

# H-Net Reviews

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Frances Restuccia. *Amorous Acts: Lacanian Ethics in Modernism, Film and Queer Theory*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006. xvi + 152 pp. \$49.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-5182-7.

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## For the Love of the Good

Frances Restuccia's book on Jacques Lacan's ethics of psychoanalysis, modernist literature, postmodern film, and queer theory promises to intervene and contribute to key contemporary debates on Lacanian theory, most notably the debates over his theories of ethical action. In *Amorous Acts*, Restuccia, in part, is trying to establish a version of Lacanian ethics distinct from that of controversial interpreter Slavoj Žižek. She argues against his "ethics of jouissance," which she characterizes as pathologically obsessed with desubjectification and death, in favor of an "ethics of radical desire" that involves instead an encounter with desubjectification and the experience of love (p.xiii). Citing several other critics, the author also endeavors to overcome a division in interpretation. One strand follows the Žižekian line and offers a more radical version of an ethics that is self-annihilating, socially suicidal, and related to the death drive. The promise of such ethics lies in the potential destruction of the symbolic or social field of meaning and discourse. The other strand emphasizes a less extreme "ethics of desire," best captured by the oft-heard Lacanian maxim of not ceding on one's desire. This version of his ethics involves an acceptance of lack/castration, and a turn to the symbolic that inscribes rather than covers lack. This is an effective heuristic for a discussion of current debates, and reflects the positions Restuccia attempts to reconcile in her text.

I must echo a complaint often heard from readers of Lacanian inspired texts. That is that their authors do not make the discussions intelligible. As opposed to much Lacanian work that is impenetrable because it is idiomatic, Restuccia's is opaque at points because of its

limited textual engagement. In *Amorous Acts*, Restuccia often invokes concepts without providing much interpretation or explanation. If you are not already familiar with Lacan's concepts, you will not find much clarification. If you are familiar with Lacan's concepts, you will know that there is no consensus on their meaning. Restuccia often quotes sections from his seminars as if these statements are self-explanatory. Actually, they are extremely enigmatic, referring to concepts that Lacan himself repeatedly rethought throughout the course of his seminar. The meanings are not at all given. As someone familiar with Lacan's work, I found that I could not easily discern the specifics of Restuccia's own interpretations.

The author frequently offers phrases like "Lacan seems to be suggesting;" "My sense of this statement is;" "it appears that Lacan wants to say" (p. 8), but does not adequately develop arguments to explain or justify these senses. The same is the case when Restuccia discusses the debates in which she intervenes. Her reading of one such debate between Judith Butler and Žižek is an example. She mentions that their difference is over political strategies of resistance, but does not explain that the basis of the disagreement is Lacan's concept of the *real*. A lack of textual engagement is evidenced in characterizations of the participants' theoretical positions as well. She writes that Butler's "interest in collapsing the social with its exclusion is clearly more akin to Žižek's idea of historicity than is her notion of (mere) resignification" (p. 151).

According to Butler, performativity ("mere resignifi-

cation” in Restuccia’s words) is the mechanism of collapsing “the social with its exclusions” (p. 151). The author writes that Butler needs “to articulate more fully what she means by lamenting [sic] that the subject is primarily dependent, passionately attached. Is Butler proposing that we no longer, as children, passionately attach?” (p. 133). Much of Butler’s body of work is an articulation of the mechanism of passionate attachment. Far from lamentation, in this work Butler articulates connected strategies of political resistance. Restuccia criticizes Butler for being contradictory and asks “whether such structure” of passionate attachment “institutes desire for subjection ... or [whether] it is the very means by which one becomes a desiring subject” (p. 133). Butler’s point is that passionate attachment is *both* of these. What Restuccia dismisses as a contradiction is actually the key insight that Butler brings to her analyses of political resistance, and the point where the difference between Butler and Žižek becomes most stark. Considering the debate between these two has extended for over ten years over fundamental ontological questions, to make the case that they “clearly” agree requires a developed argument that references their texts to support the claim. Restuccia provides neither, and in general, I found her conclusions unconvincing without more textual support.

These readings aside, Restuccia does advocate an ethical position. Let us recall the two strands of interpretation of Lacan’s ethics mentioned above. The author uses the concept of love (three “types”) to overcome interpretive divisions among critics. The first kind of love (the ethics of desire) is too narcissistic, where one only loves an other as a reflection of itself. She writes that it is “naïve,” even if “self-contented” (p. 4). The other kind is related to the ethics of *jouissance*. This love is too much, like Antigone’s incestuous love for her brother, and it gets too close to what it wants and is simply destructive. Connected to the reconciliation of interpretations is the author’s desire to reconcile Lacan’s early and later work, to unite it by exposing “coherence” in his thinking about love across the whole (p. 4). Less important than whether or not it is possible to narrate such coherence is the fact that Restuccia’s analysis is motivated in part by a *desire* for noncontradiction and coherence. She takes each version as extremes relative to which her position is the middle ground. The moderate love involves an encounter with (too much) love, not as a persistent state, but instead as an occasion for the subject’s reconsolidation in terms of a new desire. Rejecting “extremism,” Restuccia thinks the moderate form of love is the good one, good for the subject and good for society. This implicit liberal

political stance explains the frequent moral tone of the book.

Indeed, the word “ethical” is often taken to be synonymous with “good” and ethical actions understood as good actions, while unethical actions are understood as bad. However, Lacan rejected such normative ideas for the clinic. Despite this fact of Lacanian analysis, such moralism is not at all uncommon in psychoanalytic circles, and unfortunately is often the basis of Restuccia’s positions. In the introduction, she writes that Žižek’s ethics are morally problematic in as far as he describes “an authentic act without paying much attention to where it leads. To Žižek in most of his work sheer commission of such an act is acting ethically, as if an ethical act has to be an ultimate act” (p. 104). Although she finds the possibility morally scandalous, that there is something “ultimate” about ethical action was exactly the point of the ethics of psychoanalysis. Restuccia’s position is that ethical action should not be taken “for its own sake but for the benefit of reconsolidating subjectivity” (p. 96). She writes in the introduction that “an underlying concern of this chapter and book is what sort of *value* psychoanalysis could possibly have in the practical arenas of the clinic or social change were its ethics to be defined as tantamount to *jouissance* and the death drive” (p. 4). There must be, she insists, something “beneficial” to ethical action (p. 99).

Ethical action for Restuccia must in some way be related to a “good,” from which its value derives and relative to which it can be measured. For his part, Lacan highlighted how nobody ever “demands an explanation” when a good is invoked, and that this “trust in goodness” is simply the subject’s desire to assume “his own goodness.”[1] Thus, he told his audience not to ask of the good, but instead of desire.[2] Near the end of the ethics seminar, speaking on the moral goals of the clinic, Lacan says that the analyst must always remember that “the question of the sovereign good is closed, that there isn’t any.”[3] This nonmoral position was a fundamental aspect of Lacan’s theoretical project, and partly the reason behind his leaving the Société Française de la Psychanalyse in 1963. Further, it is the condition of possibility for the ethics of psychoanalysis at all. It is only upon such clearing of the moral ground that analysis is in a position not to make judgments among goods, but to reveal the nature of the desire for the good.

For Lacan, “ethical” refers to the structure of an action, not to its value in terms of goods. The basis of Restuccia’s rejection of Žižek’s interpretation is that it

might not be good for society. In the ethics seminar, Lacan described the idea of the good as a limit to thought. Restuccia's adherence to some idea of the good might be why the sections of Lacan's ethics seminar where he directly addresses the clinical significance of the repudiation of moral positions are not mentioned. Not only did Lacan reject notions of the good for ethical action, he also rejected any notions of development, progress, or cure. In the final chapter, Restuccia writes that ethics should involve a "culture's very state of progress.... society can advance only through such an ethical attempt to improve itself" (p. 150). Lacan said that any good, even that of progress, while offered as a seeming "naturalness," is always a "benevolent fraud." [4] Given Lacan's nonmoral version of ethics, Restuccia's characterization betrays its spirit.

The mention of the clinic brings me to the final point. Lacan was in the end a clinician, and his discussion of ethics was done with that context in mind. Zizek's agenda is to read Lacan with politics in mind. What Lacan did to Sigmund Freud with philosophy, Zizek wants to do to Lacan with politics, and the clinic is different than politics. Many who are thinking in clinical terms offer versions of Lacan's ethics that echo Restuccia's normative concerns, but those with politics in mind are not necessarily interested in happiness, but in changing an entire political situation. These positions emphasize a more radical version of the ethics of psychoanalysis, which involves jouissance and the death drive. Understanding that Zizek is trying to make Lacan's con-

cepts politically consequential explains much of what perplexes Restuccia about his position, and would go a long way in providing the context necessary for pertinent critiques. By just offering counterinterpretations of his examples, without acknowledging the substantive claims he is making by way of them, Restuccia's criticisms often seem to miss the point.

On the one hand, if you are unfamiliar with Lacanian theory, there will not be much in *Amorous Acts* that will help improve your understanding. I personally think that it domesticates aspects that make the ethics of psychoanalysis particularly unique and timely. On the other hand, if you are interested in applying psychoanalytic theory to film and literature, Restuccia offers interesting alternatives to Zizek's interpretation of several novels and movies. If you are familiar with Lacanian theory, then this book will be interesting for its laying out of the current interpretive terrain of his ethics of psychoanalysis. However, in the end, Restuccia is not very effective in making an intervention on this terrain.

#### Notes

[1]. Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2006), 491.

[2]. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar*, bk. 7 of *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-60*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Daniel Porter (London: Routledge, 1992), 218.

[3]. *Ibid.*, 300.

[4]. *Ibid.*, 219.

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