



Stupidity

Avital Ronell

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Explores the fading empire of cognition, modulating stupidity into idiocy, puerility, and the figure of the ridiculous philosopher instituted by Kant. Drawing on a range of writers including Dostoevsky, Schlegel, Musil, and Wordsworth, this book investigates ignorance, dumbfoundedness, and the limits of reason.

Stupidity Details

Date : Published December 17th 2002 by University of Illinois Press (first published November 21st 2001)

ISBN : 9780252071270

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Format : Paperback 376 pages

Genre : Philosophy, Theory, Nonfiction, Feminism

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From Reader Review Stupidity for online ebook

Antony Haws says

This was a wonderful book. It should be required reading in American universities.

Danielle says

This is one of my favorite books of all time. If you have this issue, which I do, of hating stupid people and wanting to kill them all the time, this book will make you feel good and stupid and then, once you get past feeling stupid it will show you the difference between you and stupid people and make you hate them again, if a little bit less this time, because you will be jealous of them.

ralowe says

criticism like this tends to frustrate people because it is believed you have to be already familiar with the material in order to really follow it. nothing is more fun than hearing someone write about something which they love as much as you. knowing such an indulgence comes at the price of the amount of space you must allow when it is a topic you have no relationship with. ultimately the material is little more than a waystation on the way to big ideas, a way of working things out that otherwise would just be way too abstract. not that someone pontificating upon a text you've never even heard of isn't in a lot of ways the same as abstract. what i like most about ronnell, and something that can be at times the most frustrating to try to keep on the same page with, is how deeply familiar she is within her texts, it feels like an intimate exchange that you're overhearing where you catch every other word. i derive a kind of voyeuristic thrill. it becomes clear what the stakes for mulling over these ideas are because there could never be a question of deception, although perhaps misunderstanding. she uses the type of language that i associate with the high-art film criticism that impressed me when i was younger where she plays fast and loose with the language because anything goes for the sake of grandiosity and her ideas are of a sophisticated grandeur. she writes about stupidity masterfully. i also like all the formal experiments with text throughout the book. i appreciate that she is fucking with what a book is, throwing propriety out the window. this has been sitting in my library forever, and dates me back when i was more enthusiastic about unending social disruption on the small scale in simple interpersonal interactions. not that i'm reformed entirely, but now it just seems to obstruct me from being myself about my daily business. it is a kind of social disruption to be intently reading a book clearly labelled "stupidity." people can't help themselves but to ask what's up. i've gotten more questions than any other book. sometimes i just want to read my book on the bus in peace. i don't really want to summarize the book, although summarization is such an essential learning practice. but then again it is just as valuable to leave it at the "jury's still out," to summarily disavow essence. "language is body" [pg. 266] she declares following a preposterous passage on the improbable signification of an apostrophe. i like writing that does things like this and i'm ashamed that i must. a campy attempt at scandal with big names in the western canon, revealing that the dominant preoccupations with control and mastery is solely organized around terror of the body, illegibility, oblivion. this all comports rather naturally with the merleau-ponty i just read where his balm for that terror would be just to ride it out, it's fine. it's just fine, i field bus questions for on-the-spot literary reviews, and become implicated in ronnell's critical intervention into institutions of non-sovereign lunacy; this anticipates the current conversations i've been into, rolling around in the civilizational aporia of an apparently constitutive imbecility. "is this not an essential trait of god, to dispossess, to be the cause of one fall after another and, in so doing, to render ridiculous the very possibility of (self-)possession?" [pg. 307]

Eric says

Near the opening of the book, Ronell claims, “stupidity is ... linked to the most dangerous failures of human endeavors” (3). Or at least one form of stupidity does—Ronell hesitates to offer a totalizing definition of the word throughout the book, her reasons for which I’ll return to in a moment. For Ronell, “stupidity does not allow itself to be opposed to knowledge in any simple way, nor is it the other of thought. It does not stand in the way of wisdom, for the disguise of the wise is to avow unknowing” (5). It is not the opposite of knowledge, wisdom, or intelligence, but is closely linked to them. Where dogmatic, unreflective claims to knowledge are made, stupidity is never far behind. And were professed stupidity appears, there’s a good chance wisdom is hiding around the corner. She looks at various forms of stupidity: Rousseau’s self-aware stupidity, the true stupidity behind the Age of Enlightenment’s truth-claims, and the violent and proud stupidity of American capitalism. At the end of “The Question of Stupidity,” however, rather than simply writing off various others as stupid, Ronell points the finger at herself: “the question of stupidity ... is connected to a fundamental commitment to justice.... I am stupid before the other” (60). Reading Robert Musil, she considers how labeling others as “stupid” can be a way of figuring and demeaning others—particularly women in the Musil chapter (78). But then it may also be the ground for love and, once again, justice (93).

This is followed by “The Rhetoric of Testing,” which is of particular interest to me. Ronell starts the chapter with Paul de Man, arguing that his “work is essentially engaged with ... the question of technology”—specifically “the unstoppable technology of a grammar” (97). For de Man, grammar—separated from rhetoric and rhetorical reflection—takes on a machine-like quality given its radical formalism. Resisting “the blind technopower of a grammar disengaged from rhetoric” requires “a modality of testing or a contestatory exercise” (99, my emphasis). The writer or reader doesn’t overpower or break out of language and grammar’s hold, but testing its boundaries allows for a sort of “permanent parabasis” within the “experience of failure.” Testing boundaries herself, Ronell moves toward de Man’s “Concept of Irony” (118), examining the “proximate determinations of irony and allegory” (123) and putting de Man’s concept in conversation with Kierkegaard’s, Wayne Booth’s, and Schlegel’s. Linked to anacoluthon, “irony disrupts the very singularity, the extreme idiosyncrasy, of the allegory of tropes” (141, singularity is another key concept at hand). De Man writing on irony doesn’t directly address stupidity, though, so Ronell finishes by reading Schlegel on unintelligibility—something of which many have certainly accused de Man. Schlegel, like Ronell, supports unintelligibility importance (significance?). Schlegel on unintelligibility reminds readers, “If there must be an imperative to understand, this is because understanding does not come but remains lost to us” (161). The failed attempt at understanding, at reading, is the test, perhaps?

In subsequent chapters, Ronell examines the figure of the idiot (or the “almost” idiot, see 217) in Dostoevsky and Wordsworth. She finishes with Kant, examining how that most dry and anti-stylish of philosophers lets stupidity and anti-Semitism creep in. She examines Kant in proximity to Kafka’s Abraham, who was caught in a catch-22 when he heard the call: A “cheated cheater,” both “you” and Abraham (and Kant and Ronell, I suspect) are “[t]oo stupid to know whether your name was called,” “ridiculous,” unable to decide “whether this call that expelle you from your house was a blessing or a curse” (310).