
I usually feel a twinge of embarrassment when academics refer to their work as ‘interventions,’ mainly because the stakes seem so small compared to other situations where the term is evoked. However, Mari Ruti’s *The Singularity of Being: Lacan and the Immortal Within* is indeed worthy of the term ‘intervention,’ not only because of the strength of her argument, but because her accessible language and pragmatic approach suggest a new kind of psychoanalytic cultural studies.

My understanding of Ruti’s project is that she intends to show how the difficult discourse of Jacques Lacan can be made useful to an audience beyond Lacanian scholars, and she also wants to rescue certain concepts from the nihilistic connotations attributed to them by prominent ‘post-Lacanians’ such as Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, and Lee Edelman. In her endeavor, Ruti employs Lacanian theory to describe the many ways that people use the singularity of their being to shape the discourse of the Other into more inspiring and satisfying forms. The result is a quite ambitious pairing of singularity with personal and social transformation, and this pairing opens interesting avenues of study for both particular works of art and the social function of art itself.

Ruti splits the book into two sections that function as steps in her argument. In the first half, she analyses the ethics of the act in relation to the concept of singularity and proposes a rejuvenating act that contrasts with the destructive act in Žižek and the restrictive fidelity to the truth-event in Badiou. Ruti’s understanding of singularity comes from the Lacanian real, particularly as theorised by the late Lacan of the *sinthome*. Using Lacan’s three orders as a guide, Ruti explains that ‘one might say that subjectivity, for Lacan, is aligned with the symbolic, personality with the imaginary, and singularity with the real’ (1). To embrace singularity is thus to work productively with the diverse ways in which the real impinges on the ordinary structures of the symbolic and the incapacitating cultural fantasies of the imaginary. Thus, Ruti draws on aspects of the real such as *jouissance*, the drive, and the ‘Thing to flesh out how singularity weakens the hold of the discourse of the Other so that we are able to experience new intensities of being. While not minimising the frightening aspects of *jouissance*, Ruti shows how *jouissance* frees us from the numbing regularity of the symbolic, and instead of lamenting our dependence on language and our alienation within the Other’s discourse, Ruti suggests that we consider ways in which the failures of the symbolic, often caused by the ‘too muchness’ of the drive, enable ‘an exhilarated sense of liberation and self-expansion.’

Ruti presents a brilliant reading of the Lacanian dictum from Seminar VII to ‘not cede’ on one’s desire, where Lacan stated that ‘the only thing of which one can be guilty of is having given ground relative to one’s desire’ (50). Ruti differentiates between the commitment to sustain desire and the commitment to follow desire to its destructive end, and her reading helps to counter the emphasis placed on ‘subjective destitution’ by scholars such as Žižek and Edelman. For Edelman the ‘sinhomosexual’ gains ethical legitimacy by accepting ‘its figural status as resistance to the viability of the social’ (63) while Žižek repeatedly argues that the ethical act in its purest form is the achievement of ‘suicidal ecstasy’. In contrast, Ruti conceptualises not giving ground on one’s desire as negotiating between the symbolic and the real in order to nurture desire. She explains that

Not ceding on one’s desire could be interpreted to mean that one should resist the temptation to completely close the space between the void and the ‘name’ that aims to encapsulate this void; it could be said to imply that desire should remain partially unfulfilled, that some share of desire should always persist as desire rather than become completely overtaken by the jouissance of the act. (101)

Thus not ceding on one’s desire entails accepting a certain indeterminateness and vulnerability; it means avoiding both the rigidity of social norms and the abandonment of the social in favor of the void. Ruti’s emphasis on maintaining the ambivalence of desire presents a very persuasive reading of this problematic aspect of Lacanian ethics.

In the second half of the book Ruti focuses on Lacan’s theory of sublimation and uses it to present singularity as an alternative process of social change to the destructive or suicidal act. At the heart of Ruti’s linking of the singular and the social is an emphasis on the ways in which we incorporate the real into our everyday lives. Because the Other is full of gaps and inconsistencies, we do not need to repudiate it. We need only make use of those gaps in order to refashion meaning according to our own desires:

Although being compelled to participate in a common symbolic system on the one level deprives us of autonomy, on another level it offers us the opportunity of carving out a singular place within that system, of claiming language for our own purposes. (123)

Thus singularity is the source of imaginative possibility that engages us in the life despite its inherent disappointments.

Ruti presents singularity, which she also describes as embracing the ‘dignity of the Thing’, as an alternative to the imaginary lures of capitalist culture. The imaginary fantasy substitutes a socially approved desire for the singular desire of the Thing. The refreshing aspect of Ruti’s argument is her acknowledgement that the Thing can only be grasped through culture; therefore, enjoyment of the material world is still possible. Ruti explains that Lacan


does not ask us to shun material things in favor of some sublime ideal that will never crystallize (or even in favor of a radical act that will detach us from the world). Quite the opposite, he intimates that the various things (objects and representations) of the world are how ‘real’ satisfaction makes its way into our lives. (146)

The key is to differentiate desire motivated by the Thing from desire dictated by the big Other. This raises an inherent problem within Lacanian ethics, which is the extreme difficulty of distinguishing the false lures of the imaginary from the echo of the Thing. Ruti is aware of this problem and addresses it directly, particularly in her discussion of the work of Badiou. Unfortunately, a simulacrum, false event, or social fantasy may provide the same rejuvenating energy as proximity to the Thing. It seems that Lacanian ethics leaves us still in need of a supplementary ethics, even if it is the injunction not to harm others. I see no persuasive evidence that an ethics of the Thing will never harm the social good.

Ruti’s exploration of singularity has many implications for the study of art and creativity. The benefit of the (destabilising) proximity to the real that she describes is that it allows us to transform the Other’s signifiers into something more ‘inspired’, and this
creativity appears in language, art, politics, and social and intellectual endeavours. Ruti’s work promotes a Lacanian aesthetics that reveals the particular blendings of the symbolic and the real, or the ways in which cultural context provides quilting points that allow us to communicate our singular passion to others. Singularity is, perhaps, what makes cross-cultural communication possible in that it evokes the ‘inscrutable intensity of being’ (8) that transcends cultural norms. Ruti’s primary intervention is to imply that we can indeed invite the real into our lives and improve our ability to harness its energy. The writing and careful reading of literature is, to my mind, a paradigmatic exercise in the use of the symbolic to gain proximity to the real, a real that connects human beings in a more visceral way.

Tom Ratekin