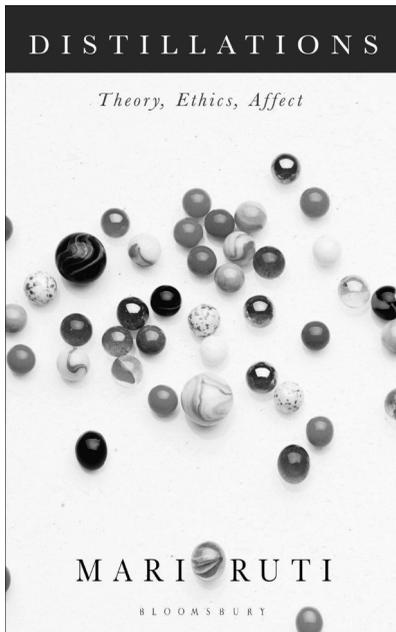


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# More than a Distillation: Review of Mari Ruti's *Distillations: Theory, Ethics, Affect*



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Mari Ruti introduces *Distillations: Theory, Ethics, Affect* as a compilation and summary of a career spanning fields diverse as Lacanian psychoanalysis and continental philosophy. In addition to being an invaluable primer to her broad body of scholarship, the book also stands on its own as an intriguing revisiting of affect and queer theory. Ruti's uses her background in diverse lines of reasoning to convincingly argue for a new, mediated and circumscribed formulation of affect theory, one that demands a radical reconfiguration of individual and universal conceptions of the ideal subject.

Often, I look beyond the scope of my research to discover sources that echo, enliven and contribute to

debates within my discipline. Though the author does not reference media, I believe the book is relevant to those who study film with regard to the ideal versus particularized viewer and appreciating the subjectivity of the cinematic spectator. Discussions in *Distillations* can be linked to the projects of such posthumanist scholars such as Rosi Braidotti, as well as existential phenomenologists like Jenny Chamarette.<sup>1</sup> Subjectivity, which takes into account a situated audience's response and which is the central focus of Ruti's analysis, is important to an understanding of the ontologies of experience and viewing.

Ruti draws upon theorists, such as Lauren Berlant and Alan Baidou, who engage with either queer theory, neo-Platonism or both, to build a complex web of meanings that place the universal and the specific into tension. This tension is established in the Forward when the author introduces the difference between the "other" and the "Other." While ostensibly to distinguish from the Levinasian Other and a broader examination of intersubjectivity, this also emphasizes that the other (with a small o), depends upon real world factors, such as the identity of the subject and the other.

In Chapter One, "The Posthumanist Universal: Between Precarity and Rebellion," Ruti further explores the tension between universalism and particularity, drawing upon philosophers and philosophies regularly brought into conversations within Film Studies, especially around questions of existential versus transcendental approaches to the phenomenology of spectatorship. She cites the distrust of universality by those such as Sara Ahmed and Maggie Nelson who move toward more empirical and particularized definitions of subjects defined by factors variously identified as race, class, gender, class, and/or sexuality/sexual orientation. The methodological trend to read empirical work as "particularized" (a term Ruti

uses synonymously with “identitarian” concerns) by Continental philosophers tends to silo this analysis, separating it from scholarship that centers around “universal” formulations of the subject. This approach constitutes a metadiscursive critique of this trend in critical theory, as Ruti questions the disciplinary logics and underlying assumptions which identify and isolate individual “identitarian” subjects, even as these trends also enforce a reading of these subjects as particular in a manner which limits the ability of these studies to raise larger implications.

In Chapter Two, “The Bad Habits of Critical Theory: On the Rigid Rituals of Thought,” Ruti’s analysis grows more complex, nuanced and specific, problematizing what she considers progressive philosophy, including under this rubric the works of Slavoj Žižek, Jacques Lacan, Alain Badiou and others. However, *Distillations* posits that many of these philosophers, and here the author emphasizes among others Lacan and Todd McGowan, allow for a reimagining of intersubjectivity which in turn has interesting implications for empiricism. As many of these scholars have been linked closely to philosophies of film and its industrial context, this section is of interest to those who might otherwise be tempted to reject universalist logics in favor of an empirical consideration of the cinematic object. Ruti makes the case for a negotiation between the universal and particular. She writes, “I concur that critical theory should not necessarily be expected to reflect the concerns of real life, that it should be allowed to work, ‘to one side of direct referents’” (51-53). With this remark, the book sides with modern Platonists like Badiou (a major interlocuter in this discussion), rather than with those more empirically situated. However, she also cautions against endorsing a mode of philosophy which ignores real-world contingency to the point of endorsing “empty rhetoric about visions that are entirely unlivable” (53). This chapter continues with an interrogation of the figurative death of the ideal subject, as well as an exploration of anti-normativity, and then augments her larger disciplinary conversation to offer a more specific examination of the query: why do posthumanist philosophers call for the death of the subject? These questions find echoes in queries about the “death of cinema,” as both pose whether a past formulation (“cinema” or Western humanist “subjectivity”) is ultimately outmoded and retrograde, or if such historical considerations can be

thought through in conjunction with more recent concerns.

The theme of Chapter Three is centered around Lacanian thought, in particular as concerns the conflict between Lacanian subjectivity and political philosophy (mostly originating from the Frankfurt school). This section moves slightly away from issues central to cinema studies and toward broader questions regarding the landscape of Continental philosophical theory. However, this more expansive focus brings into sharp relief the ways in which Ruti’s Lacanian methodology compliments cinema studies via a detailed consideration of subjectivity as it relates to political philosophy and political economy. Referencing Jacques Lacan alongside Lee Edelman and Lauren Berlant, Ruti produces a confluence of thinkers which might at first seem strange, as Lacanian theory is routinely held in tension with queer theory, especially but not exclusively due to its binary reinscription of the subject. *Distillations* considers the nature of desire and how this subject relates to an affective relationality which comes from a drive to follow preordained social scripts. This chapter goes on to the hierarchization of drives and priorities: in this discussion, Ruti references her earlier work in *The Ethics of Opting Out* where she revisits the progressive critique of neoliberalism. The section concludes by exploring approaches to Lacan’s formulation of “The Thing” and the affective realities surrounding this abstraction of the object as it relates to the Levinasian Other.<sup>2</sup>

In Chapter Four, Ruti offers a more detailed reading of the ethics of Lacanian thought versus more abstracted but ideologically oriented political theory. Here, the argument circles back around to material which has more direct relevance to film studies. Expanding on the previous chapter, Ruti goes into a more in-depth exploration of the affects that constitute the contemporary subject, focusing on anxiety. This anxiety is linked to the consumption of commodities and desire for commodities, bringing a hint of the neo-Marxist to an otherwise primarily Lacanian understanding of selfhood. The question of resignation also is interesting in this chapter, and forms a focus of the later section which shifts to a deeper consideration of the question of love as a formulating affect. Distinguishing the sense of rupture from the

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rejection of desire is an important critical move, which shows how many of the tensions introduced earlier on are exemplified in institutions such as Homeland Security. Finally, the chapter negotiates the tension between “good” and “bad” feelings, a juxtaposition which continues into the next section.

Chapter Five furthers the work begun in Chapter Four, but takes a more individually oriented and affect-based turn. The focus on the event, which emerges relatively late in this relatively long chapter, makes explicit the relevance to film studies otherwise implicit throughout this portion of the book. Chapter Five is centered around love, returning to Classical, Platonism and moving forward through later lines of inquiry to examine structures of feeling around positive affect – for example, different forms of *amor* (both romantic and otherwise). She critiques the view of the Lacanian political theorists from the previous chapter who constitute subjectivity as constituted negatively (and negativity as an attribute to be lauded), instead embracing a more positive outlook which expands upon the constitution of the event as a path toward potentiality rather than negatively.

The final chapter further complicates Ruti’s analysis by considering the nature of trauma and the event. In continuing to engage with Badiou’s writing on the subject, Ruti deepens her previous analysis, while keeping the neo-Classical tension between particularity and universalism very much at the fore. This last chapter, which spans relationships, individual and collective trauma, and the status of the “event,” is powerful in its invocation of a fluid temporality of experience, in which one’s past encounter does not erase present experience. But all encounters exist in a sort of durational continuity, with some shared

elements and some distinct ones. This duration echoes and connects to themes of cinematic temporality, as does the delayed gratification approach Ruti describes as centering the design of the event. In her final claim, Ruti implies that trauma is the event that few people “want,” but most are likely to experience (228). While not summarizing what has come before in full, this book ends with an interrogation and invitation to further contemplation—what might the universality of trauma as an affective state (while also preserving the particularity of particular traumatic events) imply for a reconsideration of subjectivity? Ruti suggests that navigating and engaging with trauma is a powerful way forward when placing good and bad affect alongside universality.

By not arguing for particularity, Ruti’s position might be understood to be vague, but I feel that the choice to end on a dialogue between different stances instead cements the flexibility of concepts like subjectivity. When taking into account viewer subject position in film, or when trying to resolve the age-old empiricism versus transcendentalism (and before that Aristotelian versus Platonic) debate, the question of what constitutes the individual remains central. In her choice of close readings and careful delineation of the landscape of psychoanalytic, philosophical and affect-based texts, Ruti offers not only an intriguing provocation on subjectivity, but a thought-provoking gloss on a methodology through which subjectivity can be defined. For what the book suggests both in form and content, Ruti’s work is a valuable contribution to film and philosophy and to graduate students looking to expand their own modes of close reading and inquiry.

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### Notes

1 See Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013) and Jenny Chamarette, *Phenomenology and the Future of Film: Rethinking Subjectivity Beyond French Cinema* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012).

2 Mari Ruti, *The Ethics of Opting Out: Queer Theory’s Defiant Subjects* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).