



Donald Kunze <kunze767@gmail.com>

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Donald Kunze <kunze767@gmail.com>
 Draft To: Donald Kunze <kunze767@gmail.com>

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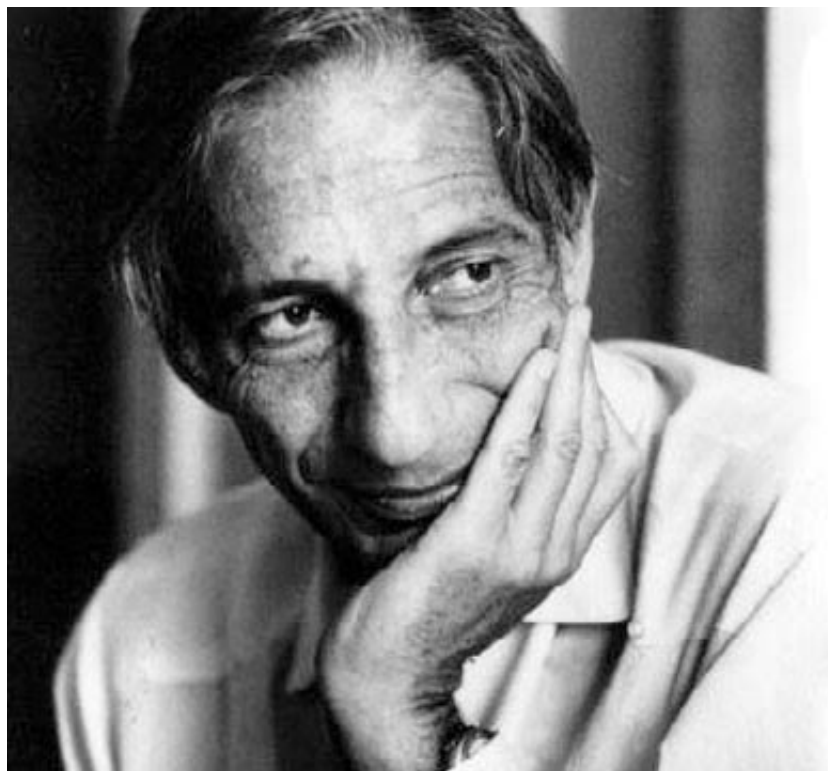
metalepsis seminar / season 4 / 1

metalepsis seminar / WAAC•PSU / 23 September 2014

conviviality; arguing metonymy; new cider house rules

METALEPSIS SEMINARIANS, 9-ERS, AUXILIARY MEMBERS, and OCCASIONAL GUESTS

Whazzup? The metalepsis seminar is, like all good experiences, multiform. This fall the form is "mostly in our heads" with the dispersal of individual people, ideas, and projects outside the reference points of Alexandria and Boalsburg. While secret rooms at WAAC and backyards in Boalsburg were fun, now it's time to go portable, and the most portable of metalepsis ideas is that of conviviality — the re-gearing of argumentation from an aggressive mode to a sympathetic one once a group of friends recognizes its own "dissensus." Dissensus is the opposite of consensus. It tolerates difference — encourages it even — while aiming to optimize group as well as personal joy in learning. In the Meno, Socrates points out to the handsome Meno that convivial argument aims, through mutual sympathy, to achieve not only knowledge but happiness. This was also the aim of Ivan Illich, a thinker who will play an increasingly interesting role in the coming months.



Ivan Illich (1926–2002)

*** new era, new group**

With the transition from group seminar to individual study and dispersed activities, the seminar needs to allow old members to drop out and find their own ways while adding new members. IF YOU NEED TO BE OFF THIS LIST contact kunze767@gmail.com. Don't worry, you can add yourself back on later. This is an adjustment to the resonance of ideas and interests that is periodically warranted. The WAAC seminar initiated both ideas and friendships that will continue to influence the project, but it's time to re-invent and adopt. If the idea is strong it will not just survive but flourish. If not, then it deserves its dust. Venues this year include Los Angeles (conference on Mediated Cities), Claudio Sgarbi's seminar at Carleton, various thesis projects, and field work of several members (Namibia, Iran, Philippines). The question is, "what is teaching, what is learning?" One could say that this is the phase of the metalepsis seminar where teaching undergoes *aphanisis* (disappearance behind the Symbolic) and learning assumes a strongly personal emphasis. The challenge is to reverse the usual assumptions about teaching and learning's relation to the collective. Although teaching is generally considered to be a group matter, learning needs to assume a power of the collective in order to make teaching obsolete — to free learning from its "authorial basis." This means, basically, thinking for ourselves, freely; but in this freedom a profound unity is to be discovered. How do we handle this paradox?

Ivan Illich spent much of his life writing pithy essays supporting the hopefulness of humankind as a thinking collective. Sajay Samuel's recent collection, *Beyond Economics and Ecology*, is well worth a read, especially Sajay's introduction. We have it in our power to overcome the "curse of the university" — namely the university's primordial obligation to provide Late Capitalism (discourse of the master) with a means of "domesticating" the wild effects of *jouissance*. Lacan's formula of the university discourse, $S2/S2—a/\$$, tells us everything. Knowledge (S2) occults the masters who are concealed behind the scenes (corporate influences would be one form) in order to repackage the *objet petit a* for the subject who must be split, as they say, "along party lines." One part of the subject is bonded to the master(s) — think how schools have tended to use vocation/employment as their dominant model. The other part pledges allegiance to the flag of enjoyment under the enigmatic cover of consumerism: "Enjoy!" is the mandate of Late Capitalism, but the command comes from the Other who does not tell us what or how to enjoy or how enjoyment relates to actual life. We consume because marketing shapes our desires; we learn because we buy into what is valuable to learn. Joy has been domesticated into enjoyment.

Metalepsarians know automatically that the solution is to un-domesticate *enjoyment* to recover the "joy" element — namely the "relation to the Real" that is, at the level of topics, realized as "unlimited semiosis": the ability to speak about everything through any something. This freedom comes with our access to the *ars topica* itself — "figures of speech" that, as figures of thought and life, are what ground variety. To give an example, our job in laying out an argument is not simply to present various possible points of view and sort through them, but to determine what was the basis of this variety in the first place. What allows dissension? error? discord? agreement?

Illich emphasized conviviality because, just as Plato had put his finger on it in the *Meno*, truth comes in several forms. I was raised in the American south, North Carolina to be precise (and I also taught briefly at LSU) so let me draw on this tradition. There are two ways of arguing in North Carolina/Louisiana. First, the hope is that the argument is really a conversation about love, with the mutual goal of producing pleasure as well as enlightenment. In this mode, we argue to have fun, and we use sympathy to understand the point of view of the other, to stand in the other's shoes. Jokes, pranks, "pulling one's leg," and diversions are all a part of it. If however an argument is started or interrupted by an aggressive jerk, who really "wants to win" (most academics are unfortunately in this camp), modality shifts. Rather than go head to head, the aim is to allow the jerk to think he/she is winning while using irony to let anyone listening in to realize the opposite. This, in the south, is called the bamboozle, and all cultures have a version of this form. Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* is filled with examples, and I would point you to the debate between Thaumast and Panurge, which takes place completely in silent gestures.

Argumentation's two modalities concerns us in this way. As a group, we are committed to conviviality. This allows us to disagree; in fact it requires us to disagree. My friend in Tunisia, Beshir Kenzari, always says, "If you and I agree, then one of us is unnecessary!" Disagreement here is *dissensus*, a form of friendship and affection (from Rancière to Plato so to speak). Here the point is to multiply possible meanings in order to find the forms underlying this variety. It is the *form* that truly interests us, which is why "metalepsis," a "form of form," is the basis of the seminar. But, seminars typically take place in universities, and as Žižek has taught, the university exists to prop up the discourse of the master. That master, for us, is a form of globalization associated with Late Capitalism, where even benevolent-sounding projects play a role in homogenizing human cultures on behalf of economic optimization and redistribution of resources. You do not have to be a Marxist to note that this involves unprecedented redistribution of wealth (the 1% phenomenon) as well as knowledge (the micro-expert). The downside is extensive poverty, depletion of resources, and civil strife. Naomi Klein shows how economists actively create disasters when they can't find them created by nature, to "ratchet up" the lock of the global economy on local structures.

We can't fix this, but we can assert from within our position within university discourse a resistance based on —

what else? — the *objet petit a*. We aim to reverse the domestication process by which all things associated with *jouissance* (art is a specialist in this, and it is key to architecture) are made to fit a marketing model. Last summer's mini-symposium on The Metalepsis of Shit was, by its insistence on the "rude" word instead of some other title that might have been put on the "community calendar," made clear that this was not going to appear on anyone's resumé as a line item. Looking at the margin and marginality itself, finding those topics that make some academics squirm, insisting on pushing the envelope of a standardized hermeneutics where the footnote is required to legitimize thought — all of this is required, within a convivial atmosphere of collective trust and affection, to say "*Je refuse!*" After that, Piaf: "*Je ne regret rien!*"

Resistance is theory's business. Theory *is* resistance. This of course is why theory is on its way out in most architecture programs, or why theory is re-made into art history or biography in others. We don't always have to use rude words to do this, but we do have to focus on ideology and discover the means of standing up to it. This is one reason why the "binary signifier" (the extensive emphasis on polar, opposed terms, such as poetry/instrumentality, theory/practice, private/public) should be deconstructed by revealing the "occulted signifier" role, something we have come to understand in terms of metonymy. Sounds like gobbledegook to those outside the metalepsis project, so there is something of the "secret club handshake" involved, but the NEW CIDER HOUSE RULES will help overcome this. Remember not everyone knows as much about Lacan as you do (although no one feels he/she knows *anything*). Be kind.

* new rules

In our "dispersive" mode, where there is no bi-weekly meeting to confirm our happy conviviality, we require a simple principle. Here's how it works. In the mode of sympathetic argumentation, where the point is mutual pleasure, we argue, discuss, exchange, provoke. The point is to reach a point where all parties realize a new freedom from within the topics of university discourse. This is the fuel for countering the university's inherent ideological mandates, the basis of resistance. Discovery of this freedom is also the alliance of friendship and renunciation of aggression in argument. But, this pleasure must be made portable through a principle that allows exchange to take place in many forms and circumstances. This is the rule: "play it forward." If you get a benefit from convivial exchange, you are obliged to construct a circumstance in which this benefit is given to a third party. This is not abstract; it is a matter of finding the right opportunities and doing the right things, whether in a classroom, living room, or street. This is your new relationship to the world. The university is "out there."

Lacan has taught us that truth is a matter of a "first" and a "fourth" position. In the formulæ for discourses, the first position is that of sublation ("occultation") of some element that allows discourse to proceed at a conscious level. It is the "unconscious" register behind this conscious progress, what underwrites and allows it. Like the "what if" assumption ("Let 'x' = 1"), it is the presupposition that discourse requires. Truth in the fourth place is about disguise. While occultation has concealed subjectivity within and behind the Symbolic (*aphanisis*), subjectivity has carried this concealment inside of it, as a permanent and radical basis of dysfunction. The cause-and-effect logic of conscious discourse has not got rid of Truth, it has occulted it within, a kernel of enjoyment in its own self-destruction.

When the time for Truth to take up its role of the Fourth Place, we have a kind of apocalypse. Metalepsis defines this moment with great precision. It is the time of epiphany, of reincarnation, of transformation. Architects and good architecture historians know all about this Fourth Place. In fact, the whole of the Baroque is dedicated to it, thanks to the merger of mathematical with optical and geometric ideas of infinity (Sigfried Giedion). ALL of the Mannerism of Gongora and Gracian is permeated with it. Shakespeare and Cervantes knew all about it. It is what happens when we see architecture *as* architecture, art *as* art. Synesthesia is involved, but especially we become aware of the "acousmatic" effects of resonance and the sublime — Lacan's extimacy.

Playing it forward means not that we become pedants who stop people on the street and hand out leaflets, but rather that we use this recovered *jouissance*, joy that has been un-domesticated so to speak, back into its resistant (to the Symbolic) and unpredictable form. We employ the aleatory (chance) and position in ways that call for an architecture of open experiment. We don't aim to humiliate or isolate our audiences; we insist on dissensus and conviviality. We sing to them.

One impressive thing that happened after the suicide of Robin Williams — the *entire city* of San Francisco stopped everything it was doing on Monday August 18 at 1pm to get out of their offices, homes, and cars to applaud for a minute. In the face of the meaninglessness of death, the "goal" of comedy was reached through collective response to an empty (now emptier) signifier. Although precise timing was involved, the idea of spontaneity was preserved because it was realized in each individual who, in addition to clapping, heard the clapping of those all over the city, blocks and miles away (placement). The occulted signifier (the noise of the audience that must be

suppressed during performance) returns — the Fourth Place — in order to reveal the "truth of truth," the metaleptic and metonymic truth that what we have lost is not lost, but remains to us, for us, through a kind of divine agency of forgiveness and mercy (cf. General Lowenheim's speech in *Babette's Feast*).

"We tremble before making our choice in life, and after having made it again tremble in fear of having chosen wrong. But the moment comes when our eyes are opened, and we see and realize that grace is infinite. Grace, my friends, demands nothing from us but that we shall await it with confidence and acknowledge it in gratitude. Grace, brothers, makes no conditions and singles out none of us in particular; grace takes us all to its bosom and proclaims general amnesty. See! that which we have chosen is given us, and that which we have refused is, also and at the same time, granted us. Ay, that which we have rejected is poured upon us abundantly. For mercy and truth have met together and righteousness and bliss have kissed one another!"

Playing it forward, in short, involves returning Truth in the Fourth Place to the First Place, where we recover what we have lost. It takes a story to understand this, just as it took the audience of *Babette's Feast* the understanding of the aleatory intricacies of her life (chef at the Café Anglais; husband shot during civil unrest; exile; winning the lottery; using all of the lottery money to create one perfect meal) to see how *position* (this place, this time) have afforded Truth to return and be recognized in the General's speech. As Babette herself puts it, the result is that "an artist is never poor." Life is continually played forward, through art.

* topics and projects

Some members have raised issues that may have broad group benefits. (1) What is architecture's relation to *jouissance*, and how may we distinguish between "enjoyment," "joy," "pleasure," and "happiness"? (2) What is the role of the gap and discontinuity in the formation of the modern (cf. [book by Michael Dennis](#)). (3) What is the role of military honor in the global expansion of violence in the period of Late Capitalism? The style of call and response that leads us to respond to questions can be played forward in two ways. The questioner can take the response and re-form it to provoke inquiry in a "third party" (including a thesis committee!). Or, the responder can use it to provoke a new line of inquiry that, with the permission and collaboration of the questioner, expand to a broader field of discourse. What broader field?

On the horizon is a periodical publication of collected essays, made one step more formal than PDFs on the web, edited anonymously and circulated universally through some publication service such as Lulu.com. That's a big step. For now we can set up forums *via* shared dropbox folders where participants may freely add and draw from "deposits" of writing. This is kept private by the participants, who determine who shares the folder, but it can be made public at any point by mutual consent. This is one method of sharing without the total exposure of the Internet, which does not allow any period of gestation, let alone courting and romance.

The summer symposium idea is still viable, although this past summer the event was compact and informal (backyard chats supplemented by movies and Tarot readings). Next summer's plan is to take on the Internet as a basis of knowledge and political resistance. Many of the Shit Symposium's speakers will be invited to participate, and the venue may shift to some exotic location.

* an indispensable resource

A book has been out for a while that we should have noticed earlier: Kelsey Wood's [Žižek: A Reader's Guide](#). Although Wood did not have [Žižek's book on Hegel](#) at the time of writing, he was able to review and order each of Žižek's books with admirable clarity and understanding. For those who read more slowly than Žižek can write (i.e. most of us), this book is essential. In fact, it is a kind of Boy Scout Handbook that can rescue a dissertation from ideology by pinpointing the exact location of the needed argument.

Wood was at Penn State at one point, but his career is hard to trace. His masterful review of Žižek's ideas makes us wonder — how is this possible? Can one "out-Žižek" Žižek? Wood's [book on Parmenides](#) is equally impressive. If you're thinking of returning to the Mirror Stage to ask for your Being back, check this one out.

Stay in touch, leave the list if you need to, but whatever happens ... play it forward. (There can be learning without teaching.)



web: art3idea.psu.edu

workshop: [metalepsis workshop](http://metalepsisworkshop.com)

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