist theory from the perspective of SR and OOO. Still, two aspects of the work suffer from lack of development, and these just happen to be the two aspects most important for a specifically feminist audience: the theory of subjective agency (“the I”) developed in chapters 1 and 5, and the notion of love formulated in chapter 4.

In the opening chapter, Kolozova draws a distinction between the “Subject” (which is depleted by the symbolic order) and the “I” (which outstrips the play of signifiers and, as *the real*, can resist it), which is meant to give her a point of entry into a long-standing topic of feminist debate: to what extent can agents engage in the act of negation if they are byproducts of the very system (of power, of language, of history) that they intend to contest? This distinction is Kolozova’s response to this question. Yet the distinction itself turns out to be somewhat frustrating since the notion of the “I”—which, for Kolozova, represents the locus of resistance and revolution within a structure—remains underdeveloped. Admittedly, we are told that the “I” differs from the “Subject” in being *more* than a place of subjection, in being *more* than a set of coordinates of relations of power. But what is this “more”? And how is it to be understood?

Kolozova does describe the “I” in chapter 1 as a “continuity” that “perseveres.”² But what sort of “continuity” is it? And what sort of “perseverance” is it capable of? Is it simply the continuity of a self that repeatedly gives, in language, an account of itself (as Butler might have it)? Or is the

continuity pre-thetic and pre-propositional and thus ultimately a phenomenological substratum of subjective experience (as Bergson would argue)? Or is it perhaps the continuity of an empirico-organic animal body that, like all living creatures, develops, grows, and dies (as Darwinians might say)? Getting clear about the *status* of this continuity, I would argue, is paramount. And I am not sure Kolozova has done enough in this regard.

In a similar key, the concept of “love” also needs fine-tuning. The author introduces this concept in the context of a metaphysical polemic concerning the relationship between immanence and transcendence in chapter 4. And although I cannot do justice to the details of her position here, it is worth noting that for her “love” is simply what “the real” does. “The real” contains within itself a tendency toward its own overcoming, toward transcendence. And this tendency or potentiality is actualized in the act of “love,” which takes place when “the real” projects itself out of itself and *becomes* something other than itself, that is, language and thought. As such, love is a function of the real’s immanence to itself, a function of transcendence. With this claim, the author gives the concept of love an unexpected metaphysical twist and then uses this same twist to overcome the old philosophical dualism between immanence and transcendence. Still, this position leaves important questions unanswered.

For instance, the author is clear that she views love as a function of reality. But, problematically, we do not know if love is a function of *all reality* or only of *human reality*. And this, I argue, results in a dilemma. If love is only a feature of *human reality*—and I think this is the only interpretation supported by the text³—it would follow that only humans are capable of “transcending.” If so, Kolozova steps into the murky waters of humanism that she tries to move away from in chapter 5. If, however, love is a feature of *all reality* and not only human reality, Kolozova must clarify in what sense a nonhuman entity can be said to “love.” Should we say that a flower (as *the real*) “loves” when it projects itself in the direction of sunlight? Or that the bacterium “loves” as it moves toward its food-source? And what about nonliving entities? Does the planet “love” as it orbits its star? And does the universe “love” as it moves forward in time and evolves? Posthumanists might want Kolozova to say “Yes” to all these questions. But it is unclear that Kolozova herself can consistently hold this view since she theorizes *love* in terms of *lack* in line with psychoanalytic theory. After all, what can a rock, a planet, or a universe ever really “lack”?

In spite of these limitations, *Cut of the Real* is polemical and adventurous. It is also innovative in the positions it carves out for itself and in the figures and traditions it employs to carve them. On the one hand, it illuminates the value of SR and OOO for feminist theory, which in itself is an important theoretical achievement seeing as certain figures associated with these traditions (for example, Alain Badiou) systematically dismiss feminist theory as unimportant. On the other hand, this work also brings to the fore the ethical and political implications of the realist perspective. All too often, when speculative realists and object-oriented scholars talk about the various philosophical concepts that mark the limit of poststructuralist thinking (as Badiou does with the concept of *love*), they present them as universals that transcend “identity politics.” But Kolozova’s work resists this sort of abstraction. On more than one occasion, and in a decidedly feminist style, she moves back and forth between theory and experience, letting her *theoretical tactics* be guided by *her personal experiences*. When she discusses the real as trauma and solitude, for example, she reflects at some length on her own experience of loss: the loss of her

father. This dialectic technique helps her accentuate the social, experiential, and political content of philosophical concepts like *the real*, *the One*, and *love* in a way that is not currently done in the SR and OOO literatures. By putting these concepts into direct conversation with the works of feminist philosophers (e.g., Butler, Irigaray, and Cornell) and by making them answer to the court of theory *and* the court of experience, Kolozova politicizes them in a productive manner and positions herself at one and the same time as (a) a realist critic of poststructuralist feminism and (b) a feminist critic of SR and OOO.

Kolozova also positions herself as a voice in contemporary feminist philosophy by exposing the norms that have governed feminist production since the 1970s. What I find particularly intriguing about her way of dealing with this sort of *disciplinary repression* is that she investigates not only the content that has been repressed by poststructuralism's domicile ideology, but also the *mechanism* responsible for it, which she locates in the social and institutional dynamics of professional academic life. Every "academic lifestyle" (82), she says, is the effect of a series of ideologies, pathologies, and compulsions (all her terms) that establish in-group/out-group relations within the academy. To be "in" a group means to respect these oppositions and abide by them, that is, to know *what to say in order to belong* as well as *what not to say in order not to be exiled*. Through these oppositions, academic cultures make the world meaningful and intelligible to their followers, and through their enforcement, they give followers a sense of belonging, the comfort of communal life.

Cut of the Real describes the system of norms that gives the culture of poststructuralist theory its inner logic. And it demands that this system be transgressed. As such, it is an exercise in "academic sociology" as much as in "counter-cultural engagement," for in synch with the critical spirit of feminist poststructuralism, it invites the reader to question the status quo and contravene the norms of the established world order. Yet, in metacritical fashion, it also invites the reader to take a second look at feminist poststructuralism itself and contravene the norms that (as far as Kolozova is concerned) have, for too long, ordered *its* world.

References

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¹ Consider, for example, Kolozova's main intellectual influence: François Laruelle. In *Philosophie et non-philosophie* (Laruelle 1989), Laruelle introduces a distinction between "philosophy" and "non-philosophy." According to him, all Judeo-Greek philosophy (including poststructuralism) begins from the double assumption that (i) in order to think an object one must also think its relation to thought (its being-thought) and (ii) the meaning of an object or concept is a function of its position within a self-sufficient philosophical "system." Against this, Laruelle advances a "non-philosophical" program in which (a) we can think about objects *independently* of their relation to thought and (b) the meaning of an object or concept is a function of *the real* (conceived, roughly, as the empirical world disclosed by scientific investigation). In *Cut of the Real*, Kolozova explicitly characterizes her entire approach and intervention as "non-philosophical," and she leans on the Laruellian perspective to release certain concepts

employed in feminist discourse (e.g., subjectivity, resistance, and sex/gender) from the philosophical-all-too-philosophical grip of poststructuralist thought.

² This may have something to do with her reading of materiality in Irigaray and trauma in Butler.

³ In chapter 4, Kolozova claims that love explains "the real, or rather . . . *the woman-in-woman and man-in-man as the real*" (199). This claim also appears in the chapter's opening paragraph, where the scope of the work as a whole is restricted, via Badiou and Laruelle, "to theories of the human and humanity" (103).