

Franziska Quabeck
Everyone's Emotions

- Rita Felski, *Hooked. Art and Attachment*. Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press 2020. 200 p. [Price: USD 95 / EUR 89,86]. ISBN: 9780226729466.

Rita Felski's new book seeks to distinguish itself from current trends in literary theory and tackles the old question of the role emotions may or may not play in the reception and analysis of literature. Felski seeks to establish an "aesthetic that is premised on relation rather than separation, on attachment rather than autonomy" (viii), which seems at times like an attempt to take over from empathy and affect theory and studies that have been overwhelmingly popular in literary studies in recent years. Her renewed take on the role of emotion takes as its starting point a re-evaluation of the ancient distinction between reason and emotion. Her chosen method of bringing Bruno Latour's actor-network theory (ANT) into this is intended to bridge the gap between dichotomies, which she considers too prevalent in literary studies. She seeks to 'slice' "across boundaries between reason and feeling, self and other, text and context." (ix) While this does not necessarily sound like an entirely new approach, she specifically tries to distance herself from what she calls the "language du jour" of "dislocating, disorienting, demystifying." (3) It becomes clearer much later in the book why this is a project pursued with such vigour, for Felski's theory is supposed to account for both criticism and teaching at all times. One of the strengths of this book is that the author never forgets about those students whom we teach, and their enthusiasm for – or indifference to the subjects one puts on the syllabus. Thus, Felski also scrutinises 'teaching politics' such as the prejudice that "the task of educators is surely to unsettle students [...] rather than pander to their existing like and dislikes." (126) At this and many other points in the book, it is clear that Felski tries to undermine any kind of elitist approach to literature or towards students – be this in selections for syllabi or actual discussions in the classroom, which is certainly laudable, if such elitism is still in existence.

Felski's focus on attachment lets her consider a wide range of artworks from literature to film to music, seeking to give the attachment one may or may not form towards a work of art a proper explanation: "How to describe this attachment, the sense of being powerfully drawn to a film or a painting: a feeling triggered by its qualities but synonymous with them?" (30) It seems that she wants to bring back talking of a 'love' of literature into the classroom – a discussion she describes as "jejune to most English professors." (30) Whether or not this is true is clearly immaterial to the stand she takes and her wish to establish "an ampler repertoire of justifications for literature and art." (35) It is very interesting that she both feels the need to justify the discipline and that she chooses the emotions of all aspects to do so. Authors who have tried to justify literary studies for academia have often turned the other way towards the prejudicially 'unemotional' natural sciences for the same purpose. If literary studies as a discipline needs to be defended at all – and if such defences might not mingle university politics with classroom politics unjustly – is another question altogether, but one the author takes for granted, it seems.

Hooked taps into decades of literary theory and criticism in the attempt to renew the focus on literature's impact on the reader. Felski thus reminds us of "the Kantian realm of aesthetic judgment as being subjective yet normative" (50) trying to fend off any imminent criticism that what she might really be describing is pleasure, a term she declares to be too "thin": "we are drawn to certain works because they matter to us." (43) She tries to make sense of these personal reactions, including her own, in order to theorise extremely diverse reactions to literary texts

and what she calls “differing rhythms of attunement.” (77) Her examples include Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Unconsoled*, *Thelma & Louise* and Thomas Bernhard among many others, but while she emphasises strongly that such are her chosen texts of explanation, the discussion of each leaves much to be desired. It is, of course, entirely against Felski’s chosen approach to literature to present anything that might resemble a close reading. Such practice of literary criticism is frowned upon as antiquated and while a variety of fictional and non-fictional texts are included in her book, at no point would one describe her investigations with terms such as ‘analysis’ or ‘reading’ (the latter she explicitly frowns upon). Her focus lies entirely on those reactions to the works she has chosen that she seeks to explain or, at least, bring into the mix of literary studies.

The question that arises for the reader at these points is where this discussion leads. She argues that in the discipline it has become customary to assume that “a felt closeness to a work of art will hamper one’s ability to analyse it.” (126) While this might not be true for all ‘schools’ or English departments across the globe, it points more importantly to the question of what her personal attachment to Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Unconsoled* (1995) brings to the table from a theoretical point of view. She describes her extremely positive emotional reaction – her ‘attunement’ and attachment to what is generally regarded one of his minor works – and her astonishment at finding out that while the novel has drawn her in completely, it served, for a time at least, as a laughing stock for reviewers. The novel’s publication changed Ishiguro’s perception quite significantly, following his Booker-prize winning *The Remains of the Day* (1989), a novel everyone loved – and still loves. In a matter of weeks, helped by ruthless reviews all over the world, the author seemed degraded and laughable, which has contributed lastingly to his perception as an author no one knows where to place – a prejudicial confusion that is all too visible in the sheer amount of ‘postcolonial’ readings of his works, for while critics and scholars are still undecided about whether or not Ishiguro is ‘good’ enough for the academic syllabus, many seem certain that one cannot discuss him as an author of *English* literature. So Rita Felski gives us an utterly positive and what seems to be a quite overwhelmed emotional reaction to Ishiguro’s least favoured work to consolidate her take on attachment as a theoretical category – if not theory – early on in her work. Unfortunately, it is entirely unclear what one might draw from this. Any Ishiguro scholar – or fan, to go along with her democratic view of everyone in the same boat – is delighted to hear that she loved a book most readers disliked profoundly, but how this contributes to a view of his works or, more importantly, perhaps, to the discussion in the classroom is uncertain. So while she tries to refute the view that someone’s emotional take on a text might cloud their analytical judgment or “hamper one’s ability to analyse it,” (126) as she says, giving her reaction to *The Unconsoled* as an example does not help her undertaking at all. Whether or not her own judgement of the work might hinder or further an insightful discussion of it is something the reader will never find out as long as she chooses not to discuss it.

The role of the emotions in literary studies in the narrow sense and for the perception of literature in the widest sense, is a very pressing matter. As people respond with increasing vigour and even aggression to works of art of past and present in their highly personalised Instagram or Twitter accounts, an explanation for why some things are loved and others hated might have tied in nicely with observations of worldwide identity politics that must be careful not to slip into censorship. Questions of misrepresentations and the idea of ‘aging well’ or not so well are becoming critical theorems notably *not* introduced by elitist scholars but by ‘everyone’. As those responses tend to be highly emotional, they would have been a very interesting aspect for Felski’s book. However, while she acknowledges the changing role of the author that is deeply affected by this kind of online criticism, she regrettably does not enter into a discussion of the phenomenon itself. As it is, she repeatedly draws attention to the fact that “we are left, simply, with the variability of how people become attuned to works of art.” (61)

In the same vein, she reminds the reader that she tries “to build a picture by looking at examples” (78), rather than “presenting a general theory.” (77) It is her prerogative to do so, of course, but whether or not her elaborations on art and attachment turn the tide of literary theory as she quite obviously hopes to do, is, simply, not so sure either.

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