

## REVIEW ARTICLE

'Without wanting to push the analysis further ...':  
Jean-Michel Rabaté and the Materialities of Theory

Jean-Michel Rabaté, *The Ethics of the Lie*  
Other Press, 2008

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Having published some twenty volumes on such diverse topics as James Joyce, Roland Barthes, psychoanalysis, Samuel Beckett, and Ezra Pound, Jean-Michel Rabaté has made his mark in very different subfields of literary and cultural studies. His most recent books—and the *book* is incontestably Rabaté's privileged unit of intellectual production—have made this plasticity and heterogeneity their defining characteristic. *The Ethics of the Lie*, the 2007 translation of a book that first appeared in French in 2005, is unapologetically wide-ranging, dealing with Plato and Nietzsche's work on lies, the widely publicized cases of Jean-Claude Romand (who had convinced his family of his nonexistent brilliant medical career and killed his whole family when he was about to be found out), the private and public lies of Bush and Clinton, the famous paradox of the Cretan liar, and big chunks of Freud and Lacan. The book's unsystematic diversity is deliberate, and does not prevent Rabaté from giving the different subjects he touches on their due: the book spends ample pages on immanent analysis, contextualization, association, anecdote, and comparison alike. While the remark by an early reviewer that this 'isn't scholarly argument—it's dinner-party anecdotage' fails to appreciate the book's investment in the subjects it deals with, it does register an undeniable sense of disappointment or unease that comes with reading this book from cover to cover. Rabaté does not appear too concerned with relating his different topics to an overarching thesis or structure; it is telling that the book has both a 'Conclusion' and an 'Afterword,' which both set out to present a synthesis of the discussions that precede it, only to end up adding a couple of extra examples to what is already a very rich collection.

*Given 1. Art 2. Crime*, another book published in 2007, is written in the same peculiar mode. Offering extensive discussions of an equally broad spectrum of cases, the book attempts to map the multifarious connections between the terms that it collects in its subtitle—modernity, murder, and mass culture. The book ranges from Victorian over modernist to contemporary art and culture, popular as well as avant-garde. What is equally characteristic is that the relations between the terms that are paratactically juxtaposed in the book's subtitle are nowhere consistently historicized or conceptualized, but merely staged and restaged in a variety of cases. The book's emphasis is squarely on the cases, the works, and the events under discussion, and Rabaté never feels compelled to detach himself from these particularities in order to present a more universal claim.

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Rabaté's recent work—and we can add his other book from 2007 here, *1913: The Cradle of Modernism*—can be characterized by the far from obvious combination of two different tendencies: on the one hand, a patient attention to the material at hand, an obvious delight in actual close reading, and an unapologetic attention to detail—elements that make it impossible to call his work merely 'essayistic'; on the other hand, we find a blissful unconcern for any grand conclusions to be inferred from these diverse engagements, which leaves the impression that these books are somewhat too relaxed, too unsystematic, and marked by a certain arbitrariness and a lack of rigor. They seem to somehow fall short of what we normally expect theoretical writing to deliver—whatever that may be.

In this essay, I want to argue that the slight disappointment and discomfort that Rabaté's recent work inspires—which, let me add, hardly interferes with a deep appreciation of these works—is not so much the result of an error in the design or the execution of these works, but is instead an effect of the relation that Rabaté's critical practice maintains to the (often implicit) protocols of contemporary theory. Rabaté's actual critical practice, and his descriptions of his own approach, index the conventions of theoretical discourse, only for his work to go on to depart from them. They install the specific relation to materiality that characterizes contemporary theory, only to then withdraw from the game they have joined. I argue that the particular movement in which Rabaté's work engages with the conventions of theory before laying them aside can be understood as a timely criticism of the economy of materiality that characterizes much contemporary theoretical writing. As I will argue, Rabaté's recent production makes it possible to appreciate that theory's customary engagement with materiality is often underwritten by what Rabaté calls a 'post-Romantic yearning for an unattainable Other construed as more real and more alive.'<sup>1</sup> Rabaté's divergence from the protocols of theory can remind us that this yearning is something that theory should perhaps resist rather than exploit.

So how precisely does Rabaté's work construct a theoretical relation to materiality? Most obviously, as I have noted, there are the extensive and patient contextualizations and descriptions of the critical objects he deals with. This procedure shapes the works, texts, and events it addresses into multifaceted objects that can no longer be contained in one critical paradigm—biographical, sociological, historicist, philosophical, or psychoanalytical, all of which Rabaté draws on and none of which he commits to. His critical objects acquire an irreducible materiality that, especially when it goes together with Rabaté's refusal to abandon them for the abstractions of universal insight, receives a suggestiveness beyond the explicit meanings that can be ascribed to these objects. In the 'Afterword' to *The Ethics of the Lie*, Rabaté writes that his aim was to 'write a book on lies that would analyze the historical positivity of the lie.'<sup>2</sup> The obvious problem with this methodological emphasis on historical actuality—rather than, say, a psychoanalysis or an ontology of the lie—is that 'it seemed that there was no end or limit to the field'; the investigation of the actuality of the lie faces 'endless ramifications.'<sup>3</sup> The only workable (and publishable) solution to this embarrassment of riches is restricting oneself to a finite number of critical objects. The vital question then becomes how to bring these objects together between the covers of a book—historically, logically, paratactically, ... The option Rabaté does not choose is to proceed incrementally or inductively: the different cases the book discusses do not add up to something so grandiose as a universal theory of the lie—instead, they are juxtaposed as so many facets of the historical positivity of the lie, which separately, and in their paratactical interrelations, merely *suggest* an understanding of the psychological, philosophical, historical, and social ramifications of the lie.

Rabaté's method, in other words, presents these cases as privileged catalysts of material experiences of the historical and social forces that are condensed in them. He writes that the lie 'takes on the value of a symptom. The lie is inscribed in a reality that is social and historically mutable, that absorbs and reflects history's lines of force.'<sup>4</sup> The privilege accorded to the lie is that it condenses historical and social forces in an eminently suggestive way. One of the symptoms the book presents is the case of Stephen Glass, the young writer at the *New Republic* whose spectacular rise came to an end when it was discovered that many of his stories were fabricated. Glass' story became the occasion for a film and for an autobiographical novel, which Rabaté also discusses at some length. Rabaté calls Glass 'a symptom that is at the same time cultural and ethical'; his 'inventions exuded

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so much zeitgeist that they might as well have been true.<sup>55</sup> The emphasis on phenomena that bring together historical and social forces in a particularly condensed way also informs Rabaté's project in his book *1913*. This book focuses on one particular year, located on a crucial historical threshold, and its different chapters survey a wide variety of aspects—social, cultural, literary, as well as artistic—that cumulatively supercharge '1913' with forces that enable it to become the occasion of a privileged material experience. In Rabaté's own words, the book focuses 'on one single year that will function as a frame, a limit, and a global attractor of trends and currents.' The book's 'synchronic or "simultaneist"' approach results in a 'pointillist mosaic.'<sup>56</sup> '1913,' for Rabaté, 'discloses a privileged moment in the history of modernity, a time full of foreboding and instruction for future generations, a time when literature and culture uniquely wrestled with a world that seemed on the brink of chaos and uncertainty.'<sup>57</sup>

In a recent interview in the pages of this journal, Rabaté remarked that his books shift between various levels of description, 'so as to avoid pure abstraction on the one hand, and pure content analysis on the other.'<sup>58</sup> Rabaté's method avoids these familiar forms of purity, and instead consists in a principled commitment to the historical, artistic, and social mediations that constitute the materiality of his objects—a materiality from which no unequivocal lesson can be abstracted, nor can it be exhaustively transcribed by pure content analysis. '1913' is the node where the historical and social forces that Rabaté's books traces are concentrated, and the same goes for the cases that *Given 1. Art 2. Crime* and *The Ethics of the Lie* present. The objects of Rabaté's criticism typically combine three characteristics: they are firmly grounded in reality (if they happen to be works of art or fiction, Rabaté's analysis invariably restores the index to reality); they have an evident mass appeal (often by way of their grounding in reality), and they contain one or more moments of artistic remediation. Rabaté's ample attention to these different dimensions grants the objects of his criticism an obtrusive material actuality that no interpretive framework or philosophical master discourse can spirit away.

In *The Ethics of the Lie*, Rabaté gives us extensive files on the Romand affair, which comprises a book and three films based on the actual events, and on the case of Stephen Glass. Just as in the discussions of Plato, Nietzsche, and Bush, Rabaté is happy to spend many pages on these cases, without feeling compelled to abstract a more or less substantial ethic of the lie from them.<sup>59</sup> Again, this approach leaves the rather uncomfortable impression that the investment in the material complication of these cases does not pay off in terms of lucid insights. In *Given 1. Art 2. Crime*, the themes of modernity, crime, and the mass media are articulated most intricately in two different constellations, one dealing with Jack the Ripper and one with the Black Dahlia murder. As the grounding in reality, the mass appeal, and the artistic afterlife of these cases is obvious, these two files are typical of Rabaté's approach. He duly describes Jack the Ripper as a media phenomenon, and pays particular attention to Patricia Cornwell's rather fanciful identification of the killer as the painter Walter Sickert, before going on to address Sickert's actual oeuvre. The Black Dahlia-constellation displays the same combination of detailed analysis, association, and, in the final analysis, a lack of firm conclusiveness. Rabaté indicates the affinities between Duchamp's scandalous installation 'Given 1. The Waterfall 2. The Illuminating Gas' and the notorious aesthetic of the cut-up body in the case of the Black Dahlia murder. This connection is complicated through a long discussion of Steve Hodel's 2003 book in which the author accuses his father of the murder; Rabaté traces the personal connections between Hodel and Man Ray, and so involves Duchamp—and the whole avant-garde ethos he embodies—in the Black Dahlia file in a dramatic way that can not be transcribed into the customary terms of, say, psychoanalysis, biography, or art history. The effect is again that of a constellation in which the themes of modernity, crime, art, and mass culture are connected in an eminently suggestive way; the different interrelations that are introduced cannot be reduced to the terms of any available critical discourse, as the careful construction of the material density of the case is not followed by any radical insights—the constellation is merely juxtaposed and loosely connected to the other cases that make up the book.

This is also to say that the investment in materiality is propelled by an undeniable dissatisfaction with the complex interactions of being and appearance, of past and present, of authenticity and imitation, of truth and lie that characterize our modernity. We can mention another of Rabaté's canonical theorists here: the

Heideggerian idea that the face-to-face with the possibility of my own impossibility in the experience of *Angst* is my only chance of graduating from the inauthenticity of everyday life to the authenticity of my own existence is, if anything, a key example of the movement in which negativity and materiality—because what could be more material than my own finitude?<sup>22</sup>—are radicalized only to be inverted into the truth of a redeemed existence. At the risk of irresponsibly abbreviating a massive chapter in the history of theory, we can note that deconstruction in the vein of Paul de Man relies on comparable movement: de Man et al.'s approach tended to carefully remove the ethical, theological, and psychological layers that inevitably cling to linguistic material and to confront the pure materiality of texts, so as to formulate the redemptive insight into the radical disjunction between linguistic material and the ideological meanings conventionally imposed on them.<sup>23</sup> These brief sketches hope to suggest that theory's customary relation to materiality is to some extent informed by the fantasy of an unalienated condition in which there exists a real affinity between things, and between words and things, as well as by a conviction of the separability of truth and lie, of authenticity and inauthenticity, of redeemed existence and the normal course of things. Theory's drive for materiality thrives on the—ultimately metaphysical—separation between being and appearance, between truth and ideology, and on the belief that experiences of materiality can help to correct the disabling interpenetration of truth and falsity. Even if it is only provisional, I believe that this understanding of theory's longing for the material can help us assess the significance of Rabaté's citation of this tradition and of his deliberate divergence from it. As I noted, Rabaté's recent books recall the protocols of theory, not only through his explicit descriptions of his approach, but also by leaving the relation between the cases he present deliberately underdetermined, and by refusing resolute movements of induction, historicization, or conceptualization. This approach allows his critical objects to appear in their highly mediated density and materiality. The materiality of Rabaté's examples lies in the complexity of the multiple mediations through which they are constructed, which pre-empts both the positivist lure of immediacy and any facile understanding or transcription. At the same time, Rabaté does not recuperate this carefully constructed materiality for a shortcut to redemption.

Rabaté's deliberate riff on the materialist routines of theory can perhaps be understood as an index of his his wariness about the enduring fantasy that underlies these routines: the possibility of separating truth and lie. *The Ethics of the Lie* does not aim to denounce the ideological deformation of some putatively authentic reality; instead, it lets the question of ethics begin in the very space that is opened by the pervasiveness of that deformation, a pervasiveness that makes it rather gratuitous to call this state of affairs a deformation rather than, for instance, reality. Rabaté's different chapters describe the productive interaction of truth and lie, and prove themselves unimpressed with the positivist desire for evidence, fixity, and authenticity. Remarking on the procedures that were in place to fact check the articles by the writers at the *New Republic*, which Stephen Glass found it all too simple to sidestep, Rabaté notes that 'the verification of facts taken one after another does not make sense – it is a parody of logical positivism' that cannot 'guard against a global lie, concerted, systemized, produced by a specialist in the system.'<sup>24</sup> The actual existence of the global lie—Rabaté mentions Max Scheler's notion of an '*organische Verlogenheit*,' a lie 'transformed into instinct and vital deformation'—does not bring Rabaté to the apocalyptic conclusion that 'everything is a lie,' but merely that there exists a 'a generalized duplicity produced by culture.'<sup>25</sup> He coins a generalized notion of lying, which refers to the dynamic process in which the first-level distinction between truth and lie is subsumed in the operations of mental and social life. This kind of lying, for Rabaté, is situated between mind and language, at 'a strategic position that permits us to simultaneously understand double thought and double discourse'<sup>26</sup>—and such a project is, perhaps, not an entirely unworthy theoretical occupation.

In a remark on Don Quixote, Rabaté points to the insufficiency of the clean division between truth and falsity. These 'deadly logical alternatives' are in the last analysis subsumed by 'the primacy of the ethical domain' and by the affirmation of 'life in its opacity.'<sup>27</sup> The question of falsity and truth is but one aspect of the logic of life, and of the question of ethics that this life inspires. The irreducible materialities that *The Ethics of the Lie* constructs are then precisely those of the highly mediated and multiply overdetermined density of life. The distinction between lie and error, between truth and falsity, are not radicalized in order to be overcome by a redeeming insight, but merely described as crucial mediations of social and psychological life. Rabaté's materialism suggests the irreducible messiness of life, and excludes both the purity of bare materiality and the

comforts of redemption.

*Given 1. Art 2. Crime* addresses the shortcut from materiality to universal insight under the unlikely name of *The Da Vinci Code*. Rabaté describes the success of that book by comparing it to Joseph Geary's thriller *Spiral*. Geary's story is anchored in a fictional work of art, while *The Da Vinci Code* starts with the thoroughly familiar and undeniably real work of Leonardo da Vinci. For Rabaté, '*Spiral* fails precisely where *The Da Vinci Code* succeeds,' and precisely because the latter successfully taps into the very economy of materiality that I have been discussing. *The Da Vinci Code* has understood perfectly well that 'one needs to ground ekphrasis in history with real artists and a totalizing myth.' What *Spiral* lacks, in contrast, is the 'grand promise of a revelation that takes its point of departure in an artist's work.'<sup>28</sup> While it may not be obvious to read Dan Brown's conspiracy-mongering as an allegory of theory's economy of materiality, it can help us see why Rabaté might want to depart from it. This departure invites us to see reality as no longer in need of ideological unmasking or as the pale shadow of a more authentic and true universe. It invites us to see materiality as both more and less than the promise of redemption – which is to say, to see it as properly material.

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## NOTES

1. Jean-Michel Rabaté, *The Future of Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p. 3.
2. Jean-Michel Rabaté, *The Ethics of the Lie*, trans. Suzanne Verderber (New York: Other Press, 2007), p. 363.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 351-52.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 107-108.
6. Jean-Michel Rabaté, *1913: The Cradle of Modernism* (London: Blackwell, 2007), p. 3 and 18.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 216.
8. Jeroen Lauwers and Thomas Van Parys, “‘You cannot make a living just being a theoretician’: An Interview with Jean-Michel Rabaté.” *Parrhesia: A Journal of Critical Philosophy*, vol. 5, 2008, p. 1-9.
9. Incidentally, Rabaté’s decision to refer to ‘the lie’ in the title of his book, rather than to ‘lying’ or to ‘lies,’ again underlines the methodological emphasis on the construction of a singular material critical object, rather than on the the diversity or generality of the phenomenon.
10. Eva Geulen, *Giorgio Agamben zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius, 2005), p. 121-23.
11. Rabaté, *The Future of Theory*, p. 56-65.
12. Quoted in Rolf Tiedemann, ‘Dialectics at a Standstill: Approaches to the *Passagen-Werk*.’ Peter Osborne, ed., *Walter Benjamin: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory*, Vol. 1 (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 235.
13. Rabaté, *The Future of Theory*, p. 58.
14. Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence 1928-1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 283.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 283.
16. I have elsewhere identified this deliberate invocation of materiality as part of theory’s genealogical relation to philology. Pieter Vermeulen, ‘Philological Modernity: Mimesis and Materiality in Auerbach and Adorno.’ *Phrasis: Studies in Language and Literature*, vol. 49, no. 1, 2008, p. 93-115.
17. Giorgio Agamben, *Signatura rerum: Sur la méthode*, trans. Joël Gayraud (Paris: VRIN, 2008), p. 9. My translation.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 18 and 34.
19. Rabaté, *The Future of Theory*, p. 59.
20. Giorgio Agamben, *Signatura rerum*, especially p. 69 and 83.
21. Adorno and Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence*, p. 283. Also quoted in Rabaté, *The Future of Theory*, p. 59. See also Jean-Michel Rabaté, *Given 1. Art 2. Crime: Modernity, Murder, and Mass Culture* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2007), p. 84-88 for a further discussion of the relations between Adorno and Benjamin in the ‘30s.
22. ‘The experience of the death of the other’ would be the most predictable answer to this question, which does however not affect my point about the structure of radicalization-and-inversion.
23. For a condensed statement of this ambition, see, for instance, Paul de Man, ‘The Return to Philology,’ *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 21-26.
24. Rabaté, *The Ethics of the Lie*, p. 98.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 164-65.
26. *Ibid.* p. 334-35.
27. *Ibid.* p. 257-58.
28. Rabaté, *Given*, p. 31.