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Avital Ronell and the End of the Academic Star

Stuart Bradford for The Chronicle

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Despite broad disagreement about the meaning of the Avital Ronell scandal, there is consensus about one thing: Ronell is a "star," and this status has something to do with how we should feel about what she is alleged to have done. Ronell appears alongside a pantheon of intellectual luminaries — among them Slavoj Žižek, Judith Butler, and Cornel West — in Astra Taylor's 2008 documentary *Examined Life*. Ronell is, in the view of one of her NYU colleagues, "one of the very few philosopher-stars of this world." Or, as the lawsuit against her and NYU explains, "Ronell is a 'superstar' of the academic world."

Indeed, if we wonder why Nimrod Reitman, the graduate student alleging years of harassment against Ronell and NYU, didn't switch advisers or change programs, the answer is in part Ronell's status as a superstar. "Half our department was hired by Yale and Harvard, etc.," Ronell wrote in an email to Reitman. "So the plan is for you to get a super job wherever and whenever you want, and I am talking about the realm of possibility, even probability." But, the lawsuit implies, if Reitman made waves or turned against his adviser, the consequences would be dire. When another student filed a Title IX claim against Ronell, she purportedly boasted about her ability to "sabotage the student's career." When Reitman considered transferring to Yale, he became afraid that this choice might be held against him because the head of admissions in Yale's German department was, as the lawsuit puts it, "one of Ronell's close friends." By the account put forward in the lawsuit, Reitman faced a stark choice: Submit to Ronell's advances and be guaranteed a "super job" or resist Ronell and be expelled from the profession.

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elite schools confers special advantages, but surely Ronell's claims about her vast capability to manipulate the job market are wildly exaggerated. Reitman's estimate of her powers was equally overblown, though one can easily imagine how a new graduate student might, in the face of a charismatic and famous adviser, come to be convinced of such fictions of omnipotence.

The fantasy of Ronell's star power is, therefore, the unexamined linchpin of the scandal. What Ronell's abuse — and the notorious letter defending her, signed by such luminaries as Žižek, Butler, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak — discloses is not only how local cultures of celebrity deform individual departments but also how the star power once associated with High Theory has gone into terminal decline. After all, when they invoke her international stature, the signatories of the letter are not only commenting on their own power — don't mess with our famous friend — but also unwittingly illustrating their inability to shield their peer from unwelcome scrutiny.

When, in a blog post at the Los Angeles Review of Books, Žižek writes that "the procedure against Avital is effectively targeting a certain psychological type, a certain mode of behavior and speech for which there is less and less place in our academia," it is not hard to sense the true worry animating his lament. Žižek is, after all, famous not only for his brilliant explications of Hegel and Lacan but also for his entertaining and charismatic speaking style. He is, not without reason, described as the "Elvis of cultural theory," a slogan reproduced on his LARB bio. What the signatories of the letter in Ronell's defense most fear, I suspect, is that the university has less and less place for people like them.

They are right, for better and worse. Though Žižek's arguments in support of Ronell are not at all convincing, there is a hard kernel of truth in his essay: Academe is not what it used to be. Once upon a time, the university was an efficient machine for converting a certain kind of cultural capital into financial capital. The most famous phenomenologist or the most famous Marxist theorist in the world might not be recognized in the wider public sphere, but the largess of the American university system could ensure that that scholar enjoyed a comfortable, even somewhat glamorous lifestyle.

You could travel to international conferences, negotiate yourself a relatively high salary, and focus your attention on teaching graduate students, whose intellectual futures you held in your hands. You could enjoy the trappings of a bourgeois lifestyle but also imagine yourself to be a paragon of resistance, a bohemian rebel, not a sexless technocratic paper pusher but someone who had the privilege of cultivating highly personal — and, yes, sometimes erotically charged — relationships of mentorship with your young, brilliant, attractive protégées. This was the lifestyle Ronell enjoyed at NYU, and it's not hard to imagine that she genuinely had no idea that anything she was doing might be problematic.

As a mark of how much things have changed we might look back to 1997, when David R. Shumway published an essay in PMLA called "The Star System in Literary Studies," in which he traced the rise of a new sort of academic celebrity to the 1970s. This system arose from a

new set of material conditions, including the rise of an international conference circuit (predicated on cheap air travel), the prominence of High Theory, and the development of new-media technologies.

While he was careful not to dismiss the individual scholars under scrutiny, Shumway argued that the star system nonetheless "inhibits the production of collectively held knowledge and has weakened public confidence in the profession." Shumway identified the rise of academic superstars with a larger shift in academic values: from "soundness," represented by the generation of literary scholars who were most prominent before the 1970s, to "visibility," represented by many of the same celebrity scholars who signed the letter in defense of Ronell (Butler, Žižek, Spivak).

In a persuasive critique of Shumway's article, Bruce Robbins asked whether we should be so quick to complain about the rise of superstars. The definition of celebrity in such jeremiads was often tellingly vague, Robbins wrote, and usually involved "starting from fame and subtracting something: fame minus merit, or fame minus power." But such distinctions falsely presumed that some pure form of merit might be separated from social forces. "Dig deep enough into any instance of merit," Robbins wrote, "and you will discover social determinants, factors like family and friends, lovers and mentors, identities, interests, and institutions that advantaged some and disadvantaged others."

In fact, Robbins argued, star power represented a form of prestige that in some sense corrected for the failures of the previous old boys' club, represented by the prior generation of scholars Shumway celebrated. "By supplying an alternative method for distributing cultural capital, the celebrity cult has served (among its other functions) to open up what remains of those tight, all-male professional circles." This was, Robbins claimed, an "improvement."

We shouldn't harbor a shred of nostalgia for the old boys' club, which to be frank never wholly went away, but the Ronell scandal suggests that the "celebrity cult" that rose to prominence in literary studies over the past 40 years has the potential to be just as abusive as anything that came before it. Now the power of the "celebrity cult" is in decline. No new theoretical school has replaced High Theory, and the machinery of the academic star system has been forced to confront the uncomfortable reality of the shrinking job market. Long gone are the days when Ronell could deliver on her promises — and her threats — to make or destroy the career of a young scholar. I'm skeptical that any single scholar ever had such power, but it is clear that some scholars believed they did.

Reading Reitman's lawsuit, I found the fantasy that anyone has such superpower almost poignant. Almost. The problem is that such fantasies can have catastrophic human effects.

Advisers might not be able to snap their fingers and secure their advisees a job, but they have the power to make graduate school a living hell for their students. Indeed, the job-market crisis and the collapse of the star system enhance the power of individual advisers to mete out suffering upon individual students. The paradox is that even as the star system implodes, the hunger for prestige remains as strong as ever. We want a quick and easy fix for our problems. Humanists sometimes argue as if finding the right method or rectifying our theories will make state legislatures and skeptical journalists appreciate our value. Find the right combination of words, and new students will flock to literary studies. Make the right plea to your dean, and administrators won't build that new stadium and instead toss us a few tenure lines. Find the right adviser, and perhaps your success will be assured.

These are the dreams — and the debates — of a profession in desperate denial about the depth of the crisis it faces. It makes sense that such scandals would erupt most violently at high-profile places like NYU, which still enjoy substantial advantages over other, less well-resourced peers. Such institutions are perhaps the last bastions where graduate students might still take seriously the claims of an adviser who says they can — possibly, even probably — get you a "super job." But our denial cannot, I hope, continue for much longer. After all, if the most famous members of the profession cannot save "one of the very few philosopher-stars of the world" from facing the consequences of her misdeeds, what do you really think your not-nearly-as-famous adviser will be able to do for you?

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