

Forget Britney: These Fan Clubs Are for Deep Thinkers

By [GARY SHAPIRO](#), Staff Reporter of the Sun | October 10, 2006

Movie, sports, and rock stars have long been known to have fan clubs, but such clubs have been springing up in a far quieter — and more contemplative — corner of New York.

Over the last three years, three societies devoted to individual thinkers — the Foucault Society, the Nietzsche Circle, and the Luce Irigaray Circle — have launched. Each has held panels, conferences, or other activities devoted to discussing philosophical works across academic disciplines and encouraging public engagement with the philosophers' works.

Interested in an existentialist celebration? On Friday night at New York University, devotees of the German thinker will celebrate the 162nd birthday of Friedrich Nietzsche, who is perhaps best known for his notion of "will to power."

"In the spirit of an ancient symposium," the Nietzsche Circle announcement reads, "imbibe the spirits of Dionysus and the food of Epicurus and engage in discourse on Nietzsche's philosophy in honor of his birth, accompanied by the dangerous music of the flute."

Nietzschean topics such as creativity, values, and power are of contemporary relevance, a Nietzsche Circle cofounder, Yunus Tuncel, said. "It is important to understand what creativity means and what it entails." Earlier, the group hosted a film program discussing Nietzschean connections to Alfred Hitchcock's work.

Mr. Tuncel teaches undergraduates at the New School and wrote his doctoral dissertation on Nietzsche. He had been in a Nietzsche study group when he and others decided to found an intellectual and artistic community to explore Nietzsche's philosophical impact on literature, film, and other arts. The group recently received nonprofit status and is awaiting a tax identification number, Mr. Tuncel said.

In the future, Mr. Tuncel said he wants to host a festival involving "Thus Spoke Zarathustra," and plans are afoot for a theatrical version of "Zarathustra" to be performed in February.

Another interdisciplinary theorist gaining a New York foothold is the Belgian-born philosopher and psychoanalyst Irigaray, who was the focus of a two-day philosophy conference at Stony Brook's Manhattan campus last month.

In her role as a public intellectual, Ms. Irigaray has addressed environmental ethics in examining issues such as Chernobyl. "Luce Irigaray has a very good sense of the connection between philosophical concepts and concrete practices," said conference co-organizer Mary Rawlinson, a professor of philosophy at SUNY Stony Brook who has used Irigarayan ideas in writing about feminist bioethics. Quoting Ms. Irigaray, she said the philosopher offers insight for "the way we live on earth together."

While the organizers anticipated about 50 or 60 attendees, the conference drew more than 120 registrants mostly from around America and Europe.

Ms. Irigaray, who views speech as ineluctably marked by sexual difference, has written on health care, how to raise children, and pedagogy. She delivered a paper to the conference via video hook-up.

The Irigaray Society aims to foster "Irigarayan work inside and outside of the academy."

The Foucault Society likewise strives "to reach beyond academic philosophical circles." A central thesis of Michel Foucault's thought is that many things widely considered natural (such as madness or sexuality) are historically manmade.

A professor in the law and society faculty at the University of California at Santa Barbara, Jacqueline Stevens, said the Foucault Society conference last weekend was beneficial in that it allowed extended conversations with others who had "deep expertise with the same texts" as she has been reading over the years.

Reflecting on the conference, a professor at the University of Alberta, Cressida Heyes, said she had a sense that "Foucault studies have just proliferated."

Just how far have they ramified? A New School professor, Nicholas Birns, said he knew of a Foucauldian criminologist, while Ms. Heyes has examined Foucault in relation to weight loss programs such as Weight Watchers, which "both educate and control."