

Interview with Professor Rita Felski

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Introduction

For this edition of DIFFRACTIONS which focuses on the idea of *Suspicion* we had the opportunity to interview Rita Felski and ask her several questions that shed light on both her work and the theme of this issue. Rita Felski is a well recognized scholar in the fields of aesthetics and literary theory, feminist theory, and cultural studies. She is the author of several books including: "Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change", 1989; "The Gender of Modernity", 1995; "Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture", 2000; "Literature After Feminism", 2003; and "Uses of Literature", 2008. In 2015 she wrote, "The Limits of Critique", which addresses the hermeneutics of suspicion as mood and method and, more recently, she co-edited "Critique and Post-Critique", 2017. Felski is currently completing a new book called "Hooked: Art and Attachment", the release of which we are eagerly awaiting.

In this interview Felski carefully explains Paul Ricoeur's notion of hermeneutics of suspicion, and some of the reasons why Ricoeur referred to Marx, Nietzsche and Freud as the "masters of suspicion". She also highlights the relationship between the hermeneutics of suspicion and critique which forms the central argument of "The Limits of Critique" where she insists that critique is necessary, but that perhaps critique should not be seen as the predominant strategy for interpreting text. Felski expresses serious reservations with the idea that "the gaze of critique is a gaze that claims to understand other people better than they know themselves". So, rather than using critique to question the common sense, Felski encourages us to see critical thinking as a dialogue, and as part of the 'ordinary world'. During this interview we also touch on the relationship of academic work with both everyday life and art. We discuss the importance of affect in criticism as a step towards rethinking the idea of suspicion; and we end up with discussing the current relevance of suspicion in relation to the current political climate in the United States and how the idea has been used within the media and as part of the construction of the notion of 'Fake News'.

S.M. Hermeneutics of suspicion is a term associated with Paul Ricoeur's work and his interest in the writings of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud - whom he called "the masters of suspicion". Is it possible to summarise what were, for Ricoeur, the main features of suspicion?

R.F. Ricoeur, is a philosopher of interpretation, perhaps the most interesting thinker drawing on the tradition of hermeneutics. His emphasis is on the hermeneutics part of suspicion rather than on suspicion itself, if you like. He does not talk about suspicion as a sensibility, or as an affect, or as a feeling – he is using the idea of suspicion to clarify a certain way of interpreting text. That is very much his main focus. And, so, Ricoeur thinks at some length about where hermeneutics come from.

And, of course, one main tradition of hermeneutics comes from religious interpretation - there is a long history of people deciphering the bible and trying to make sense of what they see as God's word. So, that form of hermeneutics is what he calls either a "hermeneutics of revelation" or "hermeneutics of restoration". That's a kind of interpretation where you're reading below the surface, you're looking for hidden meanings but, you're doing so in the hope that you will uncover a kind of deeper truth, or revelation; and your attitude towards the work is of great respect, especially in the case of the Bible. By contrast, he sets up his idea of the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' that he sees as distinctively modern. I think he would argue that you could not have an hermeneutics of suspicion in the medieval period; that is that it is a distinctively modern idea because it goes along with the growth of scepticism, a distrust toward authority, a Kantian emphasis on the need to use your own reason to question tradition, to question authority, to question conventions, or behaviour, or belief, and so on. In that sense, a hermeneutics of suspicion is a term he uses to talk about the significance of Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche. He sees them as these great "masters of suspicion".

Why are they masters of suspicion? Because, they no longer either treat things at face value, nor do they read them as interpreters of the Bible might have done, in a state of reverence and trust in what they are reading. On the contrary, they read suspiciously, they read skeptically, and they assign negative motives to whatever it is that they are interpreting. You no longer assume that your interlocutor, or the culture that you're looking at has positive, or benevolent impulses. Rather, you assume that the world around you is a screen for power, for control, for social hierarchies, and the function of culture is to hide those hierarchies. So, you read a text suspiciously in order to uncover what is supposed to remain hidden. But a key point here is that, Marx, Freud and Nietzsche - well, Nietzsche to a much lesser extent, but certainly Marx and Freud - are not primarily interested in literary works. What they are

interpreting is, in fact, the world around them, culture as a whole – the realm of ideology for Marx, of everyday rationalisation and conventions around sexuality and behaviour, and so on, in Freud. So, the hermeneutics of suspicion in this context is a way of interpreting the world. But, then of course, it gets taken over later to talk about the interpretation of literary works.

To summarise it in another way, the spirit of a hermeneutics of suspicion is a spirit of disenchantment, that is what makes it, according to Ricoeur, a distinctively modern idea. Disenchantment is an idea from Weber, is the idea that as we move towards modernity we give up on religion, we give up on faith, we become sceptical, we want to demystify. So, for Ricoeur, Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche are the great *demystifiers*.

S.M. After Ricoeur, several misappropriations of the term suspicion as an iconic instrument of doubt seem to have followed. What would you identify as a misappropriation in this context?

R.F. I don't think that Ricoeur's term has been misappropriated. Certainly, it was an influential concept that was taken up a lot, for example, in religious studies. One of the points of my book on critique is to say, in fact, that in literary studies, or media studies, and cultural studies, and indeed in everyday life, we are all engaged in a hermeneutics of suspicion. Sometimes in a good way, sometimes in a bad way. However, people don't really use the term hermeneutics of suspicion very widely. So, part of the intervention of my book was to say that I look around me and see many scholars in literary studies, cultural studies, media studies, sociology, a range of fields who are engaged in a practice of (something they call) critique. Critique is the common word now in use: one says, I'm going to critique this movie, or I'm going to engage in a critique of assumptions about sexuality, or I'm going to engage in a critical reading of this work of literature. So, people normally talk about themselves as engaged in something called critique. I don't know how that translates to

Portuguese, but certainly in English, and I think also to a certain degree German Kritik, and the French notion of *critique* has that resonance of a sceptical interpretation. So, what I was trying to do in “Limits of Critique”, was to say: well, we all think we’re engaged in something called critique, but let’s take this idea from Ricoeur of the hermeneutics of suspicion, which I think actually explains what we’re doing quite well, and then see how that gives us a different understanding of our own practice. Does that make sense?

S.M. Yes, and connecting with what you just said, in your latest work, you propose a redefinition, or reinscription, of the notion of “hermeneutics of suspicion”, which is something that has evolved throughout your writing. Can we go back to 2003, the year your book “Literature After Feminism” was published, and ask if it was there that your interest in the notion of suspicion sparked? And, if so, have this interest determined your research since then?

R.F. I think it came a bit later. In “Literature after Feminism” I did explicitly turn towards aesthetic questions. The book was not so much a new work of research as an attempt to provide an overview on debates on feminism. I deliberately chose not to organise the book around political categories, as most overviews of feminism had been organized: Marxist feminism, liberal feminism, whatever it might be. So, I decided instead to organise the book around literary categories like author, narrative, literary value, and so on. Part of the reason was to address the claim that feminism had neglected literary questions. But in my view, this was not the case. I believe that feminists had thought a great deal about the value and the importance of literature, and so I wanted to convey that in the book. So, in that sense, I suppose it was a slight turn away from suspicious reading, or an explicitly politicised form of reading. But the moment when I made a shift away to my more current work is in “Uses of literature”.

So, I'm now trying to finish a trilogy: "Uses of Literature", which came out in 2008; "The Limits of Critique", which came out in 2015; and now, I'm finishing a third book called "Hooked: Arts and Attachment", which deals in more detailed with the experience of becoming "hooked" to works of literature and art. Why do we care about some novels or films or paintings, while others leave us cold? Bourdieu, of course, has tried to answer these questions, but I find his answers insufficient. It was when I started writing "Uses of Literature" that I began asking basic questions that I felt had been pushed aside in criticism. Questions like: Why do we like to read? Why do people choose to read literature? And, what happens when you read literature? I felt that those simple questions have been pushed aside because the assumption was, for example, that academics knew much better than ordinary readers why the latter choose to read literature. There was often an explanation in terms of large political structures that the reader did not see, but the critique could see. Most of the interpretations we had were either purely aesthetic accounts, coming out of a Kantian tradition which said that when we experience literature we have this purely disinterested aesthetic experience. Or else, on the other hand, you had political interpretations of what happens when we read: we are either being shaped by some dominant ideologies; or in engaging with literature and art we are criticising those dominant ideologies. However, I felt that reducing aesthetic experience to either a purely disinterested phenomenon, or conversely to a set of political categories, was far too reductive.

So, what I did in "Uses of Literature" in 2008, was try to highlight four common experiences that happen when people read. Experiences that I think are central to both everyday reading and academic reading; to look at both [ways of reading] in their phenomenological and sociological dimensions; to think about their aesthetic and political aspects; and to emphasise the very different ways people respond to literature. So, I had a chapter on the idea of *recognition*: what it means to recognise

yourself in a book; I had a chapter on the idea of *knowledge*: to what extent can literature give us knowledge. Those two chapters were concerned with the more cognitive dimensions of literature, literature as a form of reflection, as a form of thinking. Then the other two chapters dealt with a more kind of affective, more visceral aspects of reading. I had a chapter on *shock*: the experience of shock in reading, whether in relation to Greek tragedy or avant-garde art; and I had a chapter on experiences of *enchantment*: for example, when you feel absolutely absorbed, caught up in a literary world, you lose and forget everything that is around you and you become absorbed in this magical fictional world. So, it was really in that book that I tried more fully to flesh out alternatives to thinking critically. And, because of the responses to that book, I felt that people had not fully understood, or I hadn't adequately explained, what I saw as being the limits of suspicious reading. That's why I then went on to "The Limits of Critique" to try to explain more clearly, as best as I could, why I thought - not that critique was wrong, because we obviously do critique and critique is necessary - but why perhaps critique should not be seen as the primary or the only way of interpreting texts.

S.M. In the introduction of "Critique and Post-Critique" you (and Elizabeth Anker) propose that "rethinking critique can (...) forge stronger links between intellectual life and the non-academic world". You even reinforce this idea stating that there is a necessary "recognition that scholars have much to learn from engagement with non-academics", especially in the field of art and literature because of their creative, innovative, world-making practices. What would be a good example of this relationship between academics and non-academics to rethink critique?

R.F. There are probably two issues in that question: one is the relationship between academic work and everyday life; and the other would be the relationship between academic work and art and literature. My first thought would be to say that I'm not

the only one engaged in these issues, I have a colleague, Toril Moi who wrote a book about a year ago, which overlaps with mine quite closely. Like Toril, I'm interested in the realm of the everyday life, and the realm of the ordinary. So, one could say, as I argue in "The Limits of Critique", that critique relies on a distinction between those who are engaged in critique and those who are the objects of critique, to put it simply. One way I phrase it (in something I am writing now) is that there is an asymmetry, an epistemological asymmetry in this way of thinking, between those who know and those who don't. So, the gaze of critique is a gaze that claims to understand other people better than they know themselves. These people might have some explanations or motives for their actions, but the practitioner of critique comes along and says, well, you are being driven by these structures - neoliberalism, sexism, or whatever it might be, that you fail to understand, and I am here to explain why that is happening, and to help you think more adequately. Now, I have serious reservations with that way of thinking. Obviously, we can disagree with people with different political views to ourselves. But I don't think we should articulate that critique by assuming that they don't know what they are saying, they don't know what they are doing, and they are simply the pawns of larger structures while we are able to see through those structures. So, in that context rather than using critique to question common sense, to question everyday life, to question the ordinary world, I have much more interest, like Toril Moi, in seeing critical thinking as in dialogue, and indeed as a part of the ordinary world and not standing above it. Rather than using critique to diagnose what is around us, let's use it to see what we can learn from the world around us. That could mean, learning from conversations with your neighbours, or somebody at the supermarket, or wherever it might be.

It could also, of course, mean learning things from works of art. In fact, the idea that we can learn from works of art is hardly controversial; many practitioners of critique acknowledge it, saying "let's read Brecht", "let's read Kafka", "let's read Virginia

Woolf”, because they offer critical perspectives on society – so, the idea that we can turn to art for insights into reality is not a new idea. But what I am suggesting, or Elizabeth and I were suggesting, is that we can look to art not just for examples of critique; we should turn to literature not just because it challenges, or subverts things, but also because it *makes* things. One of the points I make in “The Limits of Critique” is that when we value art, we tend to value it in terms of words beginning with a de-, we value art because it *demystifies*, because it *deconstructs*, it destabilizes. Defamiliarising, for example, is a keyword. We have this modernist mindset – shaped especially by Brecht - that says, we should admire literature because it defamiliarises us from the *status quo*. But, what I'm trying to argue, with others alongside me, is: let's also look at what art creates, let's look at its imaginary worlds let's see how it changes our perception in positive ways, let's look at how it gives us hope, or beliefs, or rich fantasies, or a range of possibilities.

For example, I'm writing now about a memoir called “Lost in Translation”, by Eva Hoffman, who moves as a young Polish-Jewish woman to Canada and then the United States. There is an interesting exploration of the affective experience of nostalgia. The book is all about her love for Poland, and her suffering in being estranged from Poland. Now, if I look at my academic articles on nostalgia, they are very critical of nostalgia, they tend to treat it with suspicion. They are certainly very suspicious of love for your country, of the love of home, which they tend to see as very reactionary. But it seems to me that reading this text can actually give us a richer understanding of how people are moved by nostalgia, and the importance of affective attachments. It's not in order to dismiss the critical perspectives, but to counterbalance them with a more affirmative understanding, or a more sympathetic understanding of why people feel the things they feel.

S.M. In "Critique and Postcritique" you also mention the role of affect in criticism. You mentioned that the greatest concern is that "a pervasive mood of suspicion, ennui, or irony, in this regard, can easily become debilitating, both intellectually and politically". Do you believe that Bruno Latour and Eve Sedgwick were already acknowledging the role of affect in criticism and thus responding to this debilitating aspect of suspicion? And how, in your opinion, can affect respond effectively to this concern?

R.F. Eve Sedgwick was of course one of the big players in the whole argument around the limits of the hermeneutics of suspicion. She wrote a very influential essay back in the 1990s, and at that point, she countered the idea of hermeneutics of suspicion with the idea of a reparative reading that was psychoanalytically based. So, Sedgwick has been particularly important for that turn to affect. Latour, I think, not so much. I mean, I haven't read everything he written because he is very prolific but I have read all his books and a large number of articles, and as far as I know he doesn't have any kind of systematic treatment of affect, although it comes up in his "Inquiry into Modes of Existence". Certainly, one of the points of Latour's work is to get us away from a meta-language that allows us to ignore or override what people are saying about their attachments. He says, people experience works of art, and they say they feel things about works of art, so, let's take that feeling seriously. That's part of his commitment to taking seriously what people are doing. And, so, similarly, I would also argue that if affect, or emotions, are one of the reasons people turn to works of art, we should take that motivation seriously.

In terms of my own position in affect studies, I do want to stress that affect cannot be separated from reason, that emotion and thought are entangled up in a whole range of ways, that feeling is linked with interpretation. So, on the one hand, I do want to argue for the importance of feeling in interpretation, and the importance of affective attachment, but certainly not at the expense of critical reflection. I think the two are

very much interacting with each other. Sometimes one is more central than the other, but they shouldn't be seen as mutually exclusive. Perhaps another thing worth mentioning in the context of affect is that one of the main points of "The Limits of Critique" was, in fact, to reinterpret critique in terms of the notion of affect. When people are engaged in forms of philosophical or political critique, they normally see themselves as being engaged in a purely intellectual enterprise. They might engage in a critique of the sexism of Marxist thought; or say that they are going to engage in a critique of the racial ideologies implicit in Jane Austen. So, one of my points in "The Limits of Critique" was to argue that the hermeneutics of suspicion is not just a mode of interpretation, it's also an affect, it's also a disposition, it's also an orientation, it's also a stance, it's also broadly an emotion. I mean, it's not a strong emotion, but it's a kind of general stance of suspicion, skepticism, weariness. Could we adopt other kinds of affective stances to works of art?

There is now quite a lot of interest in these questions. There are several recent books that are emphasising the importance of *hope*. If we have too much emphasis on scepticism and despair, people just become disempowered, they feel disheartened, they feel unable to act. So, we need to counterbalance that with paying more attention to things that can inspire us, and encourage us, and makes us go out and do things in the world. So, I think affect is very important. But again, I would say, affect cannot take place at the expense of thought. It's not enough to say, we need more positive feelings in criticism. We need to say, what would be the intellectual pay-off of these feelings in criticism. Positive feelings in themselves are not good, you have to demonstrate why they have some value.

S.M. Would it be possible to consider your own work on suspicion a symptom of the discussion surrounding humanities in the U.S. and also in Europe? Isn't the thought that derived from a permanent suspicious positioning still pertinent?

R.F. So, in “The Limits of Critique”, I’m very much writing about the academic context in the United States. Because of cultural imperialism, of course, what happens in the United States has some influence on what happens in the rest of the world. Academic trends in the United States do also influence other countries. I’m not an American, actually I have British and Australian citizenship, but I’ve been in the United States for 24 years, and so I was trying to describe what I saw as the main trends. They are certainly not the only trends, and even within the United States, as I tried to suggest in the book, they are distributed in various ways. For example, critique is more central to some journals than others, or more central to some fields than others. There are certainly other people that are doing other things, other than critique - they might do bibliographical studies, or close readings, or digital humanities that is not explicitly critical, there are a range of different options. However, critique has been particularly predominant in the United States, for a range of reasons. And literary studies has been more emphatically politicised in the United States than in other countries - both in positive ways and, perhaps sometimes in less positive ways. So, I was really trying to describe that particular intellectual formation. I’m talking primarily about literary studies in the United States, and not so much about other fields however, I think that some of what I’m saying also relates to other disciplines.

My work has been taken up by people working in other fields, such as sociology and intellectual history, because perhaps some of these practices of critique, obviously, have a broader significance across other disciplines in the humanities. I do think that to some extent critique is not so widely prevalent in Europe as it is in the United States. Again, of course, this needs to be differentiated by discussing specific countries, and so on, but that is certainly my impression and that impression has also been confirmed by scholars that I’ve spoken to. In Germany, for example, there

is a kind of substantive tradition of more philological, a more literary historical engagement with works that is not so much explicitly, or emphatically politicised, or so closely linked to social movements, as in the United States.

I would like to emphasise that the extent to which critique needs to be criticised in terms of its limits, or the extent to which critique needs to be affirmed, because there has not yet been enough critique, will vary significantly according to different contexts. I went to Poland a few years ago to give a talk and I met a feminist intellectual who said to me, “we don’t need to talk about the limits of critique in Poland, we need more critique in Poland, we haven’t had enough critique”. Her perception, was that in Poland the teaching of literature is still very much caught up in a nationalistic paradigm, it’s all about affirming the greatness of Polish literature as creating the nation, and so on. There is not the same history of critiques of literature that we’ve had in the United States for 50 years. So, the question, of how much critique you want, or how much questioning of critique you want, is going to vary quite significantly according to different national, literary, and cultural contexts. My book has sometimes been misread as saying, “we shouldn’t be doing critique”. That is the last thing I’m saying! I was trained in the Frankfurt school tradition of Marxist thought, that is my intellectual history and it remains important. What I’m saying is that critique is not *special*. Critique often presents itself as being the most radical form of thinking, the most rigorous form of thinking. Indeed, as the only acceptable form of thinking in academia. I’m just bringing it down to earth and saying, well critique is one way of approaching works of art, it’s one way of thinking philosophically, but there are other ways. Rather than assuming that critique is the only way to go, let’s pay attention to our own particular intellectual situation. Let’s try to work out whether or not it is necessary for this particular context and that goes for any social, political, intellectual context you find yourself in.

S.M. With the discredit of reality shifting political positioning, e.g. the obsession with news by conservatives, has suspicion become more conservative than subversive?

One of the points that Latour makes in his famous essay about critique running out of steam – and I agree, and I also talk about it in my own book – is that the defenders of critique are still often stuck in a certain kind of mindset. To put it crudely, the mindset is: the population as a whole are naive believers, they trust everything that the government tells them, they accept everything. The only people who are critical and suspicious are intellectuals; that to be critical and suspicious is, by default, a marginal position, it is, indeed the position of the superior intellectual who see things that others don't see. Well, Latour says, now that is not the case anymore. "I go to my French village and I can talk to my neighbours and some of them argue that no one ever landed on the moon, it was a kind of a con-job put out by the American government." There is this kind of pervasive suspicion, from the ground upwards, that much of what goes on, what we see in the news, or what we see in the world is fabricated and circulated by elites to serve their own agendas. So, now what could be seen as being suspicious, being sceptical, being critical, is a position in no way limited to – or exclusively linked to – the work of intellectuals. There is a widespread populist suspicion now, a distrust of facts, a questioning of assumptions. You go on twitter and you find that anything that anyone says can be challenged due to its dubious motives and that line of argument is used as much by the right as by the left. So, the idea that there is something intrinsically radical in questioning and criticising is no longer plausible. In a certain context, yes it can be, but critique is not automatically subversive anymore.

Editorial note: because we had the privilege of interviewing Rita Felski live on Skype, we decided to maintain the conversational tone in the transcription of the interview.

Thanks to Vera Herold for her help reviewing the transcription.