In Focus: Julia Kristeva

2024

Miglena Nikolchina
Cecilia Sjöholm
William Watkin
Tyler James Bennett
Darin Tenev
Emilia Angelova
Evangelos Kourdis

AN
H

ACTA NOVA HUMANISTICA

ACTA NOVA HUMANISTICA
A Journal of Humanities Published by New Bulgarian University

ACTA NOVA HUMANISTICA
Списание за хуманитаристика на Нов български университет

ACTA NOVA HUMANISTICA
A Journal of Humanities Published by New Bulgarian University

Acta Nova Humanistica (**ANH**) is an open-access academic journal published twice a year by New Bulgarian University (Sofia, Bulgaria). The journal's working language is English. Articles for publication are accepted also in Bulgarian, French and German following a standard double-blind peer-review procedure. Each issue of *ANH* has a specific thematic focus chosen by the Editorial Board and announced in advance with a call for papers published on our website.

Mission & Scope

ANH welcomes original research offering global perspectives on themes related to the past, present, and future of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe (EE/SEE).

We seek to collaborate with both experienced and junior scholars across various academic domains, including history, sociology, philosophy, anthropology, cultural studies, psychology, literary theory, linguistics, and more. *ANH* is particularly interested in:

Social and historical phenomena
Interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and cross-disciplinary EE/SEE studies
Comparative social, political, and religious history
Religion
History of ideas
History of concepts, science and epistemology
Philosophical and sociological theories of education, civic education
Social and cultural anthropology
Sociocultural contexts of institutional change, critical political studies
Seminal EE/SEE figures in humanities, literature and literary theory

ACTA NOVA HUMANISTICA
Списание за хуманитаристика
на Нов български университет

Acta Nova Humanistica (ANH) е академично списание с отворен достъп, публикувано в два броя годишно от Нов български университет (София, България). Работният език на списанието е английски. Статии за публикуване се приемат също на български, немски и френски след стандартно двукратно сляпо рецензиране. Всеки брой на *ANH* има специфичен тематичен фокус, избиран от редакционния съвет и обявяван предварително с цел привличане на статии на интернет страницата на списанието.

Мисия и обхват

ANH търси оригинални изследвания, които предлагат глобални перспективи, свързани с миналото, настоящето и бъдещето на Източна и Югоизточна Европа. Списанието е отворено към сътрудничество както с утвърдени, така и с млади изследователи от различни академични направления – история, социология, философия, антропология, културни изследвания, литературна теория, лингвистика и др. По-конкретно *ANH* има интерес от изследвания в областите на:

Социални и исторически явления
Интердисциплинарни, мултидисциплинарни и междудисциплинарни изследвания в Източна и Югоизточна Европа
Сравнителна социална, политическа и религиозна история
Религия
История на идеите
История на понятията, науката и епистемология
Философски и социологически теории на образованието и гражданското образование
Социална и културна антропология
Социокултурни контексти на институционалната промяна, критични политически изследвания
Изтъкнати личности от Източна и Югоизточна Европа от областта на хуманитаристиката, литературата и литературната теория

Acta Nova Humanistica: the New Academic Journal of New Bulgarian University

Acta Nova Humanistica is the title of New Bulgarian University's latest academic journal, dedicated to the humanities. Its mission, bolstered by open access and English as its working language, is to open new horizons for both established and emerging scholars, extending their reach to a broader academic audience beyond Bulgaria. As the title suggests, the journal deliberately avoids narrow specialisation, striving instead to support and encourage interdisciplinary approaches to the issues in focus.

The New Bulgarian University campus, located on the city's outskirts near the foot of a mountain, offers beautiful views and clean air. Yet this location also presents the risk of seclusion in the 'ivory tower' of academic life. In response, *ANH* is an attempt not only to step beyond the university's 'corridors' but also to transcend the constraints of 'corridor academia.' The journal reflects a growing awareness within today's academic world of the tension between regulatory demands for narrow specialisation in individual disciplines and the modern trends in humanities research toward inter-, cross-, and trans-disciplinary approaches. One of the journal's goals is to overcome this 'corridor-like' approach to academia.

This aim aligns with mission of New Bulgarian University, whose goal is 'to be innovative and enterprising in the development of university education, research, and creativity through general classical, interdisciplinary, and specialised training, and research and creative activity within open international networks.' Central to the University's academic profile, as reflected in its curricula, is the principle of interdisciplinarity across the humanities and social sciences. Part of its mission is to foster dialogue and fruitful collaboration across disciplines from all areas of the academic spectrum – including its farthest reaches.

This principle finds expression in both the curricula and the overall academic environment that NBU strives to cultivate. Colleagues would

often share that one of the rewards of teaching and/or undertaking research at NBU is the opportunity to engage with and listen to the critical perspectives of senior colleagues who work and students who study in entirely different academic fields.

Acta Nova Humanistica aims to build on the traditions established in the University's curricula and academic culture by bringing them into the realm of academic publishing. The journal plans to publish two issues per year, each with a predefined focal theme or problem, or dedicated to a figure of significance to the academic world. While a leading theme will guide each issue, contributions will not be limited solely to that topic. The first two issues are dedicated to Julia Kristeva, while the third issue, currently accepting submissions, will focus on the work and legacy of Tzvetan Todorov. The journal is open to researchers not only from New Bulgarian University but also from other Bulgarian and international academic institutions and research centres, welcoming contributions from both junior and established scholars.

The journal's inaugural issue is an opportunity for the editorial team to extend their gratitude to both the contributors and guest editor, as well as to the staff of the University Book Centre and Publishing House at New Bulgarian University. Their tireless efforts have made this beginning possible. They have succeeded in setting a standard that the journal will strive to uphold in future issues.

Best wishes for success to all colleagues involved!

From the Editorial Board

In Focus: Julia Kristeva

Contents
Съдържание

Miglena Nikolchina

Introduction

Ontology, Biosemiotics, and Set Theory: New Turns in Kristevan Studies

The papers collected in this volume were presented at the Eighth Meeting of the Kristeva circle,[1] which took place in Julia Kristeva's country of origin, Bulgaria, at the New Bulgarian University in Sofia, in May 2022. The small local organizing committee included Kristian Bankov, semiotician and Secretary General of the International Association for Semiotic Studies (IASS/AIS), Albena Stambolova, a writer and psychoanalyst, and myself, my research focus being on the juncture of literature and philosophy. I mention our research areas in order to foreground our ambition to have the conference address Kristeva's various facets and, more specifically, to see the conference bridge the division and almost complete lack of interaction between studies exploring the early "linguistic" or semiotic Kristeva and those dealing with her work after her psychoanalytic turn in the 1980s. It could be argued that the semiotic (with or without the *chora*) is the only early concept that has made its way into studies post-dating the psychoanalytic turn: it is as if we are dealing with two Kristevas, distinct and even opposed to each other. Emphasizing the semiotic as process, as "semiotization," and juxtaposing it to "transubstantiation" in the title of the conference[2] was intended to highlight and overcome this split: the first term evokes Kristeva's early conception of the semiotizable *chora*; the second emerges from her study of Proust in the 1990s. Placing these concepts side by side was meant to foreground the shifts in Kristeva's perspective as extending rather than replacing her early preoccupations.

In the general introduction to her trilogy on the "female genius," as we pointed out in our call for papers, Kristeva noted that Hannah Arendt, Melanie Klein, and Colette, although not truly excluded, not

---

[1]   The Circle was established in 2011 by Fanny Söderbäck (DePaul University) and Sarah Hansen (California State University at Northridge) with support from Kelly Oliver (Vanderbilt University). For more information about the Kristeva Circle, see www.kristevacircle.org.

[2]   Seehttps://iass-ais.org/cfp-semiotization-and-transubstantiation-julia-kristeva-for-the-21st-century/.

truly marginalized, were nevertheless "*hors du rang*": they crossed the boundaries between disciplines; they did not conform to ethnic or political allegiances; they challenged "left" and "right" establishments; they were rebels who preferred to follow their freedom to explore outside of dominant currents, institutions, parties, or schools (Kristeva 1999, 18). There can be no doubt that Kristeva's own work, like the work of her heroines, is both *hors du rang* and at the heart of her time(s). It was our hope, therefore, that the conference in the country where Kristeva's intellectual journey began would address both the unique aspects of her conceptual multiverse, and her dialogical engagement with the debates of her predecessors and contemporaries.

The decision to have the Kristeva Circle meet in Sofia was made in 2018 and the call for papers was circulated in 2019, i.e. a long, long time ago, in the old days when the world was still young and – to put it in the words of Thomas Mann's foreword to *The Magic Mountain* – "before a certain turning point, on the far side of a rift that has cut deeply through our lives and consciousness" (Mann 1996, xi). Before the lockdowns, in short.

Initially, the conference was supposed to take place in May 2020. Enthusiastic responses were received from all over the world. Almost all major American Kristeva scholars and a whole Chinese Kristevan school, about twenty participants, planned to join. Then the lockdowns began. The conference was rescheduled, rather optimistically, for September 2020. It had to be postponed again a couple of times in 2021. When we finally decided to go ahead no matter what and hold the conference in May 2022 it so came to pass that the pandemic had just been *relevé* – if I am allowed at this point to evoke Derrida's translation of Hegel's *aufheben*[3] – by the events in Ukraine. Bulgaria must have seemed, especially from certain remote locations, dangerously close to the military conflict, and this, combined with the lingering effects of the lockdowns and the multiple postponements, had a dramatic effect on the number of participants: some simply dropped out; others, including Julia Kristeva, contributed online; the bravest came in person to take part in the invigorating discussions and uplifting sightseeing.

Despite the obstacles, significant aspects of the questions formulated in the call were answered, and quite powerfully, by the papers presented at the conference and collected in this volume. Radically disparate approaches to Kristeva are proposed, which is hardly surprising given

---

[3]   I discuss Derrida's translation of Hegel's term in Nikolchina 2013, 74.

the polylogic (to adopt her own word) character of her work. Kristeva is juxtaposed with a plethora of thinkers of negativity from Hegel to Heidegger and beyond (Angelova, Tenev), Walter Benjamin (Joanna Neykova), Roman Jakobson (Evangelos Kourdis), Hannah Arendt (Sjöholm), Giorgio Agamben and Alain Badiou (Watkin), Juri Lotman (Kamelia Spassova, Anand Raja), Georges Bataille (Lenka Vojtíšková), etc. Bogdana Paskaleva has resurrected the role played by Soviet linguists Sebastian Shaumyan and Polina Soboleva. Kristeva's psychoanalytic notions are abundantly employed, yet for the most part psychoanalysis remains in the background. Albena Stambolova's paper is an exception: its topical political setting seeks to engage Lacan's views on psychosis with Kristeva's theory of the semiotic and abjection. The papers address some of the most popular Kristevan themes: motherhood, abjection and melancholy (Sjöholm, Watkin, Angelova, Frances L. Restuccia, Neykova); intertextuality (Evangelos Kourdis, Elena S. Lazaridou); the semiotic (Anand Raja); as well as some more recent or rarely discussed issues like mimesis (Spassova), the imaginary father (Francheska Zemyarska) and beheading (Lilia Trifonova). The habitual feminist preoccupations, although inevitably present, are overshadowed by concerns about the effects of artificial intelligence, new communication technologies and the marginalization of the humanities. Taken in their totality, but also in certain concrete ways, the papers do propose solutions to the rift between the "two Kristevas."

Not surprisingly, the different approaches taken by the papers challenge, debate, and contradict each other, yet they also complement and echo each other from their dissimilar viewpoints. Invoking William Watkin's claim that the work of Kristeva and Agamben presents us with "absolutely one of the most explosive and fascinating conversations of our age, whichever side you choose," we might concur that Kristeva's work engages in such fascinatingly explosive conversations on many fronts and that the present collection exemplifies this multiple engagement. While the customary applications of Kristevan concepts to social issues, literature and the arts have a share in the collection, revisionary perspectives of her work in terms of political theory (Cecilia Sjöholm), philosophy (William Watkin, Emilia Angelova, Darin Tenev), and semiotics (Tyler James Bennett) create a distinct configuration of exploratory priorities. My further introductory remarks will focus predominantly on these texts since, I believe, new nodes of contention and new venues for future research gain prominence in them.

The Commodification of Motherhood

Motherhood is a Kristevan theme with a long and venerable history of debate, especially in feminist theory. Beginning with the concept of the semiotic *chora* elaborated in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (Kristeva 1974; Kristeva 1984) and her influential reflections on the maternal in some of the essays in *Polylogue* (Kristeva 1977), Kristeva herself kept returning again and again to various facets of this topic: from abjection in *Powers of Horror* (Kristeva 1980; Kristeva 1982), love in *Tales of Love* (Kristeva 1983; Kristeva 1987a) and melancholy in *Black Sun* (Kristeva 1987; Kristeva 1989) to, most recently, maternal eroticism and maternal reliance. Incorporating negativity and the dark aspects of the mother-child passions into her analysis, Kristeva has always insisted on the maternal as the foundation of ethics and the social bond. In the present collection, Kristeva's exploration of motherhood appears in interpretations paired with distinct disciplinary and methodological preoccupations, and in ways rather unexpected: set theory, with William Watkin; ontology and negativity, with Emilia Angelova. In "Bad Mothers: Kristeva and the Undoing of the Natural Maternal," to which I will first turn, Cecilia Sjöholm, one of the two keynote speakers at the conference, continues her work on the relevance of Kristeva for political theory and on the dialogical projections between Kristeva and Hannah Arendt (see Sjöholm 2005).

Taking the novel *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother* by the British author Rachel Cusk as her starting point, Sjöholm examines the condition of the "capitalist mother" caught between, on the one hand, the marketization of emotions that accompanies the buying and selling of blissful maternity as a natural phenomenon and, on the other, the "liberal imaginary where the individual is supposed to be a self, marked by reflection, willpower and freedom." What is commodified as good motherhood turns out to be incompatible with what is being commodified as the free individual. Against the backdrop of Kristeva's conceptualization of abjection and the aporias of motherhood in consumer society, the abject appears as the zero-point of bad motherhood which "unveils an antagonistic relation to what Kristeva calls the symbolic: the symbolic is unable to contain the paradoxes and ambiguities that the experience of motherhood entails."

Sjöholm's analysis reveals another paradox: although incapable of experiencing maternal love for a living being, the "bad mother" seems

to crave affection.. Rachel Cusk is shaken by the abjective treatment she received from her readers. It would seem that she put her inability to love on paper in the hope of being loved for it. A further twist in Sjöholm's dissection of commodification is the replacement of the child by a doll. The doll, however, not only exhibits commodification, the child as precious possession; it also has the advantage of not being "soiled." Although not thematized by Sjöholm, another aspect of the contemporary crisis becomes apparent at this point. The abject, this smelly, sticky piece of dirt and grease, which her baby daughter has become for the mother in Cusk's novel, involves the so-called inferior senses: smell, touch, and taste. There is a long history of the civilizational downgrading of the senses of proximity in relation to the superior senses of sight and hearing. Nevertheless, it is our own epoch, as the pandemic lockdowns made painfully apparent, that drastically reduces our senses to the two "superior" ones, which are compatible with machines, encodable through machines, transmittable through machines, and, of course, surveyable by machines. The senses of proximity are to be locked away, confined, and kept at a distance: they become private and, by extension, filthy and indecent. They are *abjected* and, in Sjöholm's analysis, the baby, which allows for no social distancing, becomes part of this abjection. This aspect of the phenomenon, studied by Sjöholm, corresponds to the concern with the effects of new technologies discussed in the papers by Tanya Loughead and Jasmina Tacheva, Tyler Bennett, Evangelos Kourdis, and Kristeva herself.

It is noteworthy that, with Sjöholm, the abject appears from the perspective not of the child, of the subject-to-be, as is the case in *Powers of Horror*, but of the mother. In itself, this is a sign of the current crisis of the maternal, which Kristeva has recently re-emphasized.[4] In the present collection, various counterweights are proposed. Frances L. Restuccia's account of the role of St. Augustine's mother in his spiritual life offers a fascinating glimpse of the manner in which a prior epoch, that of early Christianity, inscribed abjection in a salvational worldview. Francheska Zemyarska extracts Kristeva's concept of the imaginary father from the autobiographical writing of Marguerite Yourcenar. In a bold move, Emilia Angelova ontologizes maternal love. And a sort of salvation for our epoch emerges in the unique approach elaborated by the second keynote speaker, William Watkin, to whom I now turn.

[4] See "Reliance: What Is Loving for a Mother?" and "Maternal Eroticism" (Kristeva 2018, 11–20; 101–12).

Signifiance with Set Theory

Watkin's essay "Indifferentiating the Undifferentiated in Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language*" attempts, to put it in his own words, "an ambitious remapping of Kristeva's work." The essay is an extension of his own elaboration of the "philosophy of indifference," involving his highly original interpretations of Giorgio Agamben's archeology and Alain Badiou's ontology in the perspective of set theory and analytic extensionalism (see Watkin 2014; Watkin 2017; Watkin 2021). Watkin's analysis of Kristeva is based for the most part on *Revolution in Poetic Language* and *Powers of Horror*. I emphasize this because some of his judgments could find support or, perhaps, be modified by considering Kristeva's early essay "Engendering the Formula." In fact, set theory is an explicit reference point in both "Engendering the Formula" and Philippe Sollers' novel *Nombres*, which Kristeva's essay discusses. Watkin's comparison of the maternal body to a set, which leads to his claim that

> the empty set, just born from the fullness of the maternal totality, becomes our semiotic *chora* providing us with a mathematics of the receptacle, as well as the mathematics of the generative nature of the receptacle

practically uncovers in reverse order the conceptual substratum laid out in "Engendering the Formula" and later transposed in the concept of the semiotic *chora*. My point is that Watkin is restoring a hidden map rather than remapping. Another aspect worth further discussion is Watkin's impression that Kristeva has a horror of infinity (see, for example, Lechte 2023, 17–56). That said, I must stress that Watkin's reading of Kristeva is lucid, profound, stimulating and, towards the end, powerfully poetic. It offers definitions of major aspects of Kristeva's thought that are succinct, precise, and memorable, even when they are debatable:

> "We shall call this biological dialectics. It is somaticized dialectical materialism."

> "*Signifiance* is the name she gives this drive-directed form of language, as opposed to signification. It speaks to another aspect of

the signifier, which is an embodied materiality, before, and after, it is a signifying one."

"After *Revolution in Poetic Language* we have a new language, *signifiance* not signification, a new rationality, heterogeneity not logical contradiction, and a new object, not separate from the subject but rejected and facilitated by the not-yet-subject."

"In Kristeva, the mother is akin to mathematical being. Like being, she has no capacity for relation, because she is the ground of all relation."

"[The mother is] the very definition of what sets do."

Regarding the semiotic, Watkin points out that as a plural totality it fits the definition of extensional, indifferent sets; however, its members are kept consistent by the force of drives, not mathematical axioms. Regrettably, in his view, Kristeva's intercourse with Hegel, along with other distractions like psychoanalysis,[5] the linguistic sign, and embodied materiality, results in a "fort-da game with indifference." Consequently, although it involves certain aspects of extensionalist indifference, Kristeva's philosophy cannot fit into the philosophy of indifference, which Watkin sees represented by the work of Agamben and Badiou.

Watkin's philosophy of indifference would remove from Kristeva's thought precisely that which she meticulously pursued in the aftermath of "Engendering the Formula": *signifiance* as a "drive-directed form of language." Nevertheless, his turn to extensionalism and set theory offers a provocative insight into the deeper layers that subtend Kristeva's writing, opening new possibilities for Kristeva research.

In its totality, but also in its various details, Watkin's essay not surprisingly clashes with other theoretical perspectives proposed in this collection. His unforgettable final vision of overcoming abjection through set theory presents a direct challenge to – or, should I say, is directly challenged by – Cecilia Sjöholm's summoning of the abject as a resource for the "critique of the fetishization of motherhood intertwined with consumer society." His treatment of Kristeva's

---

5   Watkin's own detour from his early work, exemplified by an essay on Kristeva, to his elaboration of the philosophy of indifference is worth investigating. See Watkin 2003, 86–107.

philosophy as epistemology – in this case, a more common supposition – is contested by the discussion of Kristeva's thought as ontology in the essays by Emilia Angelova and Darin Tenev. His disdain of the sign in favor of sets and the ensuing digital salvation of human beings as DNA-bearers stands in stark opposition to Tyler James Bennett's biosemiotic manifesto, which I will discuss next.

The Stakes of (Bio)semiotics

If William Watkin's ambition is to remap Kristeva in the perspective of his philosophy of indifference – a remapping which contributes to integrating the logical and chronological beginnings of Kristeva's work into the interpretation of her later writing – Tyler Bennett's ambition is to invigorate present-day, predominantly Peircean, semiotics by reintroducing Kristeva. This has a history – the history of Kristeva's participation as Secretary of the International Association for Semiotic Studies in the late1960s, when Emile Benveniste was its President, and her parting ways with the Association later on. Invoking this history and Benveniste's role in the early formation of Kristeva's conceptual apparatus, Bennett takes precisely the opposite direction to the one taken by Watkin. Bennett proposes a turn to Kristeva's understanding of the sign that includes "drives, impulses, and sensorimotor affective traces." The goal is a semiotics that functions as a "critique of ideology, simulacra, and the homogenizing and decontextualizing effects of information and communication technologies."

Bennett's analysis focuses on the quasi-sign doctrine thatexplores the "dramatic intrusion of communication technology into every dimension of public and private life." The task is to differentiate between the semiotic capacities of living beings and the automated production of signs, but also to assess the "varying degrees of the automatization of the biological agent's interpretive activity." Bennett's own proposal in the face of these challenges is the concept of *tardo-sign*, which tries to capture the dual motion of the generation and degeneration of signs encompassed by the simulacra of the new technologies. Whatever the overlap of this model with Kristeva's theory of *signifiance* – also a two-way process of shattering and transubstantiation – the obvious distinction is Bennett's effort to capture the disappearance of living semiotic activity in its automatic reproduction, whether by machines or

humans. While I do not see the proper integration of Kristeva's a "drive-directed form of language" into Bennett's model, the questions that this encounter raises are abundantly clear, and relate to what Bennett sees as the need to "define the objects and tools of the humanities that are not quantifiable or describable in the language of natural science."

Narrativization (which, notably, is the solution offered to the aporias of commodification in Sjöholm's essay), auto-critique (which Kristeva also terms *semanalysis* in her early work) and polylogue are the Kristevan tools Bennett proposes. He sketches various directions which the work to incorporate Kristeva's approach to the sign into semiotics might take. One possible direction – a direction which, indeed, has not been sufficiently pursued – is to explore Kristeva's theory of *significance* in juxtaposition with Peircean biosemiotics. (Bennett does not use Kristeva's term *significance*, sticking to the opposition signification-communication, yet this is obviously what he means). Another is to reread her in conjunction with the forgotten lessons of semioticians – and Kristeva's sometime fellow-travelers – like Umberto Eco. In fact, Bennet resorts to Eco in order to describe Kristeva's "interest in '[w]hat is behind, before or after, outside or too much inside' the *communicated sign*." Bennett also points out the insufficiently studied connection between Kristeva and Juri Lotman. (In the present collection, this connection is explored by Anand Raja and by Kamelia Spassova [see also Spassova 2018, 13–28].) Parallels between Kristeva's ideas and the work of the contemporary semiotician Eero Tarasti open another possibility. Last but not least, Bennett believes that dialogue should be restored between semiotics and Kristeva's wider philosophical context in the last decades of the twentieth century – thinkers like Foucault, Derrida, and Deleuze, who early on envisioned what has since been elaborated in semiotics as the "quasi-sign doctrine."

In a surprise move at the end of his paper Bennett, while recognizing Peirce's relevance for general semiotics, states that in view of the problems his essay oulines,

> the works of Hegel and Kant certainly give more food for thought [...] than do those of Charles Sanders Peirce. The most distinctive commonality between Tarasti and Kristeva is that in semiotics today, where the vast majority place Peirce, they place Hegel.

Hegel thus appears as the troublemaker at the juncture where Kristeva parts ways with the philosophy of indifference (William

Watkin) and current semiotics (Tyler Bennett). Hegel's imprint on Kristeva's work will be my next stop.

Negativity: Love Matters

Two of the papers presented at the conference – Darin Tenev's "Figures of Negativity in Julia Kristeva from 'Poetry and Negativity' to *Black Sun*" and Emilia Angelova's "Kristeva's Ontological Approach to Limit and Secondary Identification with the Mother" – discuss the ontological aspects of Kristeva's thought by contextualizing it in twentieth-century debates around negativity, and tracing these debates back to Hegel. Although the importance of negativity for Kristeva is frequently acknowledged – it is, indeed, hard to miss[6] – Tenev's and Angelova's analyses are certainly among the most systematic, thorough, and far-reaching in their conclusions. They both go against the grain of habitual scholarship, which regards Kristeva's approach as epistemological rather than ontological. Kristeva's turn to psychoanalysis is seen as comprising "not a psychologization of negativity, but an ontologization of the subject. The subject is traversed by heterogeneous matter, the matter of its own body, the matter of natural and social struggles." Emphasizing another line of contention that the conference papers made visible, Angelova and Tenev would hardly agree with Watkin's definition of Kristeva's philosophy as "somatized dialectical materialism." According to Tenev,

> [Kristeva's] interpretation of negativity may at first glance seem like an attempt to ground negativity objectively in biology or society, either suggesting a classical Marxist account or the biologization and naturalization of the symbolic. However, it is in fact a radical rethinking of negativity that instills a groundlessness in both society and biology.

Angelova and Tenev insist on the multiple forms (and designations) that negativity takes in Kristeva's work both in terms of the evolution of her treatment of this problem and structurally. As Tenev points out, "there is *a constant renegotiation between the different forms of negativity*." Tenev provides possibly the most meticulous investigation

Miglena Nikolchina

---

6   See, for example, the recurrence of the term in Beardsworth 2020.

of the vicissitudes of the concept, in all its layered complexity, from early texts like the essay "Poetry and Negativity" via *Revolution in Poetic Language* – where the discussion of negativity becomes a "stepping stone for [Kristeva's] whole theory" – to *Powers of Horror* and *Black Sun*. He extracts from this analysis a Kristevan definition of matter, which, I believe, has never been attempted before.

There is a remarkable continuity between the two essays. Angelova's starting point in the "inborn *not*" seems to set off from Tenev's conclusion that, with Kristeva, "negativity is what links Being and the psyche, it is the ontological side of the subject." Angelova takes us on a long detour, which revisits the rich philosophical biography of Antigone and, for the most part, seems to reinforce Tenev's account of negativity in Kristeva. Yet there might also be points of disagreement between Tenev and Angelova. I wonder whether Tenev's vision of the infinite redoubling of negativity is compatible with the sort of closure (*Aufhebung*?) to which Angelova ultimately takes us and which she describes as "being at peace with the world. Maternal love, the dialectic of hate and forgiveness, as per Kristeva's secondary identification with the mother, is modeled on this."

This appeasement, all too Hegelian, perhaps, seems at odds with the restlessness of Kristeva's own accounts of the maternal from abjection to reliance; with melancholy historical exemplifications like the one offered in this collection by Restuccia; with contemporary miseries like the ones here addressed by Sjöholm; and, perhaps, with Angelova's own premises. Curiously enough, Angelova's Hegelian sublimation resonates most of all with Watkin's strictly anti-Hegelian analytico-mathematical solution. Nevertheless, her proposal for the ontologization of maternal love seems to me destined to persist as a contestable but still necessary step, not only in our understanding of Kristeva, but also in our struggle with the woes of our time.

Intertextuality and Intersemiosis: A Quick Idea

And so, via continental philosophy and a specific blend of continental and analytical philosophy (the "philosophy of indifference"), new tools have been proposed for understanding Kristeva's work: set theory and the ontologization of negativity. Her own theory, on the other hand, has been proposed as a toolbox for rethinking semiotics. Before moving to

Kristeva's own address to the conference and to the end of this already too long introduction, I would like to foreground once again the underlying anxieties regarding the future of the humanities and, in fact, of humans, in the "one-dimensional universe," which Tanya Loughead and Jasmina Tacheva's essay explores using direct references from Kristeva as a prism. In his juxtaposition of intertextuality and intersemiosis in the framework of translation studies, Evangelos Kourdis introduces the complicated technological landscape of the modern epoch. However, he does not include issues raised by the newest developments in AI, by large language and image generating models, which, it is true, only exploded some time after the conference. The distinctions Kourdis makes between Jakobson's intersemiosis and Kristeva's intertextuality – a valuable input in itself – include knowing or not knowing the source of texts or images. Determining the source has certainly acquired even more urgent ignificance in the couple of years since the conference. Yet simply caring about the source is hardly enough when faced with the pressure which comes not from the enhancement of machines but from the reduction of humans. The ate of translation and translators is a clear indication of what is to come. If we re-conceptualize Jakobson's intersemiosis through Kristeva's semiotic or, still better, through *signifiance* as a "drive-directed form of language," and juxtapose it to the automated production of "tardo-signs," we might be able to propose ways to re-invent multidimensionality and, perhaps, life.

And Finally, Kristeva

Kristeva's address to the conference was on Dostoyevsky. It is included here in French as it was delivered – and translated for the occasion – then. At the time of the conference, her two books on the great Russian writer had just been published, the second one not yet translated into English (Kristeva 2020; Kristeva 2021; Kristeva 2021a; Kristeva 2024). In a manner pertinent then, as now, she said, "Prophetic, the 'disciple of the convicts' foresaw the prison matrix of the totalitarian universe revealed in the Holocaust and the Gulag, and which today threatens us through the omnipresence of technology."

So can we love Dostoyevsky, can he be our contemporary? "No more, no less than a fugue for a string quartet and a choral symphony

by Beethoven. Or the density of Shakespeare. Or Dante's comedy. Insolent challenges in the timelessness of time."

Kristeva is our contemporary but also – to go back to the beginning of this introduction – *hors du rang*, a challenge in the timelessness of time. Do we love her? Try to find out by reading these passionate tributes to the unwavering courage of her thought.

References

Beardsworth, Sara, ed. 2020. The Philosophy of Julia Kristeva. Chicago: Open Court.

Kristeva, Julia. 1974. La Révolution du langage poétique : L'avant-garde à la fin du XIXE siècle, Lautréamont et Mallarmé. Paris: Seuil.

———. 1977. Polylogue. Paris: Seuil.

———. 1980. Pouvoirs de l'horreur. Essai Sur l'abjection. Paris: Seuil.

———. 1982. Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.

———. 1983. Histoires d'amour. Paris: Denoël.

———. 1984. Revolution in Poetic Language. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.

———. 1987. Soleil Noir. Dépression et Mélancolie. Paris: Gallimard.

———. 1987a. Tales of Love. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.

———. 1989. Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.

———. 1999. Le Génie Féminin: La Vie, La Folie, Les Mots: Hannah Arendt Ou l'action Comme Naissance et Comme Étrangeté. Vol. 1. Paris: Fayard.

———. 2018. Passions of Our Time, edited by Lawrence D. Kritzman. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. New York: Columbia University Press.

———. 2020. Dostoïevski. Paris: Buchet-Castel.

———. 2021. Dostoïevski face à la mort, ou le sexe hanté du langage. Paris: Fayard, 2021.

———. 2021a. Dostoyevsky, or the Flood of Language. Translated by Jody Gladding. New York: Columbia University Press.

———. 2024. Dostoyevsky in the Face of Death: Or Language Haunted by Sex. Translated by Armine Kotin Mortimer. New York: Columbia University Press.

Lechte, John. 2023. "Julia Kristeva: Chora, Infinity, Modernism." In Understanding Kristeva, Understanding Modernism, edited by Maria Margaroni, 17–56. New York: Bloomsbury.

Mann, Thomas. 1996. The Magic Mountain. Translated by John E. Woods. New York: Knopf Doubleday.

Nikolchina, Miglena. 2013. Lost Unicorns of the Velvet Revolutions: Heterotopias of the Seminar. New York: Fordham University Press.

Sjöholm, Cecilia. 2005. Kristeva and the Political. London: Routledge.

Spassova, Kamelia. 2018. "Dual Codes: Text within a Text in Lotman and Kristeva." Prace Filologiczne. Literaturoznawstwo 8, no. 11: 13–28. https://doi.org/10.32798/pflit.64.

Watkin, William. 2003. "Melancholia, Revolution and Materiality in the Work of Julia Kristeva." Paragraph 26, no. 3 (November): 86–107.

———. 2014. Agamben and Indifference: A Critical Overview. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014.

———. 2017. Badiou and Indifferent Being: A Critical Introduction to Being and Event. London: Bloomsbury.

———. 2021. Badiou and Communicable Worlds: A Critical Introduction to Logics of Worlds. New York: Bloomsbury.

Julia Kristeva

Is It Possible to Love Dostoyevsky Today?

I. "WE ARE ALL NIHILISTS"

In the digital acceleration that is disintegrating civilizations, reading – a singular experience – calls them to rebound by retaining their memory. The "Russian ogre" is part of this call. Explorer in the undergrounds of the European soul, the carnival of his thought consumes their demons.

"Everywhere and in everything I have lived to the last limit, and I spent my life going over it," wrote Dostoyevsky to the poet Apollon Maykov (1867).

His writing, an exuberant approbation of life even in death, tugs at Internet users swallowed up by the Web, and invites them to an inner experience that I perceive as a kind of intimate immunity. Without replacing vaccines or resolving military conflicts, reading Dostoyevsky builds psychic and cultural buttresses indispensable to the human species' fight for life.

"*Loving Dostoyevsky*"? Dostoyevsky "*author of my life*"? (Buchet-Chastel, 2019, a series which includes readings of Descartes by Valéry, of Schopenhauer by Thomas Mann, of Marx by Trotsky: exorbitant stakes.) Two expressions too narrow to convey the engulfment and the regeneration provoked in me, in you, by the vocal tessitura of the swirling sense and the violence of the incarnate Word that I am, that you are, injuring us, bothering us and transcending us. Many times, I wanted to shield myself from him, to give up. Until my reading of André Markowicz's translation restored his genius for me in the French language.

The oratorio that I proposed in my *Dostoyevsky in the Face of Death, or Language Haunted by Sex* is inhabited by a total and new Dostoyevsky, galvanized by language. The man and his work enter the third millennium, where finally "everything is permitted." And Internet users' anxieties join his experience of subjectivity and freedom, which echoes hypermodern contingencies, without fear of going over boundaries, or living to the last limit.

27

I accompany the writer to the scaffold: that writer who was sentenced to death for his "revolutionary ideas." I follow him to the Siberian prison where he begins his metamorphosis. The "child of unbelief and doubt," which he will remain until the end of his life, discovers and rebuilds a "national Christ" who will never leave the "new narrator" who emerges in *The House of the Dead* (1860–62) and *Notes from Underground* (1864–65). Prophetic, the "disciple of the convicts" foresaw the prison matrix of the totalitarian universe revealed in the Holocaust and the Gulag, and which today threatens us through the omnipresence of technology.

To confront nihilism and its double, fundamentalism, which blight the world without God and with God, Dostoyevsky reinvents the wager on the power of the word and of narrative through the *polyphonic novel* (Bakhtin). He does so, propelled by his Orthodox faith in the incarnate Word. His novels are Christian, his faith is novelistic. Dostoyevsky frees the senses from the objectification and intellection in which Western Christianity excels, and the intensity of his Orthodox Christianity leads the novelist to the heart of destructive pathos and nihilism to which the fractured democracies of the West struggle to respond.

As I examine the "cursed Russian" (Freud's letter to Zweig, October 19, 1920), I unlock the *intimate backstage* of this hand-to-hand struggle that is my reading. I unearth the "Russian virus" (this expression belongs to the poet Joseph Brodsky) marking what was our second language in my youth; the astonishment of the schoolgirl standing in front of the funeral bust of the "Father of the People" (Stalin); my father, a faithful Orthodox, advising me against reading Dostoyevsky, considered an "enemy of the people" by the Stalinist regime; Mikhail Bakhtin's discovery of carnivalesque polyphony on the basis of the novelist, which the young student introduces into French structuralism; the Soviet dissidents in whom "there is something of Dostoyevsky" ...

With his nervous, generous, awkward laughter, Tzvetan Stoyanov, the great Bulgarian literary critic, punctuated, accentuated and set free the farce of nothingness and being, and drove away the confused melancholy of my first readings. Bakhtin had convinced us that Dostoyevsky carved out an unheard-of path: neither tragedy nor comedy. The author of *Demons* (1872) revealed to us the seriousness of carnival: a vitality that we needed, twenty-five years before the fall of the Berlin Wall, in order to shatter the insanity underlying the ambient pretensions of "making sense." More seriously still, and

beyond the political context, Tzvetan's laughter helped me accept the carnivalesque dimension of inner experience itself, which Dostoyevsky posits as a counterweight to beliefs and ideologies.

In the meantime, Tzvetan Stoyanov devoted himself to the ultimate "dialogue" that Dostoyevsky brought into play in his relations with Konstantin Pobedonostsev, professor of law and Chief Procurator of the Holy Synod: complicity and manipulation, again and again! The first volume of Tzvetan Stoyanov's research on this subject, which is central to any totalitarian regime (*The Genius and his Master*, French edition, 2000), is as passionate as it is meticulous. Traversed by sparse and distant allusions to the risky links intellectuals forged with the Bulgarian authorities at that time, it was to be followed by another volume, devoted to the novelistic cunning of Dostoyevsky's genius, which, under the auspices of the Holy Synod, never ceased to refine its art of parricide ...

Embarrassed by Russia, struggling with multilingualism, Europe cannot cope with its Orthodox part. It has not yet taken the measure of those penetrating voices that have made it happen, that will make it last. The voice of Tzvetan Stoyanov is one of these.

I flew to Paris with five dollars in my pocket (the only ones my father had found, and which were to support me pending my scholarship for doctoral studies on the French New Novel) and with Bakhtin's book on Dostoyevsky in my suitcase.

* * *

Paris talked about language, discussed phonemes, myths and kinship ... elementary structures and generative syntax, semantics, semiotics, the avant-garde and formalism ... Exile is a test and a chance, so I dared to ask: "Gentlemen structuralists, do you like poststructuralism?" I heard Émile Benveniste insist on the enunciation which carries the utterance, and Jacques Lacan play with the signifier in the unconscious. Bakhtin's post-formalism inspired me to another vision of language: intrinsically dialogical, and of writing: necessarily intertextual. Roland Barthes' seminar, the journal *Critique*, but especially Philippe Sollers' journal and series *Tel Quel*, then the École des Hautes Études, the Université Paris VII, New York, and many others, gave me the chance to develop this vision.

I only moved away from Dostoyevsky's themes in order to engage with his polyphonic logics and with my own intimate understanding through the writings of Mallarmé, Céline, Proust, Artaud or Colette. Beyond the surprises and the force of styles and forms, this approach immediately disclosed the revolutions in language which, in depth and often against the current of social upheavals, revealed and performed pivotal tremors in civilizations ... Psychoanalysis was to open up new and more stimulating horizons for me.

Where Freud divides Dostoyevsky into four (the writer, the neurotic, the moralist, the sinner), I dig deeper into *redoubling, homoeroticism* (the obsessive "doubles" and "trios" of the novels' plots) and the *limit states* in which madness and suicide, sanctity and crime, flow. Beyond the cult of *suffering*, I discern the *jouissance* of writing, in contact with an essential dimension of the human condition: the advent and eclipse of meaning through and in *splitting*.

The paroxysmic investment in narrative arises from Dostoyevsky's exceptional singularity, able to translate his epileptic *auras* into a flood of language. Tirelessly asserting his Christian faith and Russian populist messianism, tempted by anti-Semitism, the novelist remains a fervent follower of Europe, which yet he never ceases to vilify. He was a critic of Catholicism, but also of atheism, its supposed offspring. A connoisseur of "idiotic" saintliness (Myshkin) and "stinking" saintliness (Zosima), he opposes the Grand Inquisitor, who castigates Christianity, but spares Christ the stake (*The Brothers Karamazov*). The nihilist Shigalyov suppresses freedoms in the name of egalitarianism, while Kirilov will have to commit suicide to open the way to absolute freedom (without God) (*Demons*).

II. WHAT NIHILISM?

In the novelist's *Notebooks* (1881) I spotted these words written towards the end of his life:

Nihilism appeared in our country because we are *all nihilists*. What frightened us was only the new, original form....

It was comical to see the commotion and the trouble our wise men took to discover: where did these nihilists come from? But you see,

they did not come from anywhere; they were all among us, within us, and part of us.

Let us dwell on these sentences. Who is this "we"?

"We," the Russians, torn between Europe and Asia, which attract and repel each other, each (Europe and Asia) fascinated and baffled by the habits and customs of the other. "We," the Orthodox, devoted to the *pafos stihii* ("pathos of the elements," Solzhenitsyn will say), the cruel underground of passions and the plaintive adoration of icons, "veritable village nihilists" ("Vlas," *Diary of a @riter*, 1873), inexorably sublime and preferable to the razor-edged doctrinaires who subscribe to the scholastic pleasures of understanding.

"We": Fyodor Mikhailovich, disgusted with the positivist socialists "convinced that on the tabula rasa they will immediately build paradises". "We": the former Fourierist who lived through a death sentence and the scaffold, was not without empathy for the nihilists: did he not consider himself a former Nechaevian? (*Diary of a Writer*, 1873)

"We": "passive" nihilists, whose refusal to believe or lack of aptitude for the sacred kneads them into *indifference*, in a utilitarian world based on biological materialism and rational egoism? Or "active" nihilists, like the vulgar assassin who dreams of being Napoleon, but is only a Raskolnikov (from *raskol*, "division," "split," designating the schism between the Old Believers and the official Orthodox Church, but also the Great Schism between Catholicism and Orthodoxy)? Or is "we" one of "our own," the "secret society of killers, of arsonist-revolutionaries, of rebels," under the spell of Pyotr Verkhovensky, the exalted double of the icy Shigalyov, anarchists, incendiaries, reminiscent of the Paris Commune burning the Tuileries?

The collapse of democracies into totalitarianism, brown or red plagues, but also sovereigntist excesses, neoliberals with their finances, commodification of bodies, globalized automation of minds or what remains of them, find their ancestry in Shigalyov's tragicomic, pre-Leninist program. Stepan Trofimovitch Verkhovensky amuses himself by mocking utilitarian happiness, adding to "Shigalyovism" the "depth" of the consumer society to come: "Shakespeare or boots, Raphael or petroleum?" (*Demons*) These words resound in the present.

Raskolnikov, Stavrogin, Kirillov, Verkhovensky, Ivan Karamazov ... Dostoyevsky's great protagonists are nihilists, atheists, deniers of God, yet leaning against him. "*You venerate the Holy Spirit without*

knowing him," Tikhon diagnoses to Stavrogin when listening to his confession (*Demons*). Kirillov commits suicide "*to be free*" and "*alone,*" but shouting: "*Liberté, égalité, fraternité ou a mort!*" For Pyotr Verkhovensky, it is obvious that this "*citoyen du monde*" "*believes in God worse than any priest.*"

Orthodox Russia may not have turned out to be the cradle of nihilism if Dostoyevsky's "we are all nihilists" didn't concern us – more gravely, more universally "all of us": speaking humanity that "participates" in nothingness and nihilism. Since when? Since unfettered liberalism, colonialism, the rise of technology? Since the "history of metaphysics," which "protects nihilism in its heart" (Heidegger)? Since we starting speaking so that Freud could hear? Today, Dostoyevsky's writing challenges in depth the social and political history of Europe and the world.

Dostoyevsky's novels are novels of thought that raise the Word to the most vehement multiplicity. The *polyphony of the text* is the only possible way (the writer says in effect) to non-forgetfully penetrate the underground of nihilism. Thus to transmit only the enigmatic *jouissance* (*naslajdénié*) that Dostoyevsky loves, and which leaves nihilism behind.

III. THE GAMBLER

The narrator is the gambler himself. Alexei Ivanovich, the young tutor to a general's children, falls in love with the beautiful daughter of this old man, Polina Alexandrovna, who is going to play him.

In the novel, Alexei becomes addicted to gambling, because he is caught in the game and knows, he says, a "pleasure" like no other, unless it is "when the knout comes down on your back and tears your flesh to pieces."

This stinging image betrays the convict: it is not Alexis, the tutor of the naive general's children, but Dostoyevsky the convict who feels "this whim of chance" and who shudders when he hears the voice of the head croupier declare: "*Les trois derniers coups, messieurs!*"

One can detect an intoxicating sadomasochism in the casino players' ritual, which did not escape Turgenev, who in a letter to Tolstoy wrote that Dostoyevsky is "our Sade."

In *Notes from a Dead House of the Dead* (1862), Dostoyevsky describes the convicts' craving for alcohol and ripped by the whip, who manage to get money to gamble and lose it while laughing, and the novelist tells us that "*they remembered this whipping with laughter and delight*." "What is higher than money for a prisoner? Freedom, or at least the dream of freedom." Squandering his money, the convict acts as a free man. The psychopathological problem of gambling becomes a metaphysical one.

In this way, Dostoyevsky, a Sadeian, becomes a Pascalian. To bet is to make a wager (to win, to be free, to get out). To bet is a way of believing. Can one dare not to believe? It's not certain. You are free to betv... on the void. That's what Alexei will do. After losing all but his last coin – he didn't dare not to believe. He bet on the zero: the void, the lack, the nothing. And he won. How not to bet on the lack, when one has only that to hazard? And it is already enormous, it makes you live. In essence the gambler says: Readers, dare to bet, dare to believe!

Modern humanity is being born around Dostoyevsky and through his writing: a humanity of the prison, of the concentration camp: all of us, convicts, imprisoned/held by socioeconomic and administrative constraints, confined (as we would say today) by freedom-killing procedures. But convicts doubled as gamblers, their pathetic version, who need to believe, even in the void!

Money – debauchery and freedom – is one of Dostoyevsky's obsessional themes, along with the "trio" of lovers and the "rape of the little girl." "Money is everything," diagnoses the novelist, a sharp observer of the situation in Russia, a country where rampant capitalism is sweeping away the old Russia at the end of the nineteenth century.

But since nothing is simple in Dostoyevsky's work – "everything is money" and "everything is permitted," as the nihilists say – this vision leads the writer to the fantasy of the Jew who, in possessing money, possesses all powers, vices and manipulations. A hatred of Jews is ubiquitous in Dostoyevsky's work: on the one hand, his unabashedly populist political anti-Semitism ("The Jewish Question," in *A Writer's Diary* [1877]); on the other hand, a continuous veneration of the biblical message. The Jew, brotherly neighbor and threatening rival, yet never less than a supreme authority, as attested by the "cold water" in the synagogue that will put an end to the *jouissance* under the lash at the casino.

In 1871, in Wiesbaden, the novelist, ashamed and tormented at having lost everything, willing to confess for the *n*th time in an

Orthodox church, finds himself unwillingly "pushed by fate," he says, in ... a synagogue.

"It was as though I'd had cold water poured on me ... A great thing has been accomplished over me, a vile fantasy that *tormented* me almost 10 years has vanished ... Now that's all finished with! ... I had been bound by gambling. I'll think about serious things now ... And therefore *the serious business* will move better and more quickly, and God will bless it."

Would he have heard the call of Job that he had known by heart since his childhood? The Job that young Elihu reconciles with Yahweh: neither guilty nor innocent, repudiating transgressions and mortifications?

Yahweh gave him a sign. Dostoyevsky is never reconciled, but during the "cold shower," the Unnamable recognized him, perhaps *elected* him, almost. Dostoyevsky would no longer go to the casino. The work alone would take over the roulette wheel. Writers know that writing is a game of chance, of life and death. Sollers makes this clear by titling one of his novels *Portrait of a Gambler* (1984).

The novel *The Gambler* was dictated to the young stenographer Anna Grigoryevna Snitkina, twenty-five years his junior, who would become his wife. The great novels followed: *Demons* (1872), *The Adolescent* (1875), *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880).

* * *

I hear your question: What does the globalized Internet user have in common with the nihilist Raskolnikov and the half-mad Stavrogin; with the masochistic gambler; with the holy Prince Myshkin flanked by his double, the angry Rogozhin; with the four Karamazov brothers? There remains the most radically evil crime imaginable crime, the sexual abuse and murder of a child: Svidrigailov's dream, Stavrogin's confession, it haunts Dostoyevsky himself ... Between cruelty and grace, there is no other forgiveness for crime than to write it endlessly.

So reopen his books, and listen carefully. When finally "everything is permitted," or almost, and you no longer experience anguish but only liquid anxieties, no longer desires but only buying frenzies, no longer pleasures but only needed release through lots of apps, no longer friends but followers and likes, you are incapable of expressing

yourself in the near-Proustian sentences of Dostoyevsky's demons, but empty yourself in an addiction to clicks and selfies? Well, you resonate with the extenuating polyphonies of Saint Dosto, who prophesied the streaming of SMS, tweets and Instagram, pornography and "tribute marches," "#metoo" and nihilistic wars under cover of "holy wars."

Could Dostoyevsky be our contemporary? No more, no less than a fugue for a string quartet and a choral symphony by Beethoven. Or the density of Shakespeare. Or Dante's comedy. Insolent challenges in the timelessness of time.

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

Thus incorporated into the passions, the history of religions and the deflagration of ideologies, Dostoyevsky's discordances are no rhetorical device, and even less a polemicist's provocation, but his historical truth. This undecidable tension – inerrant, indispensable to writing – constitutes us; it may, perhaps, survive us.

Julia Kristeva

Sofia, le 22 mai 2022

Peut-on aimer Dostoïevski aujourd'hui ?

I « Nous sommes tous des nihilistes »

Dans l'accélération numérique qui délite les civilisations, la lecture – expérience singulière – les appelle à rebondir en s'appropriant leur mémoire. L'« ogre russe » en fait partie. Explorateur dans les sous-sols de l'*âme européenne,* son carnaval pensif en consume les démons.

« Partout et en toutes choses, je vivais jusqu'à la dernière limite, et j'ai passé ma vie à la franchir », écrit Dostoïevski au poète A. Maïkov (1867).

Son écriture, exubérante appropriation de la vie jusque dans la mort, arrache l'internaute englouti sans limites par la Toile, et le convie à une expérience intérieure que je reçois comme une espèce d'immunité intime. Sans remplacer les vaccins ni éteindre les conflits guerriers, la lecture de Dostoïevski édifie des contreforts psychiques et culturels indispensables au combat de l'espèce humaine pour la vie.

« Aimer Dostoïevski » ? Dostoïevski « *auteur de ma vie* » (Buchet-Chastel, 2019, qui comprends des lectures de Descartes par Valérie, de Schopenhauer par Thomas Mann, de Marx par Trotski : enjeux exorbitants) ? Deux expressions trop étroites pour exprimer l'engloutissement et la régénérescence que provoque en moi, en vous, la tessiture vocale de ce sens tourbillonnant, la violence du Verbe incarné que je suis, que vous êtes, qui vous blesse, vous ennuie et vous transcende. Maintes fois, j'ai voulu m'en protéger, renoncer. Jusqu'à ce que la lecture de la traduction d'André Markowicz restitue à la langue française son génie.

L'oratorio que je vous propose, dans mon *Dostoïevski face à la mort ou le sexe hanté du langage* (Fayard, octobre 2021), est habité par un Dostoïevski total et neuf, galvanisé par le langage. L'homme et l'œuvre s'introduisent dans le troisième millénaire, où enfin « *tout est permis* ». Et les anxiétés des internautes rejoignent son expérience de la subjectivité et de la liberté, qui fait écho aux contingences hypermodernes, sans craindre de dépasser les bornes ni de vivre jusqu'à la dernière limite.

J'accompagne l'écrivain sur l'échafaud, lui qui fut condamné à mort pour ses « *idées révolutionnaires* ». Je le suis dans le bagne de Sibérie où il entame ses métamorphoses. « *L'enfant de l'incroyance et du doute* », qu'il restera jusqu'à la fin de sa vie, découvre et reconstruit un « *Christ national* », qui ne quittera pas le « *nouveau narrateur* » en train de surgir dans les *Carnets de la Maison morte* (1860-62) et du *Sous-sol* (1864-65). Prophétique, le « *disciple des forçats* » pressentait déjà la matrice carcérale de l'univers totalitaire qui se révéla dans la Shoah et le Goulag, et qui menace aujourd'hui par l'omniprésence de la Technique.

Pour braver le nihilisme et son double, l'intégrisme, qui gangrènent le monde sans Dieu et avec lui, Dostoïevski réinvente ce pari sur la puissance de la parole et du récit qu'est le *roman polyphonique* (Bakhtine). Il l'a fait, porté par sa foi orthodoxe dans le Verbe incarné. Ses romans sont christiques, sa foi est romanesque. Dostoïevski a libéré le sensible de l'objectivation et de l'intellection dans lesquelles excelle le christianisme occidental, et l'intensité de son christianisme orthodoxe conduit le romancier au cœur du pathos destructeur comme du nihilisme auxquels les démocraties fracturées de l'Occident peinent à répondre.

Au fur et à mesure que j'ausculte le « maudit Russe » (Lettre de Freud à Zweig, 19 octobre 1920), j'entrouvre les *coulisses intimes* de ce corps-à-corps qu'est ma lecture. Je retrouve le « virus russe » (l'expression est du poète Joseph Brodsky) désignant notre deuxième langue à l'époque ; la sidération de la collégienne plantée devant le buste funèbre du « Petit Père des peuples » ; mon père, fidèle orthodoxe, me déconseillant de lire Dostoïevski, « ennemi du peuple » pour le régime stalinien ; la découverte par Mikhaïl Bakhtine de la polyphonie carnavalesque selon le romancier, que la jeune étudiante introduit dans le structuralisme français ; les dissidents soviétiques qui « ont quelque chose de Dostoïevski »...

Avec son rire nerveux, généreux, gênant, Tzvetan Stoyanov, le grand critique littéraire, ponctuait, accentuait et libérait la farce du néant et de l'être, et chassait la confuse mélancolie de mes premières lectures. Bakhtine nous avait convaincus que Dostoïevski s'était frayé une voie inouïe : ni tragédie, ni comédie. L'auteur des *Démons* (1872) nous révélait la gravité du carnaval, une vitalité dont nous avions besoin, vingt-cinq ans avant la chute du mur de Berlin, pour faire éclater l'insensé sous-jacent aux prétentions ambiantes de «faire

sens ». Plus sérieusement encore, et par-delà le contexte politique, le rire de Tzvetan m'a aidée à accepter la dimension carnavalesque de l'expérience intérieure elle-même, que Dostoïevski pose en contrepoids aux croyances et aux idéologies.

Entre-temps, Tzvetan Stoyanov s'est dévoué à l'ultime « dialogue » que Dostoïevski a mis en jeu dans ses relations avec Constantin Pobiedonostsev : complicités et manipulations, encore et toujours ! Sur ce sujet, central dans tout régime totalitaire, le premier volume de la recherche de Tzvetan Stoyanov (Le Génie et son maître, 2000), aussi passionnée que méticuleuse, clairsemée de lointaines allusions aux liens risqués des intellectuels avec le pouvoir en Bulgarie de cette période, devait être suivi d'un autre, consacré à la ruse romanesque du génie qui, sous les auspices du Saint-Synode, ne cesse d'affiner son art du parricide...

Embarrassée par la Russie, à la peine avec le multilinguisme, l'Europe a mal à sa partie orthodoxe. Elle n'a pas encore pris la mesure de ces voix pénétrantes qui l'ont fait advenir, qui la feront durer. La voix de Tzvetan Stoyanov est de celles-là.

J'ai pris l'avion pour Paris, avec cinq dollars en poche (les seuls que mon père avait trouvés, en attendant la bourse pour études doctorales sur le Nouveau Roman français) et le livre de Bakhtine sur Dostoïevski dans ma valise.

* * *

Paris parlait du langage, discutait des phonèmes, des mythes et de la parenté... structures élémentaires et syntaxe générative, sémantique, sémiotique, avant-garde ou formalisme... L'exil est une épreuve et une chance, j'ai osé : « Messieurs les structuralistes, aimez-vous le poststructuralisme ? » J'ai entendu Émile Benveniste insister sur l'énonciation qui porte l'énoncé, et Jacques Lacan jouer avec le signifiant dans l'inconscient. Le post-formalisme de Bakhtine m'a inspiré une autre vision du langage : intrinsèquement dialogique, et de l'écriture : nécessairement intertextuelle. Le séminaire de Roland Barthes, la revue Critique, mais surtout la revue et la collection Tel Quel de Philippe Sollers, puis l'École des hautes études, l'université Paris-VII, New York, et bien d'autres, m'ont donné la chance de les élaborer.

Je ne me suis éloignée des thèmes de Dostoïevski que pour m'engager, avec ses logiques polyphoniques et ma propre intimité, dans les écrits de Mallarmé, Céline, Proust, Artaud ou Colette. À travers les surprises et les prouesses des styles et des formes, cette approche s'adresse d'emblée à des révolutions du langage qui, en profondeur et souvent à contre- courant des remous sociaux, révèlent et opèrent des frémissements charnières dans les civilisations... La psychanalyse devrait m'ouvrir de nouveaux horizons autrement plus stimulants.

Tandis que Freud découpe Dostoïevski en quatre (l'écrivain, le névrosé, le moraliste, le pécheur), j'approfondis le *dédoublement, l'homo-érotisme* (les « doubles » et les « trios » obsédants des intrigues romanesques) et les *états limites* dans lesquels affluent folie et suicide, sainteté et crime. À travers le culte de la *souffrance*, je repère la *jouissance* de l'écriture, en contact avec une dimension essentielle de la condition humaine : l'avènement et l'éclipse du sens par et dans le *clivage.*

L'investissement paroxystique de la narration relève de la singularité exceptionnelle de Dostoïevski, qui a su traduire ses *auras* épileptiques en flot de langage. Inlassablement soutenu par sa foi chrétienne et messianiste du populisme russe, tenté par l'antisémitisme, le romancier reste un fervent adepte de l'Europe qu'il ne cesse cependant de vilipender. Pourfendeur du catholicisme, il l'est tout autant de l'athéisme qui en serait le rejeton. Connaisseur de la sainteté « idiote » (Mychkine) et « puante » (Zossima), il s'oppose au Grand Inquisiteur qui fustige le christianisme, mais épargne au Christ le bûcher (*Les Frères Karamazov*). Le nihiliste Chigaliov supprime les libertés au nom de l'égalitarisme, tandis que pour ouvrir la voie à la liberté absolue (sans Dieu), il ne restera à Kirillov qu'à se suicider (*Les Démons*).

II/ Quel nihilisme

Dans ses Carnets de notes (1881) du romancier, j'ai noté ces mots écrits vers la fin de sa vie : « Le nihilisme est apparu chez nous parce que nous sommes tous des nihilistes. Ce qui nous a effrayés c'est seulement sa forme neuve et originale [...] Comiques ont été l'affolement et la peine que se sont donnés nos têtes pensantes : d'où sont – t- ils venus.

Ils ne sont venus de nulle part, ils ont toujours été avec nous, en nous, auprès de nous. »

Arrêtons-nous à ces phrases. Qui est ce « Nous » ?

« Nous », les Russes, tiraillés entre l'Europe et l'Asie qui s'attirent et se repoussent, chacune (l'Europe et l'Asie) fascinée et déroutée par les us et coutumes de l'autre. « Nous », les orthodoxes, voués au *pafos stihii* (dira Soljenitsyne), cruel sous-sol des passions et de l'adoration plaintive des icônes, « *véritables nihilistes de village* » *(« Vlas », Journal d'un écrivain,* 1873), forcément sublimes et préférables aux rasants doctrinaires abonnés aux plaisirs scolastiques de l'entendement.

« Nous », Fedor Mikhaïlovitch, écœuré par les socialistes positivistes « *persuadés que sur la tabula rasa ils vont tout de suite bâtir des paradis* ». « Nous », l'ancien fouriériste qui a vécu la condamnation à mort et l'échafaud, ne manquait pas d'empathie pour les nihilistes : ne se considérait-il pas comme un *ancien netchaïevien* ? (*Journal d'un écrivain,* 1873).

« Nous », nihilistes « passifs », que le refus de croire ou l'inaptitude au sacré pétrit en *indifférence*, dans un monde utilitariste, basé sur le matérialisme biologique et l'égoïsme rationnel ? Ou bien nihilistes « actifs », comme le vulgaire assassin qui se rêve en Napoléon, et qui n'est qu'un Raskolnikov (de *raskol*, « division », « scission », désignant le schisme entre les orthodoxes vieux-croyants et l'Église orthodoxe officielle, mais aussi le Grand Schisme entre catholiques et orthodoxes) ? Ou bien encore un des « nôtres », la « *société secrète d'incendiaires révolutionnaires, de mutins»*, soumis au charme de Piotr Verkhovenski, exalté doublon du glaçant Chigaliov, d'anarchistes, des *pétroléïtchiki* qui lui rappellent la Commune de Paris brulant les Tuileries ?

Les effondrements des démocraties dans le totalitarisme, pestes brunes ou rouges, mais aussi les dérives souverainistes, ultra-libérales avec leurs finances, marchandisation des corps, automatisation globalisée des esprits ou de ce qui en reste, trouvent leurs ancêtres dans le programme tragico-comique, pré-léniniste de Chigaliov. Stepane Trofimovitch Verkhovenski s'amuse à persifler le bonheur utilitariste, en ajoutant au « chigaliovisme » la « *profondeur* » de la société de consommation à venir : « *Shakespeare ou une paire de bottes, Raphaël ou le pétrole ?* » (*Les Démons*, 1872). Ces mots sonnent au présent.

Raskolnikov, Stavroguine, Kirillov, Verkhovenski, Ivan Karamazov... les grands héros de Dostoïevski sont des nihilistes, des athées, des

négateurs de Dieu, mais *tout contre* lui. « *Vous vénérez l'Esprit saint sans le savoir* », diagnostique Tikhone en écoutant la confession de Stavroguine (*Les Démons*). Kirillov se suicide « *pour être libre* » et « *seul* », mais en hurlant : « *Liberté, égalité, fraternité ou la mort !* » Pour Piotr Verkhovenski, il est évident que ce « *citoyen du monde* » « *roit en Dieu* », « *encore pire qu'un pope* ».

La Russie orthodoxe n'aurait peut-être pas été le berceau du nihilisme, si le « nous sommes tous des nihilistes » de Dostoïevski ne nous concernait pas – plus gravement, plus universellement – « nous tous » : l'humanité parlante qui « participe » au néant et au nihilisme. Depuis quand ? Depuis le libéralisme sans frein, le colonialisme, l'essor de la technique ? Depuis « l'histoire de la métaphysique », qui « protège en son sein le nihilisme » (Heidegger) ? Depuis que nous parlons laisse entendre Freud ? Aujourd'hui, l'écriture de Dostoïevski interpelle en profondeur l'histoire sociale et politique européenne et planétaire.

Les romans de Dostoïevski sont des *romans de la pensée* qui élève le Dire à la plus véhémente multiplicité. Il n'y a pas d'autre moyen (dit l'écrivain en substance) que la *polyphonie du texte* pour pénétrer avec recueillement dans le sous-sol du nihilisme. Pour transmettre ainsi seulement cette énigmatique jouissance (*naslajdénié*) que Dostoïevski affectionne, et qui laisse le nihilisme derrière nous.

III/ Le Joueur

Le *narrateur* est le *joueur* lui-même. Alexis Ivanovich, le jeune précepteur des enfants d'un général, s'amourache de la belle fille de ce vieillard, Paulina Alexandrovna, qui va se jouer de lui.

Dans le roman, Alexis devient addict, car il se prend au jeu et connaît, dit-il, « une jouissance à nulle autre pareille, sinon à celle du fouet quand il claque dans le dos et qu'il nous déchire la chair ».

Cette image cuisante trahit le bagnard : ce n'est pas Alexis, le précepteur des enfants du général naïf, c'est Dostoïevski le bagnard qui ressent ainsi « *les lubies du hasard* », et qui tressaille quand il entend la voix du croupier en chef déclarer : « les trois derniers coups, Messieurs !».

On décèle là un sadomasochisme enivrant, dans ce rituel des joueurs de casinos, qui n'a pas échappé à Tourgueniev, qui écrit dans une lettre à Tolstoï, que Dostoïevski « est notre Sade ».

Dans les *Carnets de la Maison morte* (1862), Dostoïevski avait décrit les bagnards assoiffés d'alcools et roués de coups de fouet, qui parviennent à se procurer de l'argent pour jouer et perdre en s'esclaffant, et le romancier nous dit que « *dans cette débauche, il y a un rire de liberté* ». Qu'est-ce qu'un détenu place plus haut que l'argent ? « La liberté », ne serait-ce qu'un rêve de liberté ». Dépensant son argent, le bagnard agit en être libre. La problématique psycho-pathologique du jeu devient métaphysique.

De ce fait, Dostoïevski sadien devient pascalien. *Miser,* c'est faire le *pari* (de gagner, d'être libre, de s'en sortir). *Miser* est une manière *de croire.* Peut-on oser ne pas croire ? Pas sûr. Vous êtes libre de miser… sur le vide. C'est ce que fera Alexis. Après avoir tout perdu, sauf une dernière pièce de monnaie– il n'avait pas osé ne pas croire. Il a misé sur le zéro : le vide, le manque, le rien. Et il a gagné. Comment ne pas miser sur le manque, quand *on n'a que ça pour oser* ? Et c'est déjà énorme, ça vous fait vivre. Lecteurs, osez miser, osez croire ! dit en substance le joueur.

C'est l'humanité moderne qui est en train de naître autour de Dostoïevski et par son écriture : elle est déjà une humanité carcérale, concentrationnaire : tous, des bagnards, emprisonnés/tenus par des contraintes socio-économiques et administratives, *confinés* (dirait-on aujourd'hui) par des procédures liberticides. Mais des bagnards doublés par leur piètre version de joueurs qui ont besoin de croire, fût-ce au vide !

L'argent – débauche et liberté – est un des thèmes obsédants de Dostoïevski avec le « trio » des amants et de la « petite fille violée ». « L'argent est tout », diagnostique le romancier, observateur attentif de la situation en Russie, un pays où le capitalisme galopant est en train de balayer la vieille Russie à la fin du XIXe siècle.

Mais comme rien n'est simple chez Dostoïevski, -» tout est argent » et « tout est permis » disent en substance les nihilistes chez le romancier -, cette vision conduit l'écrivain lui-même au fantasme du Juif qui, en possédant l'argent, posséderait tous les pouvoirs, vices et manipulations. Une hainamoration des Juifs se répand dans l'oeuvre de Dostoïevski : d'un côté, son antisémitisme politique populiste sans complexe («La question juive », in *Le Journal* (1877) ; et de l'autre côté, une vénération continue du message biblique. Le Juif, frère semblable

et menaçant rival, mais non moins autorité suprême, comme l'atteste la « douche froide » de la synagogue qui mettra fin à la jouissance sous les coups du fouet au casino.

En 1871, à Wiesbaden, le romancier, honteux et torturé d'avoir tout perdu, voulant se confesser pour la énième fois dans une église orthodoxe, se retrouve sans le vouloir mais « poussé par le destin », dit-il, dans... une synagogue.

« ce fut pour moi une douche froide... une grande œuvre s'accomplit en moi, une fantaisie stupide, méprisable, qui me tourmentait depuis dix ans, s'est évanouie (...) Maintenant, tout est terminé. J'étais lié par le jeu. A présent, je ne penserai plus qu'à mon travail (...) mon œuvre se réalisera mieux et plus vite, et Dieu me bénira. »

Aurait-il entendu le dernier Job qu'il connaît par cœur depuis son enfance ? Ce Job que le jeune Elihou réconcilie avec Yahvé : ni coupable ni innocent, répudiant transgressions et mortifications ?

Yahvé lui a fait signe. Dostoïevski n'est jamais réconcilié, mais le temps d'une « douche froide », l'Innommable l'a reconnu, l'a *élu* peut-être, presque. Dostoïevski n'ira plus au casino. L'œuvre seule prend le relais de la roulette. Les écrivains savent qu'écrire est un jeu de hasard, à la vie à la mort. Sollers le dit clairement en intitulant un de ses romans *Portrait d'un joueur* (1984).

Le roman *Le Joueur* a été dicté à la jeune sténographe Anika Grigorievna Snitkina, de vingt-cinq ans sa cadette, et qui deviendra son épouse. Sans que *Le Joueur* arrête de s'épuiser à la roulette et de dissiper la dot de sa femme. Les grands romans ont suivi : *Les Démons* (1871/2), *L'Adolescent* (1875), *Les Frères Karamazov* (1880).

* * *

J'entends votre question : Qu'a-t-il à en faire l'internaute globalisé de ce nihiliste de Raskolnikov et de Stavroguine, demi-fous ; du joueur maso ; du saint prince Mychkine flanqué de son double, l'enragé Rogojine ; des quatre frères Karamazov ? Reste le mal le plus radical de tous les crimes imaginables, l'abus sexuel d'un enfant avec meurtre : rêve de Svidrigaïlov, confession de Stavroguine, il hante Dostoïevski lui-même... Entre la cruauté et la grâce, il n'y aurait pas d'autre pardon au crime que de l'écrire sans fin.

Rouvrez donc ses livres, et écoutez bien. Quand enfin « tout est permis », ou presque, et que vous n'avez plus d'angoisse mais des anxiétés liquides, plus de désirs mais des fièvres acheteuses, plus de plaisirs mais des décharges urgentes sur plein d'applications, plus d'amis mais des fellows et des likes, vous êtes incapables de vous exprimer dans les phrases quasi proustiennes des possédés de Dostoïevski, mais vous vous videz dans l'addiction aux clics et aux selfies ? Eh bien vous êtes en résonance avec les exténuantes polyphonies de saint Dosto qui prophétisaient déjà le streaming des sms, tweets et Instagram, pornographies et « marches blanches », « #balancetonporc » et guerres nihilistes, sous couvert de « guerres saintes ».

Dostoïevski serait-il notre contemporain ? Pas plus, pas moins qu'une fugue pour quatuor à cordes et une symphonie avec chœur de Beethoven. Ou la densité de Shakespeare. Ou la comédie de Dante. Insolents défis dans le hors- temps du temps.

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

Ainsi incorporées aux passions, à l'histoire des religions et à la déflagration des idéologies, les discordances de Dostoïevski ne sont pas un moyen rhétorique et encore moins une provocation de polémiste, mais sa vérité historiale. Cette indécidable tension – inerrante, indispensable à l'écriture – nous constitue ; elle saurait, peut-être, nous survivre.

Cecilia Sjöholm

Bad Mothers: Kristeva and the Undoing of the Natural Maternal

Abstract

One of the most sensitive representations in cultural, moral and political discourses is that of motherhood. The idea that a mother would feel estranged from her child, or even regret having a child, is a taboo that has only begun to be considered in the twenty-first century. What is a "bad" mother, how and why are idealized representations of motherhood now being questioned? In this analysis, the work of Julia Kristeva stands at the forefront. Through her reworking of Melanie Klein's object theory above all, Kristeva challenges "natural" motherhood as a fetishized construct. Most importantly, Kristeva's theory of the abject presents a critique of the fetishization of motherhood and its entwinement with consumer society.

This essay mobilizes Kristeva to analyze fictional and cinematic works by Rachel Cusk and Maggie Gyllenhaal concerned with the undoing of idealized ideas of motherhood. Cusk's novel *A Life's Work* (2001) offers an autofictional narrative of her first experience of motherhood, one of boundlessness, exasperation, sleeplessness and fear; of fluids, smells and noise. Unable to fulfill her daughter's needs, unfulfilled herself, critical of her environment and her peers, she provides witness to an alienated experience, that of a "bad" mother. Further, in Cusk's novel, this is intimately connected to the development of consumer society and its mythology of motherhood. For its part, Gyllenhaal's film *The Lost Daughter*, which adapts a novel by Elena Ferrante, tells a story of abjection at the edge of the loss of self, and puts the question of what it means to be a "natural" mother in focus.

Having recourse to theories of the object in capitalism, assisted by C. B. McPherson and Sigmund Freud, this essay argues for the contemporary significance of Julia Kristeva's work in the face of fantasies about motherhood in capitalist society.

A Life's Work: challenging maternal discourse

In her novel *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother*, British author Rachel Cusk offers an autofictional narrative about her first experience of motherhood. The novel, which came out in 2001, tells of the dizzying experience of losing herself in boundlessness, exasperation, sleeplessness and fear; of fluids, smells and noises. Shifting between extreme intimacy and utter estrangement, she has difficulties in preserving ties to herself, and to the world. She is, in all senses of the word, a "bad" mother. Unable to fulfill her daughter's needs, unfulfilled herself, critical of her environment and of her peers.

This experience of estrangement is inserted into a continuous self-reflection in which she compares her experience with that of the powerful discourse of idealized maternal care surrounding her. She fails to breastfeed her child to satisfaction, and observes with horror how her child becomes a foreign body of dirt and grease, rather than an extension of herself, which was the experience she was promised. She is entrenched in a discourse where care – before, during and after birth – is presented as something altogether natural, which will simply produce itself on its own. This discourse, as we will see in Cusk's novel, presents an imaginary realm about what maternal emotions and attitudes should be. In this imaginary realm, the "I" of the story does not find a place.

I believe that we can use the work of Julia Kristeva not just to understand the resistance displayed in the story, but also the challenges to the imaginary realm of maternity that it evokes. The latter can be considered from two perspectives. First of all, the scandal of "bad" mothers undoes "natural" motherhood as a fetishized construct. Although, in Kristeva's writings, the question of maternity is not addressed in terms of ideology or materialist dialectics, her theory of the abject presents a critique of the fetishization of motherhood intertwined with consumerist society.

Secondly, Kristeva allows us to discern the threads of subjectivity that form the "I" beneath the imaginary shields of motherhood. In her writings on the female genius, Kristeva offers a theory of how narrative can construe a subject, not in a line of authenticity, but as the very punctuation of imaginary constructs regarding what a subject is or should be.

In Cusk's novel, the discourse of "natural" motherhood is reiterated by companies offering baby-and-mother products, by midwives offering services, maternity groups offering communities, all at a monetary price. The novel points to a motherhood that has become commodified not just under the guise of something natural, but *as* natural – certain emotions and forms of behavior are bought and sold as natural phenomena. For instance, giving birth is supposed to be experienced as a jubilant surprise, lactation is supposed to come naturally, the company of other mothers is supposed to bring smiles and pleasure. In Cusk's case, they do not. Instead, her experience of maternity is that it has been commodified through and through – shaped and sold in accordance to certain ideological forms. Cusk tells how reality may present itself as a strange feeling of doubleness: she observes not reality, but rather herself as an actor on a stage. This has consequences also for the way in which she relates to her daughter. In dizzy spells, the daughter appears as a piece of property, on a level with the baby things that clog the houses of new mothers, a doll that is fed and cared for. "My ownership to my daughter is preoccupying," she writes. "I am in transactional shock, as if I had gone out and bought something extremely expensive. [....] I show it to other people, fearing their assessment" (Cusk 2021, 51–52).

Cusk's novel can be seen as a critique of the way in which motherhood is, sold into the life of women. It is a testimony to an ego-changing experience, but that experience occurs in a sphere controlled by social norms of what counts as good, i.e. natural. These norms are attached to patterns of consumption. The punctuation of the imaginary sphere of good motherhood comes at a price: rather than counting as good, the mother appears as "bad."

> In motherhood the communal was permitted to prevail over the individual, and the result, to my mind, was a great deal of dishonesty. [...] [I]t seemed to me to be intrinsic to the psychical predicament of the new mother, that in having a child she should re-encounter the childhood mechanism of suppression. She would encounter the possibility of suppressing her true feelings in order to be "good" and to gain approval. My own struggle had been to resist this mechanism. I wanted to – I had to – remain "myself" (Cusk 2008).

In being "herself", Cusk resists being a "good" mother, which means that she becomes a bad one. In the process, she identifies two ends in which motherhood has been caught by contemporary mechanisms of commodification. On the one hand, mothers find themselves at the losing end of a liberal imaginary where the individual is supposed to be a self marked by reflection, willpower and freedom. A natural, i.e. a good mother, cannot fulfill this idea of individualism, since her task is to respond to the needs and emotions of her child, not her own. Cusk identifies this as a state in which anything at odds with these so-called natural maternal feelings is suppressed for the sake of social approval. But, in her narrative, she also identifies the mechanisms of commodification from another end. Rather than experiencing the child as the natural extension of herself, the narrator encounters its body as a not-self, as a thing of fluids and flesh that awakens anguish and disgust. As Cusk shows, these experiences are not sellable, and have therefore remained unnamed and unspoken in the commodified discourses of maternity. When what is natural is commodified, that which is considered unnatural is made a waste product of no use. The discourses of mother-child selling points, maternity wards and playgroups for mothers target the natural, happy mother-child relation as an object of exchange, not the mother and child of unfulfilled needs, of smells and sweat.

It is perhaps possible to read Cusk's gesture of resistance, that she must "remain herself" in motherhood, at a psychological level. But, at another level, there is the urge to reach the zero point of motherhood, something that has less to do with psychology and more with a quest to traverse the fantasy, to invoke Jacques Lacan's concept. In Lacan's theory, traversing the fantasy means undoing the search for the analyst's responses that structure the discourse of the analysand (Lacan 1977, 273). Slavoj Žižek has brought the phrase into critical theory, demonstrating fantasy's value as a structural formation that both centers ideology and has the potential to undo it. Traversing the fantasy would entail an undoing of fantasy's mode of articulation, but not the structural lack in the Other through which it came to be articulated in the first place. Fantasy in Lacan, as Žižek shows, is not otherworldly. On the contrary, it offers a "scheme" in which real objects can function as objects of desire in the positive sense (Žižek 2009, 40).

Traversing the fantasy in this case, in Cusk's narrative, means undoing the norms of naturalization that uphold the ideas of maternity

in capitalist society, ideas of how children should be born, fed and raised. What Cusk encounters is the smell and stickiness of bodies that comes with all these experiences, the real beyond what is, so to speak, natural. At the same time, the maternal experience becomes strangely double: the imaginary relation to the child sold through social and commercial networks remains a contrasting feature to the way in which the sweat, fluids and ambivalences of motherhood are really experienced. This feeling of doubleness is the work of fantasy, according to Žižek's model.

Traversing the fantasy in which motherhood has been caught, Cusk finds a zero point of motherhood. This zero point is a painful moment, a moment in which the link between mother and child appears only as a rupture. The child is described as a commodity, a doll. But also as an abject, an amorphous body. In traversing the fantasy of natural motherhood, the boundlessness of the biological is paradoxically found to be unnatural. In this way, the narrative challenges what it means to be a natural and an unnatural mother.

Rachel Cusk is by no means the only one to question the good mother in fiction. Today, the idea of the "bad mom," to recall the well-known Hollywood film comedy, is being explored in fiction and nonfiction from a variety of angles. The so-called bad mother, or rather, what has been construed as unnatural, has become visible not only in literature and the other arts, but also in self-help books and advice columns in magazines and newspapers. After the appearance of books by authors like Corinne Maier and Orna Donath (Maier 2008; Donath 2017), women have come out to confess that they regret becoming mothers. This is not the same thing as regretting their children. Most often, these women emphasize that it is rather maternity that is the challenge.

In *The Lost Daughter*, Maggie Gyllenhaal's film of the short novel by Elena Ferrante, a female English professor is holidaying in Greece, and by accident becomes involved with a big family that she observes on the beach. Its many members are loud, beautiful, wealthy and mysteriously threatening – the formation of a patriarchal sphere in which women cannot escape male control. The female professor, for her part, is alone; we understand that she has an ambivalent relation to her own daughters, who are now adults. We understand also that she left them when they were very young because she felt suffocated and imprisoned: we see shocking scenes from her memory in which she really does act like a bad mother, failing to meet her daughters' needs.

By chance, the professor comes into possession of the doll of a little girl in the big family. The girl becomes hysterical, cannot sleep, screams and screams: her mother is as tortured as the professor was as a young mother. But the professor does not return the doll. Instead, she nurses it, as if it was a real baby. This is a component of the film that feels provocative and strange. But it is crucial to the story. The end is inevitable. When she is caught, the professor gives a retroactive clue to the whole narrative when she says, "I am an unnatural mother." In its obsessive focus on the professor's mysterious attachment to the girl's doll, her inability to give it up, and her uncanny rituals with it as if it were a natural child, the film goes further than Cusk's novel. The doll-child is not a commodity, as in Cusk's novel. It is a bundle representing mysterious maternal drives.

This crisis takes us into deeper waters than being a bad mother in the sense of responding to the boundlessness of another biological human body. What does it mean to become a question to oneself at the zero point between the natural and unnatural, as motherhood enters the hard-to-navigate domains of the non-human? The uncanny, Freud says, derives from the intellectual uncertainty of whether something is "animate or inanimate," such as that aroused by, for instance, dolls that bear a likeness to the living (Freud 1971, 226). For Freud, the uncanny quality of this uncertainty derives from a traumatic intervention in infantile life, a rupture in the narcissistic omnipotence of animate objects, introducing a finite universe where objects no longer carry magic. This rupture is the fact of castration, and creates the subject/object divide. From the point of view of critical theory, the subject/object divide presents a double challenge. On the one hand it, offers a model for understanding relations and affects. On the other, it cuts open another realm that is rarely included in psychoanalytic models of understanding: that of the problem of commodification. In Cusk and Ferrante, the doll is not simply the presentation of an uncanny figure tinged with anxious connotations, referring to infantile life. It is also a fetish-like object, challenging the idea of motherhood as a natural form of attachment, that can altogether be seen to untouched by the capitalist realm.

One would have thought that, in 2001, the world would have been ready for an autofictional account of an experience of maternity that was not exclusively golden. But that was not the case. Rachel Cusk notes:

I was accused of child-hating, of postnatal depression, of shameless greed, of irresponsibility, of pretentiousness, of selfishness, of doom-mongering and, most often, of being too intellectual. [...] The telephone rang and rang. I was invited on the Today programme to defend myself. I was invited on the Nicky Campbell programme to defend myself. I was cited everywhere as having said the unsayable: that it is possible for a woman to dislike her children, even to regret having brought them into the world (Cusk 2008).

This inability to maintain ties to the world, being both amorphous and estranged, is not in the first place an account of individual symptoms. Rather, Cusk can be seen as an example of the so-called "Capitalist Mother," as literary scholar Ruth Quiney has done, who refers to Julia Kristeva when stating that Cusk exemplifies a "twenty-first-century Western form of 'maternal anguish, unable to be satiated within the encompassing symbolic'" (Quiney 2007, 19–40).[1] But this maternal anguish should not, I believe, be psychologized as anxiety, an expression of unfulfillment and so on. It has more to do with unsettling received ideas of what should be perceived as free and unfree, natural and unnatural, love and disgust. The zero point of bad motherhood unveils an antagonistic relation to the normative order that is entangled with capitalist society; it is unable is unable to contain the paradoxes and ambiguities that the experience of motherhood entails.

From possessive individualism to maternal abjection

In critical theory, the concept of the object and its multiple forms has received an extraordinary amount of attention. The idea that the subject desires an object is a fundamental doctrine in which Marxist and psychoanalytic theories of desire converge. Commodity fetishism is one of the cornerstones of Marxist theory. From a Marxist point of view, consumer goods are symbols in social exchange. In *Negative Dialectics*, his post-Marxist elaboration of the relation between subject and object, Theodor Adorno calls this the "preponderance" of the object. This means that the materiality and dignity of the object are

---

[1]   One of Quiney's epigraphs cites Kristeva 1982, 12.

more revelatory than the discursive operations of the subject (Adorno 1999, 183–84).

Kristeva theorizes a resistance against the symbolic throughout her work, from her early writings, such as *The Revolution of Poetic Language*, to her trilogy on the female genius at the turn of the century, to her later work on femininity. It is when her work turns to psychoanalysis that this resistance against the symbolic becomes surcharged with ideas of the bad mother. For Kristeva, psychoanalysis can above all provide a framework in which the heterogenous relations between subject and object becomes meaningful. The object in psychoanalysis is not understood as a fetish but as a person, a relation. Melanie Klein conceived the maternal breast, and then maternal figures, as primary formations of objecthood for the developing individual. However, the relation to the object is colored by a radical indistinction, both in terms of bodily contours and of the affective and instinctual nature of the relation.[2]

From a Lacanian perspective, Klein's internalized object is theoretically impure. It escapes the symbolic, and is set wholly in the realm of the imaginary. For Kristeva, however, it is precisely this realm that bears witness to the glitches in contemporary society. It is made of images, sensations and substances, phenomena that she reads as symptoms in the contemporary world (Kristeva 2000, 104).

The abject is an example. An instinctual process of rejection allows the limits of the body to constitute themselves against the threat of the body's own rejects. On a subjective level, corporeal rejection marks a differentiation between the inner and the outer world, the body of the self creating its own contours. The abject is the symbolic treatment of rejection, at the limit between inner and outer (Kristeva 1982, 131). Bodily fluids mark a separation; the body acquires a fragile contour through disgust. The problem, however, is that the self is expelled in the same process. Instinctual rejection prevents the processes of negation and symbolization from performing their function, and impedes the subject. The problem of abjection is not, therefore, one of filth. It is one of identity.

As we have seen in Cusk's work, the discourse of maternity challenges the idea of what it means to be an individual. Having a child challenges the meaning of what it is to remain what is called "myself," when this

---

[2]   See, for instance, Klein 1975, 176–235.

"self" seen as a free and self-explanatory. It challenges the neoliberal idea of what it means to be a "free" individual, a self-fashioning individual with a good grasp of choices. This individual was described by C. B. Macpherson – a standard reference in the literature of how capitalism and liberalism have coalesced in the construction of the individual. Macpherson shows that, in the liberal tradition, the very concept of the individual depends on the possession of goods. What makes an individual free is essentially freedom from dependence on the will of others – and this is only possible through the possession of something that is one's own, of goods. The exception to this, however, are relations into which an individual has entered voluntarily.[3]

However, Macpherson's idea of the liberal individual does not account for the full extent to which not only relations, but affects and emotions, have been imposed by a discourse colored by market commodification and exchange. Cusk's novel and Ferrante's/ Gyllenhaal's work testify to this: a mother-child relation is voluntary. But the doll scenes testify to the fact that cannot both be a natural mother and an individual of unlimited choices in capitalist society.

All in all, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have been an era in which relations have become objectified through the fictional value of their exchange. We have seen an acceleration of the integration of all goods, values, services and experiences surrounding modern life into a fictionalized discourse of unlimited choice. We may intuitively want to preserve love, care and human bonds outside of this development. However, these areas are precisely the ones that have been targeted by economic and emotional marketization. Material goods are no longer the primary objects of monetary exchange. Instead, we have seen the aggressive economization of care, communication, social networks, human body parts and pregnancy, our lives now wholly open to the market. Intimate relations have been invaded by the same logic of exchange and gain that dominates monetary relations. Love is commodified through social networks, as is the care of the old, sick people and children – and maternity – by big care companies. The making of what Eva Illouz has called emotional capitalism has had dramatic consequences for the social fabric, and for the order of what Kristeva calls the symbolic – the conceptual language that

---

[3]   "The individual in market society *is* human as proprietor of his own person. However much he may wish it to be otherwise, his humanity does depend on his freedom from any but self-interested contractual relations with others" (Macpherson 1962,, 275).

encompasses all these relations. This is an order that, following Marxist and post-Marxist critical analysis, tends to be understood by the way it organizes relations between subject and object, as we have seen in Macpherson's argument.

As Illouz has shown, intimate objects also have a meaning outside of the sphere of commerce: "Objects can leave the sphere of consumption and the market and become incorporated in interpersonal relationships when they circulate in spheres of meaning that are also and perhaps primarily emotional spheres" (Illouz 2009, 389). What has happened, however, is that the intimate sphere and that of the market have become intertwined, through the emotions that are at work in both.

Kristeva has observed this intertwinement from another angle. Not being content with the binaries of the Marxist tradition, Kristeva calls it a mistake to discuss the subject of the social world as "an untouchable unity, in conflict with others but never in conflict with 'himself,'" as she writes in *Revolution in Poetic Language.* She criticizes what she perceives as a weakness in Marxist theory, that "the subject becomes either oppressing or oppressed, a boss or an exploited worker or the boss of exploited workers, but never a subject in process/on trial who is related to the process – itself brought to light by dialectical materialism – in nature and society" (Kristeva 1984, 138–39). If the subject is reduced to nothing but a construct in the social sphere – untouched by conflicting forces outside of the capitalist system of exchange – a false unity defines it. Nineteenth-century social movements strove to work with that unity. Kristeva strives to open other possibilities, through her introduction of psychoanalysis. But, as we will see, this does not exclude her work also encompassing a theorization of the impact of the forces of commodification.

The subject, for Kristeva, is constituted through negativity on the one hand, and negation on the other. Whereas negation is a function of symbolization, the creation of concepts, negativity is the "mythical" force of drive. For the subject, negativity is the unbounded, the preconceptual and the excessive. "Negativity" also designates that which is exterior to the symbolic. The semiotic is an example: it traverses the symbolic from a point which is not in opposition, nor identical to it, but other. As such, it is bound to the biological functions of the body, to an expenditure and pulsation in which the body fails, so to speak, to become wholly symbolized: "The sole function of our use of the term 'negativity' is to designate the process that exceeds

the signifying subject, binding him to the laws of objective struggles in nature and society" (Kristeva 1984, 119). The body is "caught within the network of nature and society" (Kristeva 1984, 122). In this way, Kristeva's use of psychoanalysis opens the door to a theorization of abjection, one that also introduces social ideas regarding a "failed" objectal relation – a "failure" that can be related to the market forces of commodified relations, and which the bad mother incorporates.

By first of all deconstructing the tradition of materialist dialectics through object relations theory, Julia Kristeva has decomposed and altered the question of the object, as well as that of the subject, in both the psychoanalytic and the critical tradition. It is through this intertwinement that Kristeva's abject can be understood as injected with fetishist dimensions: "It is perhaps unavoidable that, when a subject confronts the factitiousness of object relation, when he stands at the place of the want that founds it, the fetish becomes a life preserver, temporary and slippery, but nonetheless indispensable" (Kristeva 1982, 37). This fetishist dimension is wholly intertwined with the language that produces its expression. Maternity is seen, in Kristeva's work, through the way that the symbolic intersects with the semiotic, the body with language; through a psychoanalytic and semiotic grid. But it is precisely by being situated at this intersection, between a forceful symbolic on the one hand and an excessive body on the other, that Kristeva's writings on maternity challenge fantasies of the "natural" mother. Rather than adhering to a discourse of subject-object relations, Kristeva identifies a dimension of narcissistic and aggressive drives that colors "semi-objects" while construing the maternal sphere as "other" (Kristeva 1982, 32–33).

In Kristeva's analysis of the abject, melancholy and narcissism, the bad mother emerges as a fantasy (as in the writings of Melanie Klein), integral to the way that a subject speaks, senses and feels. The maternal sphere affects the subject from within a limit, and has been excluded from the symbolic from the outset. In this way it is surcharged with leftovers, and offers resistance through affects of disgust, desire, or even silence. The only thing that defines the abject, Kristeva writes, is that it opposes the self. It "draws me toward the place where meaning collapses," its course leading to a place of the birth of the self "amid the violence of sobs, of vomit. Mute protest of the symptom" (Kristeva 1982, 3).

Abjection is neither object nor subject. It is a liminal phenomenon that appears in forms conditioned by history and material forces:

through disgust, and other corporeal reactions. It is unchained from ideals. The abject is not just a corporeal figure. It is also a scandalous refusal of the idea of a subject that would desire, enjoy and exist through the object: in this way it becomes a glitch in the web of social relations intertwined, as Illouz has shown, with consumer society. The abject does not only deny the fulfillment of desire; it exists in antagonism to the subject-object relation.

Cusk's novel and Gyllenhaal's film both bear witness to the scandal of abjectal maternity as resistance to the web of social relations attached to consumer society, and to the emotional grid that shapes our conception of what has worth and what does not. Their depiction of bad maternity uses dolls to show the failure to attach to the world, captured instead by an objectal relation that is alienating in the social sense and that produces a sense of decomposition at the corporeal level.

But there is also an emancipatory potential to the abject, and to bad maternity. The subject-object relation is construed differently than in the Marxist tradition, but with a certain remainder of materialist dialectics that explains the difference between the symbolic and that which exceeds it. Kristeva has also challenged the discourse that created the bad mother. The bad mother does not fail her function in the symbolic as an individual. Nor is she an individual driven by anxiety in the social and psychological realm. She is – and this is precisely what is unraveled at the zero point that both Cusk and Gyllenhaal's English professor indicate – a subject and a body that the symbolic is unable to contain. Cusk's novel and Gyllenhaal's film both point to the impossible paradox contained in the fetish-oriented naturalization of the joyful and nurturing mother in contemporary culture – and it is precisely this paradox that is named, revealed and, in fact, protested against.

3) Natality as de-biologization

What am I behind my lactating breasts, Cusk asks in her novel? As a mother, she has become herself the abject, a question to herself. There is a need for a zero point in the narrative of what "I" have become as a mother: an abyssal formation in the discourse on maternity.

Kristeva's trilogy on the female genius – her studies of Hannah Arendt, Colette and Melanie Klein – can be read in this vein. All

of these books bring a crisis in the symbolic representation of motherhood and maternity to the fore. Kristeva's celebration of the female genius resorts, to some extent, to a philosophical tradition where ideas of birth represent novelty, truth and so on. But she is also undoing the ideologically saturated symbolic, the representation of what is seen as "natural" maternity and motherhood. The maternal is not simply a metaphor attached to ideas of life and care. Kristeva instead brings forward a dimension of excess. The female genius is a dissident – employing a transgressive discourse that denies naturalized representations of what "maternity" means.

Just like the abject, and like the "bad" mother, but from a completely different angle, the female genius can be read as a response to a crisis – as an attempt to construe a subjectivity out of an abyssal void in the symbolic.

The key to the "geniality" of Hannah Arendt's philosophy, according to Kristeva, lies in its thematizing life as *bios*, the life of the individual, seen as narrative and history.[4] *Bios* is the negativity that symbolizes *zoe*, biological life. There is no human essence to be found in terms of what we are. The question of the who – "Who am I? Who is he?" – is something that can only be determined through narrative. As Kristeva notes in her reading:

> Because he knows he is mortal and that he belongs not to the continuity of the species, but rather to the spoken memory of multiple and conflicting opinion, 'who' ceases to be 'that which' (a *quid*) and seeks to transfigure 'work' as well as 'oeuvre' into 'action,' an action that is itself spoken, projected toward both past and future, and shared with others (Kristeva 2001, 59).

In Kristeva's reading, Arendt uses maternity as a de-biologized metaphor for the way in which human singularity presents itself. The life, the "who," is an embodied being whose life, actions and stories are measured against the negative totality of future lives and generations. Thus, for Kristeva, Arendt presents a principle of maternity that creates an inexhaustible link between natality, i.e. new beginnings, and narrative. Narrative links "the destinies of *life*, *narrative*, and *politics*: narrative conditions the durability and the immortality of the

---

[4]   See the distinction made by Hannah Arendt (Arendt 1961, 42) and Giorgio Agamben (Agamben 1995, 179–93).

work of art; but it also accompanies, as historical narrative, the life of the *polis*" (Kristeva 2001, 8; emphasis in original).

This aspect of Arendtian thought also brings out a destabilizing factor in the conception of human agency: the "who" emerges out of a complex web of relations. Arendt's reason for not becoming a Marxist lies precisely in the failure of materialism to affirm, and understand, the full extent of the contingency through which subjects appear (Arendt 1998, 183). Narratives make us appear, but how we appear is a matter of contingency rather than of control. The agent of action and speech, as Arendt says, is not its author, but its actor and sufferer: the story of our life is somehow always handed over to a third (Arendt 1998, 184). For Adriana Cavarero, the question of the "who" is one which Arendt opens towards an ethical space of interaction. For Judith Butler, following Cavarero, Arendt implies an ethics, rather than a social theory, with her theory of singularity (Butler 2005, 31).

Kristeva's reading goes in another direction. She points to the fact that Arendt's de-biologization of *bios* leaves biological questions unanswered. Arendt quotes Augustine: in life, "I have become a question to myself."[5] The open character of this question points, according to Kristeva, not only to social and political processes, but also to a derailment and undoing of biology in general. By using metaphors associated with conception, life, the body, and femininity, Arendt opens the door to issues of the body, and of biology. But instead of exploring them, Arendt either suppresses or openly rejects them. This rejection takes many guises. Arendt is not only skeptical of, but also openly hostile to psychoanalysis. She is not a feminist. She rejects intimate questions concerned with emotions. And so on.

Kristeva reads this as an excess in Arendt's philosophization of the "who" – as the result of a repressed instinctual drive. The "who," in Arendt's work, is not just a form of singularity, presenting itself in a narrative. It is an "excess" that is "reached through a constant tearing of one's self away from biological life, from metabolic symbiosis with nature," Kristeva writes (Kristeva 2001, 59). It belongs neither to the "species" nor the anonymity of "work." It is not determined by either biological discourse or social constraints. In Arendt's work, social life is not recognized as a meaningful symbolic order. It is depicted, instead, as a force of constant economization, and as the commodification of

---

[5]   A quote that Hannah Arendt associates with Augustine as well as St. Paul (Arendt 1978, 65, 85).

all areas of human life. In this way it is depicted as a second nature in Arendt's work. This second nature is as hungry and threatening as the first: it presents itself through the reification of "works" and other "products" (Kristeva 2001, 59).

So, although the ideas of both natality and life are de-biologized in Kristeva's reading of Arendt, these concepts are, at the same time, re-biologized. Kristeva reads Arendt's language as a refusal, a defense against a realm that nevertheless always haunts her philosophy. She notes that Arendt's idea of the "who" in many ways appears to be fighting the female body: the "who" is an island of singularity in an amorphous universe where the biological, the cyclical, the intimate, the drives, and so on, constantly threaten its existence (Kristeva 2001, 68).

Arendt construes subjectivity out of a position of sheer contingency, out of narrative, a proposal with no manual to follow. In this way, the question "who am I?" becomes as abyssal and antagonistic as in the discourse of the "bad mothers." It is impossible to construe a subjectivity at the crossing of the metabolisms of social and biological life – Arendt, like the bad mothers, finds herself at a zero point.

One could of course read Kristeva's analysis of the "who" as a critique of Arendt's anti-feminism, and of a humanist tradition. But Kristeva also sees the operation of a resistance. She sees how Arendt manages to resist the collectivizing impact of maternal discourse, in terms of both biology and labor – the commodifying discourse of maternity is undone. Subjectivity is instead made into a question of the "who," a question that opens an abyssal lack in the symbolic. This does not make Arendt a hero of feminism. But it points to the same problem that the literature of the "bad mother" raises: if we are not reduced to biology or labor, what are we? Arendt, Kristeva shows, points to the forces that have attempted to erase the singularity of living beings – not without pain or aggression. Her philosophy of the "who" is not a fine ethics of accommodation, as many feminists have proposed, but rather a forceful and instinctual refusal of the female body. But it is precisely in the force of this instinctual work, in the baring of sheer drive, that Arendt's quest for the understanding of subjectivity is important.

In her aggression against the discourses of biologization and social constraints, Arendt shares something with the bad mothers who open an abyssal space in the search for subjectivity. "Who am I?" Without access to my body, or to the story of my life, I cannot answer this question – and yet that is precisely the question that I have to answer,

in the face of the forces that remove it from my being. The bad mothers, and Kristeva's reading of Arendt, show us that this question has lost none of its burning actuality.

References

Adorno, Theodor W. 1999. *Negative Dialectics*. Translated by E. B. Ashton. London: Continuum.

Agamben, Giorgio. 1995. *Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Arendt, Hannah. 1961. *Between Past and Future*. London: Faber and Faber.

———. 1978. *The Life of the Mind II*. New York: Harcourt.

———. 1998. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Butler, Judith. 2005. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Cusk, Rachel. 2008. "I Was Only Being Honest." *Guardian*, March 21, 2008.

https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/mar/21/biography.women.

———. 2021. *Life's Work: On Being a Mother*. London: Picador.

Donath, Orna. 2017. *Regretting Motherhood: A Study*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books.

Freud, Sigmund. 1971. "The Uncanny." In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 17. Translated by James Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press.

Illouz, Eva. 2009. "Emotions, Imagination and Consumption: A new research agenda." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 9, no. 3 (October 2009): 377–413.

Klein, Melanie. 1975. "Envy and Gratitude." In *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works 1946–1963*. New York: The Free Press.

Kristeva, Julia. 1982. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.

———. 1984. *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.

———. 2000. *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt*. Translated by Jeanine Herman. New York: Columbia University Press.

———. 2001. *Hannah Arendt: Life Is a Narrative*. Translated by Frank Collins. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Lacan, Jacques. 1977. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: W. W. Norton and Company.

Macpherson, C. B. 1962. *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Maier, Corinne. 2008. *No Kids: 40 Good Reasons Not to Have Children*. Translated by Patrick Watson. Toronto: McLelland & Stewart.

Žižek, Slavoj. 2009. *The Parallax View*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

William Watkin

Indifferentiating the Undifferentiated in Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language*

Abstract

When Kristeva published her doctoral thesis *La révolution du langage poétique* in the early 1970s, its engagement with the philosophy of difference was groundbreaking. However, nearly fifty years later, the rise of indifferential systems of thought in continental philosophy, such as we find in Giorgio Agamben's archeology, Alain Badiou's ontology, set theory, and analytic extensionalism, means that, returning to Kristeva's foundational text, it can appear dated and impossible to recuperate for a twenty-first century philosophical situation.

Yet central to Kristeva's work is the semiotic *chora,* which is described as uncertain, indeterminate, quantity without quality, suspensive, nonexpressive and *un*-differentiated. While, intrinsic to her theorization of the thetic as central to the symbolic order is Frege's extensional, indifferent theory of denotation and the indifference of truth. Both the semiotic and the thetic suggest that Kristeva is not insensible to the conceptual potential of the philosophy of indifference. Taking the semiotic *chora* and the positing function of the thetic as our starting point, therefore, this paper will attempt a remapping of Kristeva's work by thinking of the *chora*, and the thetic indifferentially.

Keywords

Kristeva, Chora, indifference, semiotic, thetic

When Kristeva published *Revolution in Poetic Language* in 1974, it was at the cutting edge of continental thought. Yet returning to the work today, one is tempted to say it has been superseded. The conceptual paradigm in continental philosophy has shifted dramatically away from difference and otherness, towards indifference and neutrality. The leading figures of this movement, Giorgio Agamben and Alain Badiou, have completely rewritten the future of philosophy in a manner that seems to leave little or no room for those poststructural

thinkers who came just before them. What will our relationship to our teachers be, one of rejection and abjection, or can we find a healthier, more normative state of intellectual recuperation? This is a particularly pressing question for the Kristeva of *Revolution in Poetic Language*, for almost every aspect of that book is based on a presupposition around difference, dialectic, otherness, heterogeneity, negativity, death, separation, scission, sacrifice, syntax, and language, that has been thoroughly destabilized by the indifferential thought of Agamben in particular. While, basing her whole system on the biological materialism of the sign, and assuming that stability arrives from the double articulation of a sign working within a symbolic order, makes little sense when one reads Badiou, who founds his indifferent materialism on the simple assertion that multiples are real, and whose description of the thetic stability *he* calls nature, is entirely devoid of linguistic theory, being reliant instead on the mathematics of sets. In fact, you could sum up this dramatic conceptual shift simply as indifference not difference, suspension not deconstruction, sets not signs.

The situation is exacerbated by Kristeva's clear antipathy towards indistinct, asymbolic, indifferential situations, in her early work at least. In *Revolution* she clearly dislikes indifference, calling it psychotic, schizophrenic and life-threatening. By the time of *Powers of Horror* a handful of years later, *everyone*, she assures us, dislikes the pseudo-object held in a position of indeterminate irresolution between subject and object (Kristeva 1982).

Indifference is a state of emotional indecision or better of being affectively noncommittal. You do not care one way or another. It is a homeostatic moment of suspension between those opposing states determined by the drives. Indifference takes on philosophical significance for modern thought in Hegel's *Phenomenology* where he refutes what he calls "indifferent difference," in favor of the dialectic (Hegel 1977). Indifferent difference is pure difference as such. It allows you to say X does not equal Y, without saying what X is or what Y is. We will call this content neutrality or qualitative indifference (Watkin 2017, 60–62). Two things here are different, irrespective of what they are or what they are like. Hegel refutes "indifferent difference" because it results in the rejection of what he calls "determinate nothingness, one which has a *content*" (Hegel 1977, 51; emphasis in original), a section Kristeva quotes (Kristeva 1984, 183), resulting

instead in an indeterminate and contentless nothingness that arrives either at the indifference of pure determination, in which all objects relate to all other objects equally, meaning abstract notions can get no hold of them and place them in orderly conceptual sets; or else in a state where all beings are monadic, self-enclosed abstractions with no relation to the physical world they claim to conceptually generalize.

Hegel's refusal of indifferent difference due to logical impossibility was precipitous, because just a few decades later, Boole, Cantor, Frege and finally Wittgenstein formalize it as extensional logic and change history. Extensionality then is our third definition of indifference. Extensional reasoning is the rational basis for analytic philosophy for much of the last century and is also a logical and mathematical language of indifferent differences. Extensional logic is the result of a brave refutation of the concept of Aristotelian classes still very much in play in Hegel's phenomenology, a system that defines being in terms of essence, judgment and properties (Bar-Am 2008). All three functions, essence, judgment and properties, being modalities of avoiding the actual infinity of matter in the world by defining an immaterial truth, a philosopher who decides, and entry requirements, based on quality content. What Boole, Frege and Cantor realized was that the Greek system of Aristotelian classes is based on a superstition. There are no essences. Accept this and everything else falls by the wayside or falls into place. Extensionalism is thus named because it proves logically that the co-extensionality of two objects in the same set, their identity, why they are in the set, what allows you to collect them as one thing, is defined by their sharing the same extensional concept (basically you are to be included in this set), not essence nor property nor judgment. Extensionalism suggests a flat and unequivocal identification of terms with their extensions, resulting in a context-free, epistemically neutral language with inferences that require no extra-logical judgments as props. A class (we will call it a set) is no longer Aristotelian, but any arbitrary collection of particular objects and a handful of logical terms that designate truths about their extensions.

Extensionalism is an indifferent system, especially when applied to the mathematics of the set by Cantor. It is Cantor's extensionalism that concerns us here as it is Badiou's realization, in 1988, that the problems of ontology are solved by mathematics hat marks a watershed moment in the rise of the philosophy of indifference (Watkin 2017; Badiou 2005). Leaving the math to one side, Badiou realizes that the elements of our

tripartite problem – essence, proliferation into infinite regress, and judgment – are each solved unequivocally by some simple axioms in set theory. Essence is replaced by the void set and Badiou's contention that Being is simply another name for structural consistency. The problem of infinity and regress is not a problem. Actually infinite sets not only exist, but can be easily proven, and they are the norm. And, finally, judgment is superseded by a simple ontological statement: there are only multiples of multiples. They exist, you don't judge them, you just count them (Badiou 2005, 23–30). The aporias of ontology are no longer paradoxical or contradictory, Badiou concludes. Indifferent difference works, Hegel was wrong, the dialectic was a solution to the problem of Aristotelian classes, just before they were completely swept away by extensional sets.

We can summarize Badiou's system as being is-not, multiples of multiples and actual infinity, but why is this schema indifferent? First, being is radically non-relational, it is-not, it is in-different, outside all mechanisms of differentiation. Nonrelationality is a key component of all indifferential systems. Second, multiples are in sets due to their quantity, not quality. What multiples are, their essence, due to a judgment regarding properties, is irrelevant. Multiples are content-neutral, quality-indifferent when you define them ontologically. You collect multiples based on their numerical collectability, not the fact that they are cats: FIVE cats, not five CATS. Finally, the assumption that content neutral sets are chaotic examples of Hegelian 'bad infinity' is proven false by the ubiquity and stability of actual infinite sets.

Badiou formalizes an indifferent, mathematized ontology in 1988 but indifference does not become a dominant force in continental thought until the popularization of the work of Agamben. His *Homo Sacer* of 1995 presents a theory of life and its abjection, based on a figure whose presence indifferentiates key ontological oppositions such as human and animal, life and death, nomos and anomie, sacred and profane, inside and outside. It makes them indistinct from each other at the moment they need to be incompatible. Indifference thereafter slowly replaces deconstruction as the premier mode of turning the texts of our tradition against themselves through suspending their internalized oppositions. More on Agamben's system soon enough. For now, we close with these five aspects of indifference – disaffection, indifferent difference, extensionalism, content neutral sets and

dialectical suspension – and ruefully note that none of them seem compatible with Kristeva's theory of *signifiance*.

Revolution in Poetic Language presents one fundamental idea: "the dialectical materialist theory of signifiance [...] which will explore the specific ways in which symbolic and/or signifying unity is shattered, and through which a new symbolic device is constituted – a new reality corresponding to a new heterogeneous object" (Kristeva 1984, 181). The book proposes to take the existing structures of dialectical reasoning we will call the philosophies of difference, and locate these abstract, rational, logical and theoretical modes in an actual, biological materiality. Rather than try and prove the dialectic is true, accept the idea of logical truth in Frege. Concede the thetic subject in Husserl, or of enunciation in Benveniste. Concur with Derrida over the logical impossibilities of metaphysical language. Ally herself with Saussure's theory of the sign, or concede that the signifier is a metonymic wild goose chase for an ideal object that never was (her critique of Lacan). By so doing she is able to find alliances with different voices simply because what they say is in accord with how the drives work within the human body, and then by implication suggest that dialectics, extensional logic, phenomenology, deconstruction, linguistics and psychoanalysis are all materially determined due to the biology of the drives. We shall call this biological dialectics. It is somaticized dialectical materialism. It means *signifiance* is an epistemology, not an ontology or aesthetics, and can only be questioned empirically, and scientifically. It cannot be logically disproven. In all the thinkers she engages with, what she finds missing from their work is not rational veracity or logical consistency, but a lack of an embodied affectual drive. And because of this, *signifiance* can reject dominant symbolic structures, and go back to that initial materiality, creating what she calls a "new heterogeneous object" or the semiotic.

Signifiance is the name she gives this drive-directed form of language, as opposed to signification. It speaks to another aspect of the signifier, which is an embodied materiality, before, and after, it is a signifying one. This materiality is the semiotic or all the noises a child makes before it can speak, before it can think of itself as a subject, that do not signify, but are deeply meaningful in the affective, pre-conceptual sense of meaning. Reconstituted after the onset of language and the mirror stage, first as the material basis for the symbolic order and signifying practice, but then also as a materially embodied

memory in every subject, or what is called the engram, put in place during the holophrastic stages of the pre-symbolic which the subject can and will return to in later life (Kristeva 1984, 170), the materiality of *signifiance*, the semiotic, is a means of breaking the dominant hold of the symbolic order. Such a fracture allows one to come into full subjectivity as a practice or process of rejection and reconstitution, rather than a completed, well-adjusted, Austrian or French citizen, with just the occasional neurotic impulses.

What is compelling about this proposition is that Kristeva's *signifiance* refutes the basic idea of contradiction and paradox in rational thought, by claiming that all such ideas do not come out of logical reasoning, which is what contra-diction ultimately is, but thanks to material heterogeneity in the pre-rational infantile body. This, in a sense, future-proofs her work against indifference which is a logical system, not an embodied one. A contradiction, for Kristeva, is not insisting that something both exists and inexists, or that two mutually exclusive objects occupy the same space, or saying one thing and its opposite at the same time. Rather, a contradiction, the basis of all Western rationality including post-structuralism and deconstruction and indifferential reasoning, is the material tension between two drives occupying the same body at the same time in a state of homeostasis (Kristeva 1984, 98). As if this were not disruptive enough, there is also a second aspect to our opening quote to contend with. Not only does *signifiance* present a new kind of signification, and a new idea about contradiction, it also proposes a new object, a heterogeneous object that does not stand in the normal, oppositional or correlational pairing of subject to object, nor function as the material basis for logical proofs, or theories of the subject and the real. It is an object made up of two materialities, an external stimulus, that breast, and an internal one, how much you like it, such that the subject and its drives are located both inside and outside the body in a logically contradictory manner. An object that exists inside and outside at the same time is a recurrent observation in *Revolution* that she then she pushes to its limits in *Powers of Horror* just a few years later. It is a bodily contradiction except that it exists in reality and so is not a contradiction at all. If we asked, extensionally, is there an object that is both inside and outside at the same time, a logical impossibility according to the language of extensionality, Kristeva can point to at

least two, the semiotic and the abject. And add, within this object there are two mutually exclusive drives that actually coexist.

After *Revolution in Poetic Language* we have a new language, *signifiance* not signification, a new rationality, heterogeneity not logical contradiction, and a new object, not separate from the subject but rejected and facilitated by the not-yet-subject. Her refutation of contradiction in favor of heterogeneity should immunize her textual body against all elements of indifference because she is not making a logical argument. This triad of ideas is both the basis of the lasting reputation of Kristeva's work, and the potential point of her irrelevancy for twenty-first century indifferential thought. She is radically nonrelational to it, because *signifiance* does not think. Yet immediately, having said that, as my title suggests, I am struck by a certain indifferential quality to the un-differentiated semiotic heterogeneity of *signifiance*, a certain relation to indetermination, asymbolia, indecision, a kind of affective suspension, an indifferentiation and indetermination, an occupation of a suspended state of inside and outside, thetic stasis and semiotic irruption, a basic suspension of true and false, the neutralization of logical contradiction; which, on the surface at least, is impossible to think via the philosophy of difference.

Kristeva is very clear how much she dislikes indifferentiation within the semiotic, yet at the same time the semiotic *chora*, the engine that drives the rejecting economy of *signifiance* is itself without clear differentiation. She calls *signifiance* "unlimited and unbounded" (Kristeva 1984, 17), i.e. without structural determination. While the *chora* is "uncertain and indeterminate" (Kristeva 1984, 26). When she defines the important process of somatic separation as rejection, she is at pains to explain that the syntax of rejection is "nonexpressive," yet its very definition is its "distinctiveness" (Kristeva 1984, 25). Yet she then immediately distinguishes her signifying practice in, say, a poetic genotext, from the "'drifting-into-non-sense' [*dérive*] that characterizes neurotic discourse" (Kristeva 1984, 51). In her consideration of Frege, she focuses entirely on his infamous statement that all truth objects are indifferentially the same. When speaking of semiotic mimesis, she notes it is a mimesis not of external objects but of the internalization of truth agreements, such as we find in Frege, using a language "which is neither true nor false" (Kristeva 1984, 58).

Moving on, this is all in textual chronological order, her definition of the semiotic *chora* is that it is digital, a continuous syntax of discrete

elements which, however, do not signify, leaving us to ask how do we determine their discreteness then? When Kristeva speaks of the famous genotext she notes it is a space where the subject is "not yet a split unity" (Kristeva 1984, 87). In other words, the subject is in the pre-differential state of in-differentiation. When speaking of sacrifice she admits that without the murder of rejection, the violent insistence on a social boundary of censorship and taboo, then cultures collapse into indifference. "On the other side of this boundary is the a-symbolic, the dissolution of order, the erasing of differences, and finally the disappearance of the human in animality" (Kristeva 1984, 76).

Although she constantly drifts across the landscape of indifference, Kristeva's antipathy for indifferentiation never waivers. In the sections where she defines different orders of discourse, narrative is defined, and rejected, as when "*instinctual dyads* [...] are articulated as nondisjunction (-v-). In other words, the two 'terms' are distinct, differentiated, and opposed but their opposition is later disavowed" (Kristeva 1984, 90; emphasis in original). The disjunction of narrative eradicates the true differentiation of drives that determine language. Similarly meta-discourse is rejected because it neutralizes subjective embodied specificity into a kind of neutral, anonymous, impersonal "we": "an indifferent subject, supposedly everyone" (Kristeva 1984, 95). When she turns to her lengthy engagement with theory, the third discourse, she warns us not to confuse the heterogeneous drives for simply two sides of a logical argument where said dyads "are knotted into a nonsynthetic combination in which 'plus' and 'minus' interpenetrate like the ends of a magnetized chain" (Kristeva 1984, 95), or what she calls the "*Aufhebung* of the instinctual *chora* [...] [is] inseperably symbolic" (Kristeva 1984, 96). The symbolic, therefore, indifferentiates the radical in-difference of material heterogeneity in the form of drives.

Yet at the same time, if *signifiance* is not symbolized, the syntax of pure semiosis, without thesis, positing, symbols, mirrors, phalluses and fathers, she tells us, leads to insanity. The only form of discourse she sanctions is the text or, later, genotext, where the "*instinctual binomial* consists of two opposing terms that alternate in an endless rhythm" a material discontinuity which is "both continuous and discontinuous" (Kristeva 1984, 99; emphasis in original). This, she says, "is not simply a unity but a plural totality with separate members that have no identity but constitute the place where the drives are applied"

(Kristeva 1984, 101). The semiotic indifferentiates the copula or correlation of continuity and discontinuity; it is both at the same time. A plural totality where the members have no identity but constitute the place, is purely and simply a definition of extensional, indifferent sets, except that, when they lack essence and content, what keeps them consistent is the force of drives, not mathematical axioms. These are not unreasonable positions, but when Kristeva then "talks" with Hegel it is to bemoan that his concept of force is the force of thought only, lacking in cathexis, which results in the collapse of the actuality of material substances "unresistingly into an undifferentiated unity" (Kristeva 1984, 116). Rejection, she argues, is only possible physically, yet the signifying crucible of the semiotic *chora*, the origin of all rejection, has to say no to negation by entering into symbolization, "saving it from foundering in inarticulable instinctuality" (Kristeva 1984, 148), or what we are calling drive-indifference. Left to its own devices, without stasis, semiotic "rejection could not produce something *new* and displace boundaries; it would be merely mechanical repetition of an undifferentiated 'identity'" (Kristeva 1984, 171; emphasis in original). And so on and so forth. Time and again across the entire body of the text, Kristeva describes the complex economy and syntax of thesis and rejection, rejection and thesis. It is an economy that here appears to capture what can only be called Kristeva's fort-da game with indifference. Sending it away, only to call it back. *Signifiance* is not indifferent, but there would be no *signifiance* without this complex game of indifference she is playing so beautifully: DA! And yet Kristeva's entire system is totally incompatible with indifferential philosophy, at least that practiced by Giorgio Agamben: FORT!

Agamben has created a philosophical archeology of signatures for the purpose of their indifferential suspension, as opposed to their differential deconstruction. Western metaphysics is dominated by pairs, correlations, couples, of oppositional terms, as Derrida has proven, and as the drives demand. These can be located in a dialectical tension where one term is the founding, common, universal one, essence or the death drive; and the other is the founded, proper, specific multiple, property or the life drive. This abstract model can be found as the basis of all our major concepts. Agamben calls these meta-signs, signatures. It is assumed that the word "language" extends over objects in the world which actuate it. Language is composed of signs. Yet when you extend language over all signs, you discover that there

is no sign for language qua language. This is Russell's famous barber paradox, language as the system that names everything that does not name itself. It cannot, due to Gödel's incompleteness theorems. This is why language never has the floor, as Heidegger famously lamented. It is the floor. If you remain in the Greek model of an ontology of concepts as essences, you will never resolve this problem. Look at it from the other direction, signs as signs. What if signs did not need structuration by a *langue*, what if there were a pure free-play of the signifier? Why, then there would be no code and this is either impossible (Derrida) or life-threatening (Kristeva).

Agamben's next discovery is perhaps even more disturbing. He says, take the term in question, here "language." Although he calls this a signature, as I have recently shown, it is actually the name of a set (Watkin 2021). Language itself as a set is "in force without signification," a phrase Agamben takes from Kafka's "Before the Law" (Agamben 1998, 49–62). Language does not have a referent, an actual signified; rather, it is the sign we use for any "linguistic" system. There is no *actual* language, only what we have said about it so far. In the set [language] are all statements about language ever made in the West, for example since the Greeks. At any one time in history – let's take 1982, the year Agamben first published this theory (Agamben 1991) – the set [language] contains both all the statements on language, and specifically some statements that are paradigmatic of language at that time. These paradigmatic statements have to follow one structural rule, that of the dialectical pairing of a common and proper because, in the West, no other ontology or epistemology is possible to us. Thus, one paradigm will be defined as the foundation or common, and the other as the actuation of real examples of this foundation. Agamben calls this the basic economy or *oikonomia* of all signatures or all our concepts (Watkin 2014, 216–20). The motility of the economy keeps the signature alive. When that motility falters, for example if some bright spark questions Saussure's structural view of linguistics, or Derridean deconstruction, the new paradigms have to take up the two key positions of common and proper.

All this movement, all this frenzied activity, just to keep Western concepts in a state of homeostatic stability, because built into every signatory unity is its conceptual death. Death in philosophy comes in the form of irresolvable contradiction and paradox: our language/barber problem. If language is a sign, then the sign is made up of a

foundation, meaning, the signified. Meanings are stable, there will always be red, rabbits, love, the phallus. The signified is the common. This makes the signifier the proper, all those words changing over time. Yet is this true, or did I get it mixed up? If there is no language without signifiers, which makes sense, then surely it is the materiality of the signifier that is the foundation of language, and meaning comes after? After all, every culture uses semiotic modalities of expression; these are universal, according to Kristeva for example, as they are based on bodily drives that we all have. As to what they signify, that depends on contingent social forces.

If the sign is the paradigmatic example of language for Derrida and Kristeva, in 1982, which is the common, and which is the proper? Is the signified the common? Yes and no. Is the signifier the proper? No and yes. This moment of indistinction – which is identity, which is different, which is common, which is proper – indifferentially suspends the dialectical economy. Motility comes to a halt. This dialectic suspension, or dialectic at a standstill as Walter Benjamin describes it, puts the signature at risk. Why? Because the signature [language], currently, in 1982, filled with the paradigm of the sign, is itself contentless, content neutral; it is just the set as a receptacle for the dialectical economy of oppositions between the one and the many. Even worse, language as a signature, is not actually a sign. It does not refer. It is a signifier with no referent, an asymbolic materiality of expression, whose "meaning" lies in the fact of its economic motility between two positions, that of conceptual stability, identity, and its disruption by multiplicity, difference. As long as two terms battle it out below, the signature is secure above, whichever term wins; but, as soon as the oppositional differential positions become mixed up, such that the economic motility of the machine comes to a halt, is suspended, this becomes an existential threat to the whole system, which only lives qua economical motility. Thus, it must never stop, and yet it has to, because it is based on an illogicality that can never be resolved unless you accept the replacement of Aristotelian classes with extensional sets. At this point, the content of the signature, here the sign, now totally exhausted, is replaced by new paradigms, and the machine rises from the ashes and begins all over again.

Everything about this system both echoes and negates everything that Kristeva calls *signifiance*. The two systems are absolutely irreconcilable and yet exceptionally similar. They overlap remarkably

on issues of signification, sacrifice, inside/outside, economy, semiotics, motility, poetics, life, death, and the body. In fact, at second glance, one can see that in a sense indifferential suspension and the heterogeneous economy of *signifiance* are almost identical. Both consider a homeostatic economy, and go so far as to define being as the economy itself. Both appreciate that said economy runs the risk of dramatic indistinction, indifferentiation, asymbolia, and contentlessness. The difference is that Agamben openly encourages the permanent inoperativity of the homeostasis between common and proper, while Kristeva's *signifiance* actively encourages the economy to avoid the death that would be its suspension. Second, while both appreciate that the economy of heterogeneity is based on the economy of mutually exclusive yet totally interlinked positions, the common, death, the proper, life (or is it the other way around?), for Agamben this is an economy of contradiction, i.e. self-negating because it is based on not being contradictory. For Kristeva, on the other hand, this is an economy of heterogeneity, not contradiction. As we have seen, heterogeneity is precognitive; it exists before logical thought. This is absolutely one of the most explosive and fascinating conversations of our age, whichever side you choose.

If Agambenian indifference makes it impossible to recuperate Kristeva's commitment to the sign, semiotics, sacrifice and the body, on the surface Badiou's version looks equally inhospitable to *signifiance.* His work is not linguistically based, or embodied; in fact, he openly mocks such systems in *Logics of Worlds* (Badiou 2009, 1–10). Yet, at the same time, Badiou shares a great deal in common with Kristeva: dialectics, materiality, radical irruption, retroaction, Lacan, the real, revolution, and of course a theory of the subject. More pertinently, Kristeva's description of the prelinguistic, the archaic infant, the semiotic *chora*, rejection, its experiments with cathexis and its relation to the maternal body, even abjection, in many instances overlap with Badiou's theory of indifferent sets in a manner quite surprising. Not least because Kristeva describes the semiotic as undifferentiated, both in the *chora*, and later in *signifiance.* In her early work at least, Kristeva is at pains to describe pre-signifying states such as the semiotic *chora*, and then the abject, as facilitations of the symbolic signifying system, but our contention is different. The pre-symbolic is not the affective investment into the structure of the sign, not least because, as we have seen, the sign has been indifferentially suspended by Agamben, and totally abandoned by Badiou. And what comes "before" language is

not the functionality of separation. That is a retrospective application of how we think now onto how we didn't think at all then, as a very young child. Instead, before we speak and thus separate, we collect and combine. Sets come before signs, numbers precede words, the semiotic is not a proto-linguistic function at all, but a system of multiplicities and their gathering into contentless ones, which is then later overwritten by the intensional nature of expression. Gathered, in Kristeva, by affect-laden, material semiotics. What if the semiotic did not describe the pre-linguistic function of material separation, but the pre-linguistic function of material collection? Let's take some basic functions from Badiou's indifferential set theory and test that.

The child is not yet born. They live in a state of blissful indistinction, in the womb, with the maternal body. In that every material need of the child is met immediately, they are not perceived as needs. Once they are born and they slowly come to appreciate they are a separate body, the radical indistinction of the maternal body becomes the origin of its abjection, its cultural association with being unclean, especially around issues of menstruation and food. *Powers of Horror* is an essay on indifference, on our horror of the indistinction between subject and object. The abjection of some matter is due to its partiality, it defines a zone of indistinction as Agamben would call it, between subject and object. However, the abject horror associated with the maternal body is due to another kind of indistinction, that of totalization. The body of the mother is typical of the indifference of pure determination: there is no relationality with the mother's body because there is no distinction between the child and her body. She is overwhelming, she has no outside, she is infinite, she possesses no gaps, she is non-successive. In Kristeva, the mother is akin to mathematical being. Like being, she has no capacity for relation, because she is the ground of all relation. Being has no outside, it is not even the boundary of the set, because boundary suggests a limit between one being and another being and the logic of sets does not allow this. Being, determined by the classical logic of the void set, is unique. All mothers are the same mother, like all truths in Frege. The mother, on this reading, *is* truth: a single, indistinct, impossible-to-argue-with fact. Badiou calls her nature.

Kristeva tells us the other monstrous function of the mother is her generative ability. She herself knows of no separation yet she generates new object-subjects. This I think explains her abject nature more clearly. She has no outside, she is complete without distinction

or parts, and yet from inside she makes new ones, meaning again the distinction between inside and outside is problematized. However, this impossible function is deemed impossible only for Aristotelian classes. When it comes to extensional sets it is not only eminently possible, it is the very definition of what sets do. All sets emerge from that initial void set, our mother set, due to certain axioms of recurrence, the +1, collection, and the fact that the empty set never belongs but can always be included. Actual infinities are made up of recurrent collections of empty sets, the most miraculous result in set theory and ontology. What is clearly paradoxical here is that the maternal body can be complete, and yet from it can emerge something that is not her body, which itself is complete, and which does not leave the mother incomplete. More than this, birth contravenes the maternal essence, its totalizing indistinctness. How can you separate an object from an inseparable unity? This is only a problem for necrophiliac minds, as Kristeva memorably calls them (Kristeva 1984, 13). Living minds look at extensional set theory as the basis of our ontology, rather than Aristotelian classes, and realize this is the very essence of sets. Because the maternal being is not complete, it "is-not," it allows structures to attain stable consistency when they are radically incomplete, when they are infinite, when they are empty, when they proliferate, when they are endlessly divisible, when their contents are neutral, when they experience birth and death, when they are semiotic.

The basic recurrent process of collection, and the +1 generation of sets out of literally nothing, leads to some qualities of sets that are perpetually astonishing and directly pertinent to the maternal body and the separation of the infant. For example, the inside of sets is larger than their overall size. Like the mother's body, every set contains more than its apparent being, that being its cardinal number or how big it is. For example, the set of zero contains one empty receptacle determined by the axiom of collection or separation, what we might call the axiom of the semiotic. This empty set, just born from the fullness of the maternal totality, becomes our semiotic *chora* providing us with a mathematics of the receptacle, as well as the mathematics of the generative nature of the receptacle, or what makes it a crucible for the generation of the syntax of the semiotic. No sooner does the child experience its emptiness – that it is a receptacle, a collection – than materiality and cathexis flood the *chora*, said receptacle, in an infinity of undifferentiated semiotics, infinite because finitude is a meaningful,

consistent structure. Not only is this a good fit for the semiotic *chora*, it appears to me the only viable explanation of how it functions.

So we have being qua void as a model for the maternal body. We have the child as emerging out of the maternal, the +1 and collection functions, where it finds its void immediately filling up. It is filled, Kristeva tells us, with an infinite, stable, uncountable, and thus noncompletable set of semiotic expressiveness. The *chora* is not some mystical neoplatonic essence function, but simply any infinite set. Inside the *chora*, those semiotic materialities are multiples. Multiples are pre-linguistic, content neutral, yet distinct and syntactically ordered differential units that are totally consistent within an infinite set: the child. The semiotic is, in other words, composed of multiples, not pre-signifying signifiers.

Kristeva uses the term "infinity" to describe her semiotic on a regular basis, always in the negative. Yet another astonishing result of basic set theory is that infinite sets not only exist, and are stable, but that finite sets are derived from them, they come after. Like the finitude of the set of the infant as they cease to be empty, and slowly fill themselves with semiotic material in a nonclosed yet consistent count: an actual infinity. Kristeva's fear of infinite semiotics is either misplaced, or what she fears in her patients is not infinity but something else. Schizophrenics are not infinite sets. Infinity, in set theory, is a stable collection of content-neutral multiples. The semiotic is also composed of content-neutral multiples, noises that are collected in the body and in the pre-conscious mind, those engrams, without their having any referential meaning yet. The infinite is also defined as an uncountable yet stable set. The semiotic *chora* is the same. It is a stable receptacle, within which are collected emotionally directed noises. There is no limit or way of counting semiotics, yet they are placed in a syntax, and they are enclosed in a set. This makes the archaic child, that self-filling void set, immediately full of infinite noise, infinite, that is, as uncountable yet consistent.

It appears impossible to think that the dialectic of drives is manifested in anything other than the prelinguistic signifier but, as we are arguing, it is just as credible to say that the prelinguistic is not semiotic but numerical. Where does this leave the separation of the infant? Kristeva argues that separation occurs piecemeal as the child plays with its voice, the breast, vomit, spools and finally mirrors. Yet what would happen if the reverse were the case? The

child's semiotic *chora* is not then a means of learning its own separation and enclosedness through learning to separate the object, as Hegel contends, but is the child learning to collect. To cathect is to collect. The precognitive experiments are actually experiments in agglomeration, collection, gathering, togetherness, and infinity. What the child is toying with in the semiotic *chora* is not a transition into subjective finitude, but the reality of its subjective infinitude. Isn't that a better description of the later, retroactive process of *signifiance*? The finitude of subjectivity is a later construction of the infinity of being. This explains why *signifiance* and the semiotic irruption exist, because we are infinite beings, before and after we are finite subjects. The *sujet en procès* is the subject who experiences this, a stable set, a subject, full of an infinity of material, the semiotic, that is content neutral, breaks with referential signifieds, and which is built out of the void, the semiotic *chora*.

What is this mouth of mine? What is its function? Does it expel and separate, or ingest and collect? It collects, and gathers, and agglomerates. The eyes do the same. The ears, these hands, our skin, noses. All of our proprioceptive senses are modalities of sense-data collection, forming into engrammatic neural patterns, which become conscious forms, to which society gives names and meanings. As this happens, energy is expended, pleasure provided, as Freud suspected, but collection is not a dialectical process of signification, at least not at first. So, when does separation occur? In a sense, it never does. We are not separate. We are closed loop systems. We are DNA continuum bearers, not separate organisms worried about our organs. We are multiples of multiples. Our mothers remain as much inside of us as we were once inside of them, without contradiction or abjection, thanks to the axioms of sets. Perhaps it is time to accept that there is no difference between the child and its mother, between subjects and objects, between girls and boys, between humans and animals. This is the truth of nature, and it should not disgust us.

Signifiance: the embodied materiality of the mathematical miracle of being. That we are all infinite sets, composed of content-neutral and non-relational collections of indifferent zeros. Can mathematics be indifferent *and* embodied? I leave that question hanging, suspended, rejected, abjected, yet hopefully productive.

References

Agamben, Giorgio. 1991. *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*. Translated by Karen E. Pinkus with Michael Hardt. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

———. 1998. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Badiou, Alain. 2005. *Being and Event*. Translated by Oliver Feltham. London: Continuum.

———. 2009. *Logics of Worlds*. Translated by Alberto Toscano. London: Continuum.

Bar-Am, Nimrod. 2008. *Extensionalism: The Revolution in Logic*. New York: Springer.

Hegel, G. W. F. 1977. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated by A. V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kristeva, Julia. 1982. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection.* Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.

———.1984. *Revolution in Poetic Language.* Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.

Watkin, William. 2014. *Agamben and Indifference.* London: Rowman & Littlefield International.

———. 2017. *Badiou and Indifferent Being*. London: Bloomsbury.

———. 2021. "A Mathematised Archaeology of Ontology: Agamben's Modal Ontology Mapped Onto Badiou's Mathematised Ontology." *Ethics & Politics* 22, no. 3 (2020): 13–47.

Tyler James Bennett

Kristeva as Semiotician Today[1]

Abstract

Even a cursory exploration of the international semiotics scene today reveals that the work of Julia Kristeva is underrepresented. The radicalism of her texts is an abiding reason for the fact that *Sēmeiōtikē* remains stubbornly "inconvertible" (Nikolchina 2011) into mainstream semiotics. This essay elaborates two opposed philosophical temperaments and a series of functional dualisms, including *signification* vs. *communication* and *quasi-sign* vs. *fully fledged sign,* in connection with Kristeva's own dualism, the *symbolic* vs. the *semiotic*. The quasi-sign doctrine is just one example of how Kristevan dualisms make possible non-reductive existential and social commitments and afford a written textual method applicable across the board in general semiotics. The Kristevan methods of *polylogue, narrativization,* and *auto-critique* are highest-order humanities tools for regulating ideology at the level of the text; they also contribute to the inconvertibility of Kristeva's books as hermetic and seemingly incomprehensible artifacts. The interest of these methods is intractable to quantitative methods and non-describable by natural science. This is one reason we provide such an effective interdisciplinary framework in humanities research – as semiotics aligns more and more with the struggle to revitalize the problematic humanities, Kristeva remains/returns as a core theoretic coordinate.

Keywords

---

1. Signification and communication (and the two temperaments)

The titles of a few of Kristeva's major works give an accurate if still ambiguous picture of why she is inconvertible: *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980), *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (1987), *Strangers to Ourselves* (1988), and *New Maladies of the Soul* (1993). Theory-building enacts the superposition of codes and the transposition of terms between those codes. The most important books on semiotics have always been mostly solipsistic meditations on signification alone, with no clear demarcation between theory and practice – think of Roland Barthes' *Elements of Semiology* (1964), Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1967), or Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things* (1966). "Nevertheless, in semiotics a distinction must be made between structures of communication and those of signification" (Tarasti 2000, 126). This is the methodological quandary of general semiotics: how to accept the provisional dualisms necessary for making normative judgments, while resisting the reification and mystification entailed by any neat separation of signification from communication? If we are to make any generalizations at all, some dualism is always required. But in order not to reify the distinction two points must be kept in mind:

1. Signification and communication do not exist in isolation from each other, and
2. The interest of semiotics is ultimately not in one or the other, but rather in their interpenetration

Necessary for social and existential commitment is the ability to draw a distinction between directions of movement in synthesis and analysis, descending or ascending levels. By means of accepting such provisional distinctions

> one can speak of authenticity of time, place, and subject (or "actor"). Centrifugal and centripetal forces operate these three dimensions. Greimas calls the centrifugal force, which makes a text move in the inner or outer sense, *débrayage* (disengagement), and the centripetal force *embrayage* (engagement). (Tarasti 2000, 118)

Tyler James Bennett

In an essay devoted to the linguist and former president of the International Association for Semiotic Studies, Émile Benveniste, Kristeva applauds his version of the same dualism, which he calls the *semiotic* and the *semantic* – the semiotic corresponding (imperfectly) to the formalism and substrate-independence of signification, and the semantic to context-specific channels of communication. Kristeva's essay, collected in *Passions of our Time*, deals mostly with Benveniste's *Problems of General Linguistics* (1966), where he gives his most systematic treatment of this dualism. As Kristeva writes,

> In discussion with Saussure and his conception of signs, the distinctive elements of the linguistic system, Benveniste introduced *two types in the signifyingness* of language: "the" *semiotic* and "the" *semantic.* The *semiotic* [....] is a closed, generic, binary, intralinguistic, systematizing, and institutional meaning, which is defined by a "paradigmatic" and "substitution" relation. The *"semantic"* is [...] defined by a relation of "connection" or "syntagm," where the "sign" (the *semiotic*) becomes "word" by the "activity of the speaker." (Kristeva 2019, 39; emphasis in original).

Kristeva does not mention that what Benveniste calls the semantic is (imperfectly) what she calls the semiotic, or that what he calls the semiotic is what she calls the symbolic (Kristeva 1984, 25). His characterization of an elemental dualism adheres closely to the traditional structural-semiological notion of signification, whereas Kristeva's characterization of the same dualism is, interestingly, more reminiscent of the Peircean biosemiotic way of describing things, where "the semiotic" rather corresponds to that which exceeds the established formal structure of signification. "Her concern is with the aporia of sensation, irreducible to any representation, yet dependent upon it; and with the psyche as a stratified significance that the linguistic and cognitive imperialisms conceal and redistribute along the sole dimension of language" (Nikolchina 2004, 13). For Kristeva, the semiotic is not just a node in a pre-established network of correlations between expression and content; it is rather the forging of new correlations and the interpretive plenitude upon which this draws, and that is indeed very close to its description in much Peircean biosemiotics, with the emphasis upon the interpretant, as well as in

Umberto Eco (1976), whose early position is, again, far more nuanced than his detractors suggest.

Her major difference from the tradition of Peircean bio- and cognitive semiotics is that Kristeva, like her contemporaries in second-generation semiology, refuses to name "semiosis" directly. As with Derrida's *différance,* the closest we may get to naming semiosis is by tracing the ruptures and discontinuities it produces at the level of the symbolic – by mapping the inadequacy of extant closed structures of signification. This is the Lacanian law: the "real" is never more than a disruption at the level of the symbolic (Lacan 1977), not because there is no reality, but because as soon as one names it concretely it has already been absorbed and foreclosed by the symbolic. Kristeva moves a step closer than her forebears to a positive account of semiosis by defining the semiotic *not* as the formal structure of signification, but rather as the drives, impulses, and sensorimotor affective traces which *intersect* with the symbolic. Though their terminologies do not accord perfectly, Kristeva notes that Benveniste is also mainly interested in this intersection, or *interpenetration* as it may be more accurately named.

> Benveniste focused on surpassing the Saussurian notion of the sign and language as a system [...] opening a new dimension of the signifying process [...] "We are just beginning to think about a property that is not yet definable in an integral way"; this orientation that crosses through linguistics "will impose a reorganization of the apparatus of human sciences." (Kristeva 2019, 39–40)

This unspeakable property (which the Peirceans call semiosis, and which Derrida more cautiously traces as *différance*) is located at the intersection of signification and communication. While Kristeva gets closer than Derrida to semiosis (through her postulate of the *chora* and her strategic redefinition of the semiotic), closer to the "irrepresentable transphallic jouissance of a prelinguistic sensory fusion" (Nikolchina 2004, 6), the fact remains that her description of the "thetic" moment (Kristeva 1984: 44–48) of interpenetration remains mostly differential, "immanent" and non-positivist. Despite *sémiologie* often being opposed to existentialism[2] and phenomenology in the Heideggerian, Hegelian, as well as the Sartrean senses, Kristevan *sēmeiōtikē* certainly shares

86

---

[2]   Sartre and Kristeva are usually situated at opposite ends of the spectrum in the debate about *form and social commitment*.

Tarasti's philosophical temperament and preoccupation with the notion of negation. As already noted, negativity is one of the hallmarks of Kristeva's writing, whose convenient synecdoche is *Kristeva's crucible* – the often-cited gauntlet in *Revolution in Poetic Language*:

> Going through the experience of this crucible exposes the subject to impossible dangers: relinquishing his identity in rhythm, dissolving the buffer of reality in a mobile discontinuity, leaving the shelter of the family, the state, or religion. The commotion the practice creates spares nothing: it destroys all constancy to produce another and then destroys that one as well. (Kristeva 1984, 103–104)

The title of Miglena Nikolchina's 2004 *Matricide in Language* captures the forbidding tone of Kristeva's negativity quite well, as it channels "the lethal, depersonalizing tendency of the feminine erotic" (Nikolchina 2004, 7). According to her, prior to negation the subject exists as an unchallenged (and un-self-aware) formal structure. It is outside of time and not conceived in terms of any substrate, unsent by any sender and unreceived by any receiver. This formal closure and perfection is only broken by its actualization in the communication substrate:

> the recognition of the epistemological space as split into two irreconcilable types of thought where "the one is articulated only through its ignorance of the other: representation and its production, the ratiocination of objects and the dialectic of their process (of their becoming)" [Kristeva, *Polylogue*] [...] (Nikolchina 2004, 29)

This recognition of the epistemological space as split, always open, and never saturated results from the realization that the production of the sign and of the subject cannot be given within the homogeneous sphere of concepts and ideas.

The emphasis on negation dictates stylistic concerns that differ somewhat between Tarasti and Kristeva-Nikolchina. Both completely reject the possibility of explaining interpenetration in the language of natural science, defending the methods of the humanities, from exegesis to hermeneutics and poetics, to translation, dialectics and autobiography. In Tarasti's case, the existential presence of the subject

is manifested in the text by means of personal asides, anecdotes, and musing in a meandering way from topic to topic, and this lends itself to being read as though dictated by a man seated by the fire in his country residence in the forest. In contrast, Kristeva's method is much closer to that lethal, de-personalizing auto-critique, in which metatheory is piled upon metatheory to the point that any narrating subject or baseline object language crumbles beneath the reader's feet. When it comes to textual method, or *how to write semiotics*, there is no better teacher than Kristeva. This is the topic of the third section of this essay: narrativity, the polylogue, and auto-critique. What Tarasti and Kristeva truly share, beyond their emphasis on negation, is an interest in "[w]hat is behind, before or after, outside or too much inside" the *communicated sign* (Eco 1979, 317). That is, by remaining committed to the elemental distinction between signification and communication, they make it possible to distinguish *sign* from *non-sign.* The next section summarizes the *quasi-sign doctrine*, in which, in addition to differentiating the sign and the non-sign, *two types of non-sign* are invented. The interpretive effects of the various textual methods discussed in the third section will be conceptualized on the basis of how they engage with quasi-signs.

2. The quasi-sign doctrine

Quasi-signs are precisely the signs that Eco excludes from the domain of semiotics proper, those "behind, before or after" actualized signs, entailing consideration of the communication substrate as distinct from the matrix of signification, thus inviting hybridization with the vocabularies of the applied disciplines, against which Eco warned.

It was also Eco who coined the notion of semiotic threshold. While the lower threshold has classically served to theorize the debate around non-linguistic (and non-human) meaning, the upper threshold has received less attention. Or rather, the upper threshold has rarely been theorized as such, whereas the idea for which it stands – a post-semiotic automatization of meaning facilitated by various technologies of communication – has actually always been of great interest, particularly for structural semiology. Of course, Jean Baudrillard's notion of simulacra (1994) is emblematic of the various terms to label post-semiotic quasi-signs. In fact, one could say that the preoccupation with either the upper or lower threshold, and their limit cases, tends
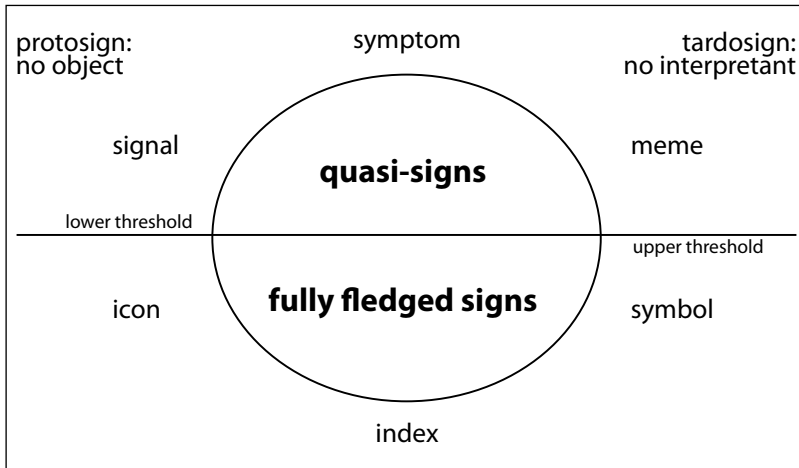
Figure 2: The quasi-sign doctrine (adapted from Bennett 2021, 193)

to align pretty consistently with the differences in philosophical temperament in semiotics today (those interested in simple non-human signs tend to be more optimistic, and those interested in post-symbolic technological signs more pessimistic). In other words, Kristeva's negative temperament tends to focus more on the dangers of post-semiotic quasi-signs, showing much less interest in the lower threshold, particularly as it relates to questions of non-human signs. This is not to say that she is uninterested in sensorimotor affects and drives – on the contrary, this is what the *chora* (Kristeva 1984, 25) is all about – but simply that her main concern remains above the upper threshold, where the (Lacanian) symbolic interpellates the subject into the structure of another order. This is why there are two types of quasi-sign. One of them specifies the major interest of the group of pessimistic semiologists committed to negation as a starting point. This interest is usually called *ideology* and its critique, and has to do with the crystallization and ossification of the dynamic, vital, and plural into what Eco calls sclerotic signs. In these sign complexes one could include fundamentalism, mob mentality, the loss of the referent, and, later, higher symbolic technologies of data processing and primitive artificial intelligence (see Figure 3). In all these cases there is an automatization in the sense of a decrease in deliberation[3] on the object, or a decrease in the production of an interpretant, to the extent that the formerly fully fledged sign appears to regress to a pre-semiotic

---

3   Borrowing from the paradigm of biosemiotics, this could also be characterized as a decrease in *choice* (Kull 2018), or a diminishment of *agency* (Sharov and Tønnessen 2022) on the part of the organism.

sign, like a virus or bacterium – but there are important differences between the post-semiotic *tardo-sign* and what Giorgio Prodi called the *proto-sign* (Prodi 1988). This is why there must be two types of quasi-sign. Tarasti is hip to quasi-signs, but names them differently. He divides them into *pre-signs* and *post-signs* (Tarasti 2000, 7).

Figure 2 shows the first distinction, between fully fledged signs and quasi-signs. Charles Sanders Peirce's icon-index-symbol maps on to contextually grounded and "triadic" signs; and the symptom-signal-meme triad maps on to decontextualized, dyadic quasi-signs.[4] We introduce a new distinction between the *proto-sign* (a term already widely used in biosemiotics) and the *tardo-sign* (a wholly new invention), the two types of quasi-sign. The proto-sign corresponds to what Tarasti calls the pre-sign. In the biosemiotic understanding derived from Giorgio Prodi and developed by Alexi Sharov and Morten Tønnessen (2022), proto-signs are the simple biological precursors of proper signs, such as those found in bacteria. For Tarasti, proto-/pre-signs are not found exclusively in simple biology, but may be found in any substrate, being defined rather formally by their potentiality and indeterminacy (and not according to communication context or species), yet lacking (virtual) symbolic codification. The tardo-sign corresponds to Tarasti's post-sign, overlapping with similar theories in the critique of ideology, simulacra, and the homogenizing and decontextualizing effects of information and communication technologies. Early-stage tardo-signs like ideology and fundamentalism exist on a continuum with late-stage tardo-signs like memes, viral videos, and artificial intelligence: they comprise varying degrees of the automatization of the biological agent's interpretive activity. Figure 3 shows how tardo-signs map on to different kinds of decontextualized, post-symbolic artifacts.

The quasi-sign doctrine is necessary today when we are still "in the process of perishing as the being of language continues to shine ever brighter upon our horizon" (Foucault 1970, 386), and whose menacing light is only growing brighter. The panopticon (Foucault 1977) started out as a hypothetical physical prison of total surveillance, but today is a very *real* if still *virtual* prison. Whereas Jacques Derrida foretold the replacement of speech by *writing* (Derrida 1969), we now see that speech, as the primary form of human communication, has been replaced not by writing per se, but by texting, chatting, and sharing.

---

[4] The six terms of the quasi-sign doctrine are derived in a modified form from Thomas A. Sebeok (1975). For a full explanation of this derivation, see Bennett 2021, 191–204.

When, in the 1970s, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari asserted in *Anti-Oedipus* that the interpreting subject should be treated as nothing more than a *recording surface* (Deleuze and Guattari 2009: 4, 11, 16, 71), it was not completely clear what they meant; but now we see: subjectivity is mediated by a series of screens where every input and output is recorded. The dramatic intrusion of communication technology into every dimension of public and private life is today so pervasive as almost not even to merit mentioning – the point is that *second-generation semiology anticipated the paradigm shift to life online;*[5] and that the Lacanian notion of the symbolic – its dangers and promises – looms behind all of these theorists. They have been indirectly developing the quasi-sign doctrine all this time.

When it comes to Peirce and ideology critique, the work of Terrence Deacon affords a unique descriptive insight into the cognitive reality and specific nature of ideology. His *cognitive penumbra* (Deacon 2006, 26–27), *golems* (Deacon 2012, 89), and the so-called *inertia of mental content* (Deacon 2012, 518) also work in this direction. Following this biosemiotic line of thinking, the neurolinguist John Schumann, another professor at the University of California, speaks of *the autonomy of the symbolic*; and he, for one, *does* emphasize its dark side (like Lacan). Existing applications of Peirce to notions of the psychoanalytic unconscious exist (see Bennett 2021, 154–63). In the Peircean camp, it is probably Søren Brier, in *Cybersemiotics* (2008), who most helps us in the effort to define quasi-signs (Brier 2008; 370).
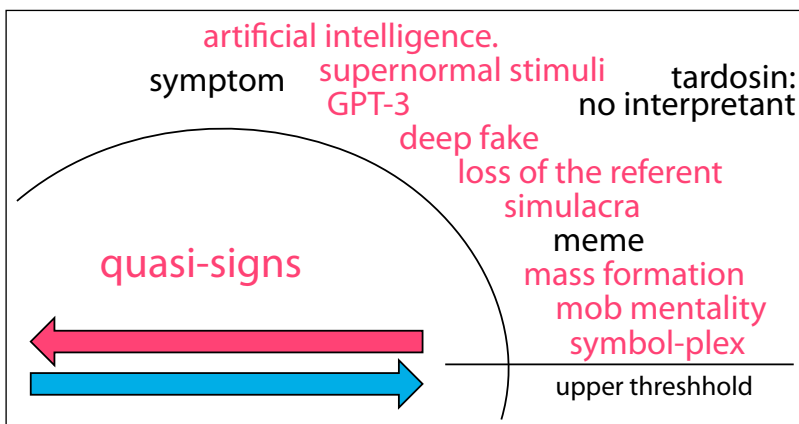

Figure 3: The continuum of tardo-signs

---

5   For a full-length treatment of this topic, follow this link to a lecture given on the topic at Palacký University Olomouc 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RgMvbN2OAfc

Brier reminds us that all these technologies – artificial intelligence and information and communication technologies – fail to exhibit the semiotic capacities of living beings. At most, they succeed in producing quasi-signs, but in what cases are quasi-signs used by organic beings? And what is the difference between a digitally automated quasi-sign and a simple, pre-semiotic proto-sign? Brier does not ask these questions as quasi-signs are only a secondary consideration for him and his approach is avowedly Peircean, completely disinterested in structural semiology and deconstruction, and predictably does not share their pessimistic philosophical temperament.

The diagrams above depict a cycle of movements between the kinds of signs. Signs both generate and *de*generate: there are two directions of movement. The differing temperaments encountered in semiotics today are related to the preoccupation with one or the other direction by different intellectual factions. Part of the doctrine developed here is that any adequate understanding of the current array of tardo-signs must consider both directions and will thus exhibit a dual temperament: both seriously pessimistic (about the likelihood of overcoming convergent global crises by means of incremental social change), and profoundly optimistic (about the real possibility of transcendence, and the dual nature of the symbolic as potentially facilitating this transcendence). Narrativization, the polylogue, and auto-critique may be understood as textual tools for regulating the production of quasi-signs.

3. Narrativizing theory – the polylogue

The commitment to certain provisional dualisms affords a further number of possible commitments and distinctions, as detailed above. The Hjelmslevian dualism of form and substance stratifies the planes of content and expression into a fourfold system charged with special descriptive power. Although the inner machinations of the Peirce-Hjelmslev hybrid (Bennett 2021, 14) will not be discussed further here, the style of writing under consideration in this section can only be precisely defined by means of this hybrid, as the retroactive action of the substance of the signifier upon the form of the signified. The most obvious examples of this creative critical writing come from the surrealist tradition, but in principle it may be enacted in unlimited ways,

when the otherwise inessential features of the channel are repurposed to reorganize the contents of the message. This crypto-Hjelmslevian signature writing was first proposed by Roland Barthes, when he called attention to the difference between the secondary *metalinguistic* and *connotative* semiotic systems (Barthes 1969, 17). Only a few years later, Jacques Derrida proposed the same Hjelmslevian (1976, 57–58) basis for understanding his own version of this writing, which he called *archi-écriture* (arche-writing) (see Derrida 1976; 110, 128, 140, 228). In all these cases, there is a special *genre* of theoretical writing connected to ideology critique, which has always implicated structural semiology. Kristeva first named it *auto-critique* in the oft-cited passage that always bears quoting in full:

> Semiotics is therefore a mode of thought where science sees itself as (is conscious of itself as) a theory. At every instant of its production, semiotics thinks of its object, its instruments and the relation between them, and in so doing thinks (of) itself: as a result of this reflection, it becomes the theory of the very science it constitutes. This means that semiotics is at once a re-evaluation of its object and/ or of its models, a critique both of these models (and therefore of the sciences from which they are borrowed) and of itself (as a system of stable truths). As the meeting-point of the sciences and an endless theoretical process, semiotics cannot harden into *a* science let alone into *the* science, for it is an open form of research, a constant critique that turns back on itself and offers its own auto-critique. As it is its own theory, semiotics is the kind of thought which, without raising itself to the level of a system, is still capable of modelling (thinking) itself. (Kristeva 1986, 77; emphasis in original)

Two or more non-equivalent descriptive systems are superimposed; terms between those systems are transposed; contradictions between the systems are foregrounded and preserved. We could say that *all* rational inquiry proceeds in this manner – but in this specific kind of writing, at a certain pitch of metalinguistic hyperdensity, the object-language/metalanguage distinction breaks down as metalanguage is piled on metalanguage. For this early period of second-generation semiology, the style of writing (of auto-critique) is characterized precisely by this pitch of hyperdensity and breakdown.

Kristeva's early writing is full of heterogeneous terms, often drawn from the most unlikely sources. It sometimes leaves the impression of an elaborate cipher. In one essay only ("The Bounded Text"), she borrows terms from such a variegated assembly of authors as Bakhtin (*ideologeme*), Greimas (*sememe*), Quine (his *reification of universals*), Shklovksy (*loop*), von Wright (*alethic, deontic*), Tesniere (*junctive, translative*), etc. Her later works grow more restrained, and yet drastically transplanted words continue to appear, introducing the flavor of different metalanguages, or foreign tongues, and exotic alphabets. (Nikolchina 2004, 53)

Over and above her social and existential commitments, it is the inscrutable, hermetic result of these procedures that is the most, or perhaps the second-most, inconvertible feature of Kristeva's work. She

enacts the sliding of the theoretical signifier, a technique that sets off the nonuniversality of theoretical discourses. This technique is most clearly exemplified in the method of *The Revolution in Poetic Language*, which consecutively proceeds through general theories of meaning, theories of language, and theories of the subject in order to demonstrate their indispensability and inadequacy for describing the object of Kristeva's inquiry. The method has been described as montage, but is more precisely described as a stratification of the theoretical discourse in a manner that resists one-dimensional filiations and loyalties, and that approaches its object via a number of distinct routes. (Nikolchina 2004, 27)

Nikolchina's own text proceeds consecutively in this way. The catachresis of the multiverse as a multimedia trope extends the horror of the postmodern as a state of affairs that can no longer be described as something that comes to pass, and passes away. Besides auto-critique, the author of this style could be characterized as the *polylogue* (Kristeva 1977). Far from actually rejecting the notion of metalanguage, as Lacan ostensibly proposed, the polylogue stacks metalanguage upon metalanguage. It would be more appropriate to say that, in practice, there is only metalanguage and no object language. However, object languages continue to exist, even as they fail to provide the discursive support that their name implies. This is how to wield dualisms like signification and communication, or fully

fledged sign and quasi-sign: not as rigid oppositions, but as oscillating poles that reverse positions at their moment of consummation. As a result, "Kristeva's works have to be entered as one enters a hall of mirrors; the doubling and mirroring, the play of masks and reflections is the medium of her polylogue, which as a genre is, too, a multiple splitting of discourse" (Nikolchina 2004, 57). The polylogue is the genre of intertextuality (Kristeva 1984, 59–60) as well as the subject-in-process (Nikolchina 2004, 75), the weaver of incompatible codes, perpetually exiled from any one of them. "Kristeva's concept of intertextuality, the transformation of one sign-system into another or, rather, the overlapping interference and mutual transformation of different sign-systems, provides a fit designation for this procedure that bypasses unified space and linear chronology" (Nikolchina 2004, 11). But intertextuality has always been the buzzword in Kristeva studies. Nikolchina's emphasis on the notion of polylogue reformulates ideas that later crystallized into "intertextuality" (and "subject-in-process"); in performing this intertextual translation between different periods of Kristeva's corpus, Nikolchina acts as a polylogue herself, repurposing the enigmas of the original texts. She "performatively enacts Kristeva's theory of maternity on a number of levels, from the theoretical via the fictional to the poetic" (Nikolchina 2004, 10).

Nikolchina cites the founder of the Tartu-Moscow School of Semiotics, Juri Lotman in her book, but does not clearly link the concept of the polylogue to Lotman's own principle of cultural and linguistic polyglotism. In the latter theory, the sign exists at the intersection of at least two incompatible codes (Kull 2018). Given their common inheritance of Mikhail Bahktin's dialogism, as well as other commonalities, it is surprising that more syntheses of Kristeva and Lotman have not been undertaken; however, this can partly be explained by the problem of inconvertibility. Because Lotman's work is rightly perceived as a part of a broader intellectual resistance to Soviet totalitarianism, it is easily converted into an emblem of Estonian Westernization and post-Soviet sovereignty, whereas Kristeva's name has always been tied (sometimes unfairly) to her on-and-off relationships with various communist organizations. The Tartu school has clearly shifted to the semiotics of biology and the environment, producing advances already noted in this article (for a more comprehensive discussion, see Bennett 2021, 164–212), and the concept of polylogue finds a place equally well there. That

is, the concept of polylogue is suitable for general semiotics because the multiplicity and coexistence of incompatible codes – and the act of choosing between these codes – has also been adopted as a definition of the sign by biosemiotics (Hoffmeyer 1996; Kull 2015; Lacková 2020). A Kristevan approach to biosemiotics would well suit its increasingly critical orientation, demonstrated by a recent paper in *Sign Systems Studies* about "the second turn in biosemiotics" (Barreto et. al 2022).

As Nikolchina portrays it, the polylogue is first *read into* certain works of literature. Kristeva reads it into Stéphane Mallarmé and Gérard de Nerval; Bakhtin reads it into Fyodor Dostoyevsky; Nikolchina reads it into late Virgina Woolf, via Kristeva. This *via* is important for the next step, because the polylogue is then redeployed within the analysis itself. "The polylogue can be seen as a transposition of Bakhtin's polyphony into the problematic heterogeneity of theoretical writing" (Nikolchina 2004, 45). Here one sees clearly how theory and practice interpenetrate in Kristeva's work, as the techniques belonging to the novel and the poem are utilized in a theoretical text. "Her theoretical discourse undergoes a deliberate fictionalization, which becomes more explicit and evident with each new book" (Nikolchina 2004, 45). It is actually more useful to point to the moments of fictionalization in the work of *Nikolchina* rather than Kristeva, because the former already takes another step in the chain of this "consecutive" process. She asks, "Is this the beginning of the process that will finally take the chips of our motherless souls out among the stars? At the dawn of an irreversible transformation of the maternal function, a transformation that technology is already bringing about[?]" (Nikolchina 2004, 13).

Conclusion

The fight against the transformation of European universities into Yankee-style private industry provides a nice rallying point for general semiotics. The notion of the sign helps us to define the objects and tools of the humanities that are not quantifiable or describable in the language of natural science. Semiotics cannot be upscaled or automated; it cannot be meanly instrumentalized; it will probably not give you the edge you've been looking for in marketing research analytics. Old-fashioned notions like "cultivating the sensibility" or better yet "disinterested interest" come from German idealism so it

Tyler James Bennett

should be no surprise that they crop up in Charles S. Peirce, Ferdinand de Saussure, Jakob von Uexküll, and Ernst Cassirer, but the works of Hegel and Kant certainly give us more food for thought here than do those of Peirce. The most distinctive commonality between Tarasti and Kristeva is that in semiotics today, where the vast majority place Peirce, they place Hegel. It may be that the vogue for Peirce in semiotics since the 1990s has something to do with the fetishization of STEM (science, engineering, technology, and mathematics); after all, unlike Kant and Hegel, Peirce was an accomplished natural scientist and mathematician and his texts reflect this; nor do they at all resemble the kind of writing under discussion in this essay. A further incidental point which I think is important is that the private business model afflicting European universities today, and the resulting marginalization of the humanities, is partly the outcome of longstanding counterintelligence operations conducted to eradicate communism from European intellectual life. Despite all this, and for a number of other reasons, Peirce remains a good choice as a philosophical foundation for general semiotics; yet there are certain tasks for which Peirce does not provide the necessary tools. For these we must look elsewhere. If we can find these tools and use them, then we may begin "to think about a property that is not yet definable in an integral way," as Benveniste put it (qtd. in Kristeva 2018, 40); we may start to talk about something like semiosis (as Peirce openly named it), while maintaining our commitment. We may remain inconvertible.

References

Barreto, Eugenio Israel Chávez, Oscar S.Miyamoto Gómez, Tyler James Bennett, Ľudmila Lacková, Kalevi Kull. 2022. "Funktionskreis and the biosemiotic signifieds: Towards the integration of semiotics." *Sign Systems Studies* 50, no. 2/3: 433–52.

Barthes, Roland. 1977. *Elements of Semiology*. Translated by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith. New York: Hill and Wang.

Baudrillard, Jean 1994. *Simulacra and Simulation.* Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser.

Bennett, Tyler James. 2021. *Detotalization and Retroactivity: Black Pyramid Semiotics.* Phd diss, University of Tartu.

Benveniste, Émile. 1971. *Problems in General Linguistics*, vol. 2. Translated by Mary Elizabeth Meek. Miami: University   of Miami Press.

Brier, Søren. 2013. *Cybersemiotics: Why Information Is Not Enough*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Deacon, Terrence. 1997. *The Symbolic Species: The Co-evolution of Language and the Brain*. New York: W. W. Norton and Co.

———. 2006. "The Aesthetic Faculty." In *The Artful Mind: Cognitive Science and the Riddle of Human Creativity*, edited by Mark Turner, 21–56. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

———. 2012. *Incomplete Nature: How Mind Emerged from Matter*. New York: W. W. Norton and Co.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 2009. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, Helen R. Lane. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Derrida, Jacques 1976. *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore, MD: Johns

Hopkins University Press.

Eco, Umberto 1976. "Peirce's Notion of the Interpretant." *Comparative Literature* 91, no. 6 (December 1976): 1457–72.

———. 1979. *A Theory of Semiotics*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

———. 1989. *The Open Work*. Translated by Anna Cancogni. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Foucault, Michel. 1970. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Pantheon.

———. 1977. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books.

Hoffmeyer, Jesper 1996. *Signs of Meaning in the Universe*. Translated by Barbara J. Haveland. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Hjelmslev, Louis 1953. *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*. Translated by Francis J. Whitfield.   Baltimore, MD: Waverly Press.

———. 1954. "La stratification du langage." *Word* 10, no. 2/3: 163–88.

Jameson, Frederic 1991. *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Kristeva, Julia. 1977. *Polylogue*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.

——. 1982. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection.* Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.

——. 1984. *Revolution in Poetic Language.* Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.

——. 1986. *The Kristeva Reader,* edited by Toril Moi. New York: Columbia University Press

——. 1989. *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia.* Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.

——. 1991. *Strangers to Ourselves.* Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.

——. 1995. *New Maladies of the Soul.* Translated by Ross Guberman. New York: Columbia University Press.

——. 2018. *Passions of Our Times.* Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. New York: Columbia University Press.

Kull, Kalevi. 2015. "Semiosis stems from logical incompatibility in organic nature: Why biophysics does not see meaning, while biosemiotics does." *Progress in Biophysics and Molecular Biology* 119, no. 3 (August 2015): 616–21.

——. 2018. "Choosing and learning: Semiosis means choice." *Sign Systems Studies* 46, no. 4: 452–56.

Lacan, Jacques. 1977. *Écrits: A Selection.* Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.

Lacková, Ľudmila. 2020. "Folding of a peptide continuum: Semiotic approach to protein folding." *Semiotica* 233: 77–90.

Land, Nick. 2019. *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987–2007.* Cambridge: Urbanomic.

Lasn, Kalle 2012. *Meme Wars: The Creative Destruction of Neoclassical Economics.* London: Penguin Books.

Nikolchina, Miglena 2004. *Matricide in Language: Writing Theory in Kristeva and Woolf.* New York: Other Press.

——. 2011. "The West as Intellectual Utopia." In *Überbringen – Überformen – Überblenden. Theorietransfer im 20. Jahrhundert,* edited by Dietlind Hüchtker and Alfrun Kliems, 207–30. Cologne: Böhlau Verlag.

Prodi, Giorgio. 1988. "Material bases of signification." *Semiotica* 69, no. 3/4: 191–241.

Sharov, Alexei, and Morten Tønnessen. 2022. *Semiotic Agency: Science Beyond Mechanism.* Dordrecht: Springer.

Sonesson, Göran. 2010. "Iconicity strikes back: the third generation – or why Eco is still wrong." In *La sémiotique visuelle: nouveaux paradigms*, edited by Constantini Michel, 247–70. Paris: L'Harmattan.

Stjernfelt, Frederik. 2007. *Diagrammatology: An Investigation on the Borderlines of Phenomenology,   Ontology, and Semiotics.* Dordrecht: Springer.

Tarasti, Eero. 2000. *Existential Semiotics*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Darin Tenev

Figures of Negativity in Julia Kristeva from "Poetry and Negativity" to *Black Sun*

Abstract

This paper traces the role negativity played in Kristeva's writings from the 1960s to the 1980s, i.e. from early texts such as "Poetry and Negativity" through *Revolution in Poetic Language* and *Polylogue* to *Powers of Horror* and *Black Sun*. On the one hand, negativity allows for a reconstruction of Kristeva's conceptual development from the early "structuralist" work to her psychoanalytic turn. The paper demonstrates in what way the theorization of negativity opened the way for a new form of engagement with psychoanalysis. On the other hand, negativity helps to recontextualize Kristeva's conceptions within the broader horizon of her contemporary theoretical scene. Negativity helps to delineate her unique position in the latter vis-à-vis thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Jacque Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, Jean-Luc Nancy, etc., and simultaneously vis-à-vis the psychoanalytical work of Jacques Lacan, André Green, and others.

The paper also contains a philosophical stake. By rereading and reevaluating Kristeva's take on negativity it shows in what sense Kristeva's work poses an ontological question about negativity that is at the same time a question about the possible redefinition of matter.

Keywords:

Julia Kristeva, negativity, subjectivity, language, psychoanalysis, ontology

Negativity has a special place in twentieth-century thought. The history of the discourse on negativity over that century may be seen as defining the development of philosophy and the human sciences. At the beginning of the century, and in the shadow of Hegel, a whole series of thinkers (among whom one should mention at least Frege, Bergson, Freud, and Rosenzweig) construed negativity as derivative and dependent on affirmation, even insisting that negation is a form of affirmation. The problem of negativity was seen as related to that

of the origin of negativity and, with Husserl and Heidegger, this origin was revealed to lie in the sphere of the pre-predicative. Even though the latter defended opposing views (Husserl claiming that negativity is secondary, Heidegger insisting that it is primary), both pointed to the fact that there are various forms of pre-predicative negation not easily subsumable under the strict logical notion of negation. From the 1920s and 1930s to the 1940s, the discourse on negativity passed under the influence of Alexandre Kojève's reading of Hegel and Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (but also Bachelard's *La Philosophie du non*); then, into the 1950s, it played an important part in the work of people like Bataille, Blanchot, Lacan, and Hyppolite. This brings us to the 1960s and the 1970s, the immediate context of Julia Kristeva's early work. During that time thinkers like Foucault, Derrida, Irigaray, and Lyotard were directly or indirectly working on negativity in France (in the 1970s most would withdraw from this problematic). In Germany, Adorno opened up new perspectives on the problem, which were to be taken up by scholars like Wolfgang Iser and the *Poetik und Hermeneutik* group (it is worth noting that the 1975 volume of *Poetik und Hermeneutik* was titled **"**Positionen der Negativität"). The problematic persisted in the 1980s as well with Agamben's *Language and Death* (subtitled "The Place of Negativity") and Laurence Horn's *Natural History of Negation.*

In my paper I want to address the question about the place of negativity in Kristeva's work from the 1960s to the 1980s. And if I gave a brief sketch of the history of the discourse on negativity above, it is because I believe it will be productive to read Kristeva's work on negativity against this background even when it is not thematized as such. There are already fine analyses of Kristeva's understanding and use of negativity. In more recent years, Cecilia Sjöholm has offered an in-depth interpretation of this in her *Kristeva and the Political* (2005), and Sina Kramer has dedicated a text to negativity in Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language* (Kramer 2013). I will try to trace the development of Kristeva's notion of negativity and show its stakes.

My starting point will be not *Revolution in Poetic Language* but an earlier text, "Poésie et négativité," written in 1968 and included in *Semeiotiké* (Kristeva 1969, 246–77). This text plays a part in building the intricate conceptual network that is at the basis of Kristeva's early literary theory, and it should be read and discussed together with the other texts in the volume, with the argument about production as opposed to circulation

in the study of literature, with the analysis of the engendering of the formula, and so on. The same can be said of each of the books I will be discussing. However, in the limited space of the present essay I will not go in this direction. In the reading I will propose I will focus predominantly on the theme of negativity and therefore will oversimplify the general theoretical framework. After "Poetry and Negativity," I will study the place of negation and negativity in *Revolution in Poetic Language* and *Polylogue*, and finally I will focus on *Black Sun*. These four moments (or rather three plus *n*) of the genealogy of negativity in Kristeva's thought provide a clear and yet somewhat neglected thread for the depiction of the philosophical role of negativity in her work, one that can help simultaneously associate it with the more general context indicated above and differentiate it from other theoretical takes on negativity.

Poetic Speech and Negation

In "Poésie et négativité," Kristeva first defines the general function of negation at the basis of all symbolic activities, and then proceeds to show what is specific in the case of poetic language. Poetic language is understood as one signifying practice among many. It is defined in contrast to non-poetic discourse, and this distinction, as the reference to Roman Jakobson at the very beginning of the text suggests, is an inheritance of Russian Formalism, a heritage she develops and displaces.

Following Hegel, Kristeva sees negation as defining difference and hence sees differentiation as based on negation (Kristeva 1969, 248). This allows her to link the logical operation of negation to any symbolic activity and to reread Saussure's famous statement that in language there is nothing but differences as referring to a structural type of negation (Kristeva 1969, 248). However, at this point she goes back to Parmenides and Plato and focuses on the peculiar status of the negated in the very way that logic is constituted. Simply put, logic depends on the identity of the terms it uses but this identity is conceivable only against the background of what it excludes, the nonidentical, and so the nonidentical, for example, what is neither true nor false, is included only in the form of being negated. This is what makes everyday speech possible. This is how everyday speech operates. Paradoxically, what is negated by the speaking subject turns out to constitute the "origin" of the

subject's speech, as what is excluded from it (Kristeva 1969, 249). Kristeva lists death, fiction, madness, and other factors as marked by the index of nonexistence. The logical operation attempts to tame negation through notions such as Hegel's *Aufhebung*. In terms of the symbolic functioning of signifying practices, this means that negation, which constitutes discourse, bans the negated from discourse (Kristeva 1969, 250).

Among other things this means, first, that negation is primary before it becomes secondary (simultaneously suspending and maintaining the distinction between primary and secondary); and, second, that "primary" negation operates according to different logical laws or laws different than those of logic (as it makes logic itself possible). The operation of "primary" negation is, strictly speaking, translogical (Kristeva 1969, 267). This entails a *doubling of negativity*. On the one hand, there will be negation in the form of the judgment: "This is not that." This negation is internal to judgment and, in this sense, tamed and secondary. There is, however, as becomes clear, another negativity that makes possible and escapes the logic of judgment. Kristeva describes this type of negativity as ambivalent, indeterminate (Kristeva 1969, 252, 267), and heterogeneous. This translogical negativity manifests itself in poetic language.

The most telling examples of translogical negativity at the heart of poetic language are that the things spoken are at the same time concrete and general; and that fictional beings have no being, they simultaneously are and are not (Kristeva 1969, 252, 254). Kristeva calls the gathering of the two incompatible terms of a negation "non-synthetic union" (Kristeva 1969, 254).

Non-synthetic union frees the poetic signified and opens it to traversal by different codes, making it possible for the poetic text to absorb many texts at the same time. Kristeva famously defines the absorption of many texts and many codes into a single text as intertextuality and paragrammaticality. She lists three types of paragrammatic negation. The first is total negation, where the meaning of the foreign text is reversed and denied (Kristeva 1969, 256). The second is symmetric negation, where one of the texts gives a new and different meaning to another, even though they share the same general logic (Kristeva 1969, 256). Finally, there is partial negation where only part of the referenced text is denied (Kristeva 1969, 257). In all these cases a paragrammatic reading of the two texts is necessary, a reading that unites them without producing a synthesis.

In particular, the two logical or mathematical laws challenged by or ineffective in the signifying function of poetic language are the law of the excluded middle (every proposition must be either true or false, and there is no middle ground) and the distributive law (multiplying a number by the sum of a group of numbers is the same as doing each multiplication separately). However, the ambivalence of poetic negativity means that even these two laws are not simply negated. They are accepted and negated at the same time. Which is tantamount to saying that poetic language both follows logic and implicitly negates it (Kristeva 1969, 264). (Kristeva tries to formalize this movement between logical and nonlogical as an orthocomplementary structure [see Kristeva 1969, 265ff].)

It must be noted that the text does not end at this point. If its first two parts were focused on the (trans)logical status of poetic language as seen in different literary works, the final part, dedicated to paragrammatic space, focuses on the place of the subject. Drawing mainly on Hegel, Freud, and Lacan, Kristeva describes the speaking subject as constituted according to the laws of logic, and therefore through the negation internal to judgment. If this is the case, then ambivalent translogical negativity should be viewed as a general negativity in which the subject dissolves in order for a non-subject to come to the fore (Kristeva 1969, 273). The non-subject is not related to the circulation of constituted meaning but to the actual production of meaning. In this sense, it indicates a point prior to the text that survives its production and continues to operate within the produced text to keep engendering meaning. (This turn of literary study from circulation – which is to say, communication – to production was quite important for the young Kristeva and may be said to constitute one of the starting points of her theory.)[1]

However, at the stage of "Poésie et négativité," attention to the subject whose constitution and deconstitution are linked in general negativity is not a separate theme; it is subordinated to research on poetic language, not reducible to something in the unconscious but studied as a signifying practice (Kristeva 1969, 274). The movement of negativity reveals how this practice negates both speech and the result of this negation (Kristeva 1969, 276).

---

[1]   Kristeva's 1968 text "La Sémiotique – science critique et/ou critique de la science" is particularly important in this respect (see Kristeva 1969, 27–42).

I want to stress here, before moving to *Revolution in Poetic Language*, that general negativity understood in this way always entails the negation of the negation. However, not only is there no resulting sublation of the Hegelian type, but also the very definition of negation becomes problematic. General negativity implies many *forms* of negation.

Negativity as a Material Process

In *Revolution in Poetic Language* Kristeva develops the above main points but also introduces many new elements and shifts the stress. She devotes the second part of the book to the notion of negativity (Kristeva 1984, 107–50), thus making the discussion of negativity a stepping stone for her whole theory.

If in the early work negation was discussed exclusively in relation to signifying practices, here it is seen "as the *very movement of heterogeneous matter*" (Kristeva 1984, 113; emphasis in original) on which signifying practices are based. The "*production of the symbolic function*" is seen as the result, as "the *specific* formation of material contradictions within matter itself" (Kristeva 1984, 119; emphasis in original). This implies that matter itself neither can nor should be thought separately from negativity and heterogeneity (a materialist line of thinking that is not without relation to the work of Georges Bataille, but which also resonates with the way in which Aristotle associated matter and *steresis* or privation). Negativity is what links the real and the symbolic, "reinvents the real, and re-symbolizes it" (Kristeva 1984, 155). This process (and negativity is the process itself, this is in fact the starting point of the chapter) was partially described in "Poésie et négativité" as that of primary negation, where it was associated with the becoming of the subject. Here the point is developed further and with much greater psychoanalytic precision.

Negativity produces a "subject in process/on trial" (*un sujet en procès*) (Kristeva 1984, 111). This subject's material side is the biological, bodily space where scissions, separations, and divisions occur as "a biological operation" (Kristeva 1984, 123) introducing the possibility of the symbolic function. This argument is in line with the idea developed in "Poésie et négativité" that negation introduces the differentiation necessary for any symbolic activity. In the earlier

text, there was the implication that some part of this operation passed into the literary text, making it constitutively ambivalent and incessantly productive. In *Revolution in Poetic Language,* the part that is irreducible to the symbolic function, the primary negation that keeps coming back in one form or another, along with the surplus negativity related to it (that is, the negativity that cannot be subjected to the power of logical judgment or be reduced to logical negation), are conceived in biological and social terms. The biological space of the operation of scission is that of the drives and of bodily pulsations. The social element is defined in terms of social struggles and social contradictions. "*The sole function of our use of the term 'negativity' is to designate the process that exceeds the signifying subject, binding him to the laws of objective struggles in nature and society*" (Kristeva 1984, 119; emphasis in original). As the term "struggle" (*lutte*) makes clear, negativity is thought of as *force* (see Kristeva 1984, 114–16) and this force, whether biological or social, is conceived as a material process.

This interpretation of negativity may at first glance seem like an attempt to ground negativity objectively in biology or society, either suggesting a classical Marxist account or the biologization and naturalization of the symbolic. However, it is in fact a radical rethinking of negativity that instills a groundlessness in both society and biology. Negativity is not only pre-predicative in Husserl's sense; it is also a presubjective movement of matter, a material process. The force of negativity is the force of heterogeneous matter.

If this is in fact the case, then the very concept of negativity becomes problematic as it would imply the negation of heterogeneity. Yet, in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, not only does Kristeva take up her earlier distinction between radical, exterior, heterogeneous negativity and negativity subjected to the interior of judgment (Kristeva 1984, 114–16), not only does she again stress that negation leads to a "'fading' of negation" (Kristeva 1984, 125); but, even more importantly, at a certain point she practically stops using the word, instead using "expenditure" (*dépense*) and "rejection" (*rejet*) as more apt to specify the material contradictions engendering the semiotic (in contradistinction to the symbolic) function (see Kristeva 1984, 117ff). Expenditure (which is another element tying Kristeva's understanding of negativity to Bataille's) is defined by the way it poses an object as separated from the body and "fixes it in place as *absent*, as a *sign*" (Kristeva 1984, 123). Thus, expenditure always has to do with what is rejected; and expulsion "constitutes the real object as

such" (Kristeva 1984, 148), as both absent and signifiable.[2] She associates rejection understood in this way with the anal phase (Kristeva 1984, 150–51). However, as I have already pointed out, this would not mean that negativity has its ground in a biologically determined place in the body; rather, negativity introduces heterogeneity at the level of the body, opening the way for the subject in process/on trial, dislocating and complicating any origin it might have had. It is in this sense that one can read Kristeva's quite Derridean claim that "[r]ejection rejects origin" (Kristeva 1984, 147). Not only is there no ground for negativity (as negativity makes both ground and positing possible) but it cannot even be said that negativity is primary or originary, as its operation rejects any origin. "To posit rejection as fundamental and inherent in every thesis does not mean that we posit it as origin. Rejection rejects origin since it is always already the repetition of an impulse that is itself a rejection" (Kristeva 1984, 147).

In this way, the materialist rethinking of negativity in *Revolution in Poetic Language* implies a rethinking of materiality itself. As the driving force of biological and social struggles, it makes possible the very distinction between the biological and the social that it calls into question, just as it does that of the subjective and the objective. Even this does not make it less elusive. Above all, Kristeva's non-thetical negativity always differentiates itself, negates itself. And this is precisely why it is never vanquished and keeps producing its mark on the signifying matter (Kristeva 1984, 163).

Before moving forward, I would like to point out that the pages on negativity in *Revolution in Poetic Language* also trace a kind of genealogy of thinking on negativity. She discusses Frege, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Feuerbach, Marx, Lacan, and Derrida, but for her theory Hegel and Freud are the most important.[3] What I want to stress is that these discussions, readings, and misreadings – which, unfortunately, I cannot analyze in depth here – contextualize Kristeva's own work.

---

[2]   Kristeva introduces "rejection" (*rejet*) as a translation of Freud's *Verwerfung*; in the English translation, Freud's *Ausstosung* is rendered as "expulsion." This move is in direct polemic with Lacan's influential rendering of *Verwerfung* as foreclosure (*forclusion*). I cannot develop this here.

[3]   Within the limits of this essay, I cannot develop the question of the relation between Kristeva's understanding of negativity and Jacques Lacan's work on negation. It is noteworthy, however, that Kristeva probably started attending Lacan's seminar in 1966–67, when Lacan returned to the problem of negation, distinguishing four different types (see Lacan 2023, 68–73). I have not been able to verify that Kristeva actually attended these sessions, but it is highly probable that she did. (See Kristeva 2016 [translated in Beardsworth 2020]; and Jardine 2020, 63, 86.) If this was indeed the case, it would shed a different light on her discussions of Lacan's theory.

This self-contextualization is telling in various ways. Saussure and the structuralist legacy play less of a role. The level at which the question of negativity is posed has changed. In 1974, it is more and more tightly tied to a psychoanalytic and – even more surprisingly – an ontological problematic.

Polylogue contains most of the tendencies in *Revolution in Poetic Language*. This is hardly surprising as most of the essays on negativity included in *Polylogue* (above all "Le sujet en procès" [1973]; but also "Comment parler à la littérature" [1971], on Barthes; "L'Expérience et la pratique" [1973], on Bataille; etc.) were integrated in some form in *Revolution in Poetic Language*. They were originally published individually, for various occasions, then, edited and rewritten, became part of the 1974 book, only to be later included in the 1977 *Polylogue*. Their displaced temporality testifies to Kristeva's own processual character.

If I find it necessary to turn to *Polylogue* it is because it stresses even more clearly the role of negativity in the constitution of the subject, on the one hand, and of heteronomy, on the other. Negativity is productive and at the same time inscribed in its product. This inscription means that the product is not static but dynamic; it means that in the product the force of negativity is still active and operative. The product will thus have at least two sides, one of which will keep transforming it, multiplying the figures of negation. The term "product" includes not only an author's literary production but also – and most of all – the subject. Negativity affirms the position of the subject (Kristeva 1977, 68). This is why Kristeva speaks of affirmative negativity (Kristeva 1977, 63; Kristeva 1984, 113). However, its affirmation is a movement of force, of materially inscribed force that dissolves what it produces (and Kristeva also speaks of productive dissolution). In this way the subject as product becomes a unary subject and, since it is simultaneously an incessant process, it constantly subverts its own unity (Kristeva 1977, 65). Negativity poses heteronomy (Kristeva 1977, 64). This heterogenizing process is what makes each subject singular. By positing heteronomy, negativity makes itself unavoidably heteronomous – it doubles itself, opening the path for the genealogy of the logical negation in judgment, a negation that is stopped or absorbed, and yet always escapes the logical trap of identity. Negativity is without identity. The doubling of negativity implies that negativity is its own doubling (therefore at least triple once there is doubling). Its doubling

is therefore also a multiplication – it becomes other than itself, it is this becoming other than itself. Hence the stress on a "multiplicity of rejections" (Kristeva 1977, 58; my translation) in which even the name of negativity is put in question.

Negativity and the Psyche

In the years after *Revolution in Poetic Language* and *Polylogue* Kristeva focuses more and more on the problematic of the subject and fully develops her own psychoanalytic theory. This has an effect on her discussion of negativity.

In the opening pages of *Powers of Horror*, published in 1980, she writes: "Put another way, it means that there are lives not sustained by *desire*, as desire is always for objects. Such lives are based on *exclusion*. They are clearly distinguishable from those understood as neurotic or psychotic, articulated by *negation* and its modalities, *transgression*, *denial*, and *repudiation*. Their dynamics challenges the theory of the unconscious, seeing that the latter is dependent upon a dialectic of negativity" (Kristeva 1982, 6–7). In this passage there is a multiplication of the figures of negativity: exclusion, negation (*sic*! negation itself is but a form of negativity), transgression, denial (here a rendering of Freud's *Verneinung*; in other places the word translates Freud's *Verleugnung*, or disavowal) and repudiation (or rejection, that is, a translation of Freud's *Verwerfung* – this is the rejection discussed in *Revolutions in Poetic Language*) – all are figures of negativity, some of which participate in what Kristeva calls the "dialectic of negativity" constitutive of the unconscious. In order to understand the psyche, one needs to understand negativity and its dialectic even prior to the unconscious. What is more, the different terms are not all equal as some of the figures of negativity are modalities of others (transgression, denial, and repudiation are modalities of negation). Additionally, there is an "exclusion" that, though a figure of negativity, does not operate according to the dialectic of negativity, and other "articulations of negativity" have "become inoperative" (Kristeva 1982, 7). As is well known this exclusion in *Powers of Horror* is abjection, which does not allow a secure differentiation between subject and object. What happens to the dialectic of negativity in the case of abjection? Is abjection a negation of dialectics? If the latter were the

case, then it would have been included in the dialectic it negates. Is it not, then, rather a stopping of the dialectical machine, the negativity of a dialectic at a standstill?[4]

As the word "dialectic" makes it clear, negation and its modalities are conceived on the basis of the Hegelian model discussed in "Poésie et négativité" and *Revolution in Poetic Language*. And here again Kristeva moves beyond the Hegelian *Aufhebung*. However, this does not involve an attempt to save Hegel from the teleology of his system (see Kristeva 1984, 113), but leads rather to the openly non-Hegelian model of negativity found in abjection.

In *Powers of Horror* all figures of negativity, whether dialectical or not, are discussed within a psychoanalytical framework. Several years later, in *Black Sun* (1987), there is the same focus on the operation of negativity in the psyche and the same stress on the multiple forms of negativity. There Kristeva writes: "I deem negativity to be coextensive with the speaking being's psychic activity. Its various dispositions, such as *negation*, *denial*, and *repudiation* (which can produce or modify repression, resistance, defense, or censorship), distinct as one might be from another, influence and condition one another" (Kristeva 1992, 45–46). This is in line with everything Kristeva has said on negativity since "Poésie et négativité," but it is worth noting that the attention here is exclusively on psychic activity.

In the quoted passage "negation" translates Freud's *Verneinung* while "denial" is saved for *Verleugnung*. This could be read as a non-systematic use of terms in Kristeva. However, it is much more probable that this is a strategic move, one that keeps the elusive nature of negativity visible in the very instability of the terms that name it. This strategy would run parallel to Kristeva's ongoing redefinition and broadening of terms. For example, in *Black Sun*, she generalizes the meaning of denial, or *Verleugnung*, to mean "the rejection of the signifier as well as semiotic representatives of drives and affects" (Kristeva 1992, 44), which is much broader than Freud's definition, and this broadening of the term is something she insists on. This would mean that there is *a constant renegotiation between the different forms of negativity, there being no supreme form*. In fact, it could be argued that this is the ground on which one of the main arguments

---

[4]   I cannot pursue here a comparison between Walter Benjamin or Theodor W. Adorno and Julia Kristeva. On Benjamin and Kristeva, see Bullock 1995; Caputi 2000; and Yoanna Neykova's essay in this volume.

in *Black Sun* is developed: "Signs are arbitrary because language starts with a *negation (Verneinung)* of loss, along with the depression occasioned by mourning. [...] Depressed persons, on the contrary, *disavow the negation*: they cancel it out, suspend it, and nostalgically fall back on the real object (the Thing) of their loss" (Kristeva 1992, 43–44). The classic understanding of the sign as killing the thing – found in Hegel, Mallarmé, and Blanchot – is here psychoanalytically complicated by a dynamic of negativity, one in which negativity changes its nature and its modus operandi from one moment to the next. Loss, which, as a form of privation, is already a figure of negativity, is negated, and this gives birth to language (or to signifying practices, as the early Kristeva would say) only to be later disavowed. And the disavowal of negation is immediately described in a manner that gives two additional modalities of disavowal, namely, canceling out and suspension, making the disavowal double. And so on. The resemblance of this process, loss-negation-disavowal, to the Hegelian dialectic of thesis-antithesis-synthesis is telling, but also misleading, as it should not be understood in the Hegelian framework but, rather, the role of negation and the negation of negation in Hegel's system should be rethought in terms of the multiplication of negativity in its self-heterogenizing operation.

Despite the coherent way in which Kristeva develops her understanding of negativity (to the point of practically rejecting the word since it serves as a unifying unit), there is one important difference between books like *Powers of Horror* and *Black Sun* and her earlier work.[5] I have already hinted at this. The focus in the 1980s is exclusively on the psyche. Negativity is coextensive with psychic activity and discussed as such. One could put it like this: where Kristeva's early writings offered a theory of the subject in order to develop a theory of the poetic text, *Powers of Horror* and *Black Sun* used the analysis of poetic texts to develop a theory of the subject. And in between, there are the radical texts of the 1970s in which both poetic works and the subject are referred to the movement of matter. Such a view is too simplistic. Did Kristeva move in the direction of a psychologization of negativity?

---

[5]   For a general discussion of the relation between the different stages of Kristeva's work on psychoanalysis, see Beardsworth 2004.

No One

She did not. No psychologization of negativity is possible if the question concerns the way that the constitution of the psyche is dependent upon negativity.

Yet there has been an easily discernible shift of accent. If I were to summarize it in four points, I would say that the accent shifts (1) from poetic language to the constitution of the subject; (2) from production and productivity to the organization of the psyche; (3) from the zero subject through the subject in process/on trial to the birth of the object; (4) from linguistics and logic to psychology.

Seen as the development of a single theory of negativity, however, the shift of accent reveals matters in a different light. The genealogy of negativity and all forms of negation in the subject shows that *the genesis of negation is the very genesis of the subject.* In the way that Kristeva poses the question of negativity, she is closer to Husserl and phenomenology (Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, etc.) than she seems to suggest. However, she moves beyond Husserl once she refuses to ground negation in an already constituted subject. Negativity is constitutive, productive, affirmative, determinative. Negativity determines but is not determined in advance; it is not predetermined. (Let it be said in passing that this makes all twentieth-century criticism of negativity, from Bergson to Deleuze, look naïve and simplistic.) I will come back to this.

If negativity does not have its ground in the subject except as a subjected, reduced form of negation, if it does not have a ground at all, as Kristeva demonstrates in the final analysis, then the discussion of negativity is an ontological discussion. *Kristeva ontologizes the question of negativity*. Paradoxically, in this sense, she is perhaps closer to the thinker she most severely misrepresents and misunderstands, in the chapter on negativity in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, than to anyone else. And this thinker is Martin Heidegger. Heidegger writes: "No matter how much or in how many ways negation, expressed or implied, permeates all thought, it is by no means the sole authoritative witness of the manifestness of the nothing belonging essentially to Dasein. For negation cannot claim to be either the sole or the leading kind of nihilative comportment in which Dasein remains shaken by the nihilation of the nothing. *Unyielding antagonism* and *stinging rebuke* have a more abysmal source than the measured [logical] negation of thought. *Galling failure* and *merciless prohibition* require

some deeper answer. *Bitter privation* is more burdensome. These possibilities of nihilative comportment – forces in which Dasein bears its thrownness without mastering it – are not types of mere [logical] negation" (Heidegger 1998: 92–93; emphasis added). Unyielding antagonism, rebuke, failure, prohibition, and privation are all forms of negation that cannot be reduced to logical negation. The critique of logicism, which Heidegger and Kristeva share, does not invalidate logic but rather circumscribes it in a problematization over which it has no control. Two other things that the thinkers seem to share are more fundamental. Negation is initially multiple. And this multiplicity is due to the fact that negativity is not ontologically predetermined.

I will leave a possible comparative analysis of Kristeva and Heidegger aside in order to point out the main ontological aspects of negativity in Kristeva.

Negativity is not one. Perhaps there should not even be a general term to name all figures of negativity except as a retroactive logical operation. Part of Kristeva's strategy would be the constant introduction of new names, paired with the instability of the given names.

Negativity is initially doubled. It is doubled as exterior negativity and negation interior to judgment; exterior negativity can itself be further divided into rejection and expenditure, etc. And rejection in itself is already multiple.

At every step, *the doubling of negativity is multiplication*. Being both two and the difference between the two, negativity is always multiple. Thus, either before or beyond rejection, there is exclusion, abjection, denial, negation, disavowal, and so on and so forth.

The different forms of negation are not without relation to each other. *The figures of negativity negate each other*. And this signifies different things according to the prevalent form of negation.

Among other things, this means that *negativity is immanent*.

But immanent to what? Not just the poetic work, and not just the subject. Negativity is immanent to matter. *Matter is negative. The negativity of matter takes the form of heteronomy and heterogeneity*.

If the ontological aspects of negativity are taken into account, one notices that the shift of accent performed by books like *Powers of Horror* and *Black Sun* is not a psychologization of negativity, but an ontologization of the subject. The subject is traversed by heterogeneous matter, the matter of its own body, the matter of natural and social struggles. In the light of what was said, however, this should not be

understood as meaning that there is a determinate social or natural state of affairs that univocally defines the constitution and the problems of the subject. The biological and the sociological are themselves ontologized through the paradoxical notion of negativity as open to what cannot be predetermined. Disavowal, rejection, abjection, and so on, are forms of the ontological singularization of the subject operated by the dynamics of negativity.

The ontological question of negativity is, therefore, a question about the possible redefinition of matter. Matter is here not some substance; however contradictory it may sound, it is not something material in the classical sense. Matter is a dynamic of force movements of negativity. And as negativity is not predetermined and is always other than itself (Kristeva points this out in her discussion of Hegel's concept of force [Kristeva 1984: 114-16]), matter is always heteronomous and heterogeneous. There is no one matter. Just as there is no one negativity, and because this is the case, there is heteronomy and the production of differences, the difference between biological.

It is in this perspective that one should read the final point to which the trajectory of Kristeva's theory of negativity has led her. Negativity is what links Being and the psyche, it is the ontological side of the subject and that is the subject's non-predetermined singularity.[6]

References

Beardsworth, Sara. 2004. *Julia Kristeva. Psychoanalysis and Modernity*. New York: SUNY Press.

——, ed. 2020. *The Philosophy of Julia Kristeva*. Chicago: Open Court.

Bullock, Marcus. 1995. "Bad Company: On the Theory of Literary Modernity and Melancholy in Walter Benjamin and Julia Kristeva." *boundary 2* 22, no. 3: 57–79.

---

[6]   This reading of course leaves many questions open. If negativity is affirmative and productive, how can one differentiate it from positing? There should be something in affirmation that is not affirmative but would negativity itself then be affirmative? The question can be generalized. Does negativity act? Is it active? Kristeva's reference to Hegel seems to suggest that she thinks that this is the case. However, as soon as negativity is grasped as an act, it turns into something positive. It should be that which in the act is other than the act. A *potentia*, a *dynamis*. But then, there will be no operation, no work of the negative. Another question left suspended above concerns the relation between singularity and negativity. This question seems all the more interesting when one realizes that it may explain the relative withdrawal of the theme of negativity in Kristeva since the 1990s, along with her growing attentiveness to the problem of singularity, the stress she puts on Duns Scotus, and so on. I leave these and many other questions open.

Caputi, M. 2000. "American Overabundance and Cultural Malaise: Melancholia in Julia Kristeva and Walter Benjamin." *Theory & Event* 4, no. 3: [n.p.].

Heidegger, Martin. 1998. *Pathmarks*, edited by William McNeill. Translated by David Farrel Krell. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Husserl, Edmund. 1973. *Experience and Judgment*. Translated by James Spencer Churchill and Karl Ameriks. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Jardine, Alice 2020. *At the Risk of Thinking: An Intellectual Biography of Julia Kristeva*. London: Bloomsbury.

Kramer, Sina. 2013. "On Negativity in *Revolution in Poetic Language*." *Continental Philosophy Review* 46, no. 1: 465–79.

Kristeva, Julia. 1969. *Σημειωτική. Recherches pour une sémanalyse*. Paris: Seuil.

———. 1977. *Polylogue*. Paris: Seuil.

———. 1982. *Powers of Horror*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.

———. 1984. Revolution in Poetic Language. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.

———. 1992. *Black Sun*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.

———, and Samuel Dock. 2016. *Je me voyage*. Paris: Fayard.

Lacan, Jacques. 2023. *La logique du fantasme. Le Séminaire livre XIV*. Paris: Seuil & Le Champ Freudien.

Sjöholm, Cecilia. 2005. *Kristeva and the Political*. London: Routledge.

Emilia Angelova

Kristeva's Ontological Approach to Limit and Secondary Identification with the Mother

Abstract

I propose an ontological approach via Hegel to Kristeva's notion of archaic loss, specifically her theory of secondary identification with the mother. I argue that she elaborates the pre-Oedipal relation to the mother as part of the presupposition that Hegel's Modernity realizes history's empty transmission of trauma. Trauma functions as a critique of dialectic in crisis, by Derrida and Nancy, on the basis of Hegel's work of loss and the return of loss "for us." Because of Kristeva's work on the semiotic and signification, the implication of ontological loss in this approach also allows her to develop especially her view of sublimation in divergence, from Lacan's approach to Antigone and the limit of the human.

117

Julia Kristeva and Jean-Luc Nancy are two French thinkers who emphasize early Frankfurt School ideas concerning history "after" Hegel – that loss and the loss of loss returns "for us." Derivative of the thematic of loss in both thinkers is the work of the negative, but with important differences.

Kristeva's negativity claim (Stawarska 2017, 129–55) consists in ontologically processing the non-founded ground, the *arche*-trace (Kristeva [2005] 2010, 12–13) that will become the "object" (whether we term this conscience, desire, death) of recurrence, on which thought can posit itself as labor, and actualize being as transition from *assujettissante* "to" object (Derrida [1961] 2022, 23–27). With her theory of maternal abjection, she formulates an ontico-ontological differential approach to loss and mourning, which is a dependency not on a mental image, but on the actualization of incomplete being as a way of breaching the logic of the fixed limit. Kristeva's essay "Antigone

as Limit and Horizon," which lies at the center of my argumentation, on *Até*, the idea of the porous border of the human, concerns this very methodological structure.

In other words, she posits a divergent theory of the thetic break, her deduction of thought as form developed in 1974. Accordingly, for her, Being as pure being containing an inborn *not*, in Hegel's *Science of Logic*, harbors rejection not only epistemologically but ontologically-normatively as well, "thought *and* the structure of being" (Houlgate 2006, 23–36; Thompson 2019). Ontological normativity is not simply that in Hegel, e.g., the objectivity of the ethical order, its customs and laws are "historically contingent" (Thompson 2019, 42). The system lacks a pregiven foundation, for it depends on the dynamic of a relational ontology: the co-positing between subjects, as being equally "right," abstract right, objective spirit and morality, subjective spirit: "conscience" co-posited with the "good" are both "right" (Hegel 1991, §142). In Kristeva, this amounts to an inborn *not*, a negativity at the foundation of the signifying process of the subject, anchoring itself in the capacity for sublimation, an inner void as a bridge to language, the cost for experience to become possible.

Kristeva introduces the semiotic as part of a claim about signification, that through reconnecting with the void, the self empties itself out structurally, in thought as well as being (see Kristeva [1974] 1984; Lechte 1990). The signified of discourse, in other words, the "I" of phallic assumption or enunciation is inscriptive, but what determines the boundaries between subject and object, rather than a simple function, or a shifter between binaries, is a kind of being, constitutively capable of ruination, withdrawal from closure in the ego as pregiven norm of signification, thus forming a semiotic resistance. In the recurrence of the recursive signifier of Being as empty, as exposure to suffering, the speaking subject feels ill at ease in illness, rejection/negation, the sickness of "mourning sickness," and "on trial." "In calling the text a practice we must not forget that it is a new practice, radically different from the mechanistic practice of a null and void, atomistic subject who refuses to acknowledge that he [*sic*] is a *subject of language* [emphasis added]. Against such a 'practice,' the text as signifying practice points toward the possibility – which is a jouissance – of a *subject who speaks his [*sic*] being put in process/on trial through action*" (Kristeva 1984, 211; emphasis in original). Due to the recurrence of semiotic, rebellious forces of dissolution, the unity of

the signifier as posited in the synthesis of non-being and being proves to be larger than the self; this is always already so.

History's empty transmission, a trauma of secondary identification, with the mother at the beginning of fractured origins as thematic of the unstable discourse theoretically setting itself up as closed structure: this is more adequately akin to expressing Kristeva's approach of what it would be to read trauma as her method. The system of signification is her method. On the one hand, concerning the birth to presence of the modern subject, Jean-Luc Nancy and Kristeva share a common premise: with natality oblivion comes right away. On the other hand, Hannah Arendt and Kristeva share a common premise: with natality comes the unpredictability of "freedom." However, William Watkin is right about Kristeva's wariness that simply leaving it to freedom is too much too soon for the mental health of the child (Watkin 2003, 86–107). Accordingly, Kristeva has theorized abjection and melancholia; and has explicitly theorized the more complex "crime" of Antigone in Hegel as a philosophy of history.

To evaluate her Antigone, we need to ask precisely what is the kind of freedom to which Kristeva is indebted. I borrow my approach from "The Chiasmus of Action and Revolt: Julia Kristeva, Hannah Arendt, and Gillian Rose," Sara Beardsworth's incisive argument about the impasse of the modern subject in Kristeva and Adorno (Beardsworth 2017, 43–67). On the subject of Antigone, other critics of Hegel, notably Judith Butler, have proposed that Hegel's identification of the divine law with the unconscious renders it *without* ontological status, i.e. as nonexistent (Butler 2000, 23–33). My reading, however, which is informed by Derrida as well as Kristeva, reveals that the problem is precisely the opposite. In identifying the divine law with the unconscious, Hegel grants it a definite ontological status: it is that which enables and underlies signification, and thus manifests for consciousness, in its own manner, concretely as human law. By attributing guilt in terms of intention toward the law, Hegel seems to disregard what must be said, on his own account, regarding the law's status and substance.

I. Kristeva and Nancy's Hegel

The idea governing this chapter is that, in much of the scholarship, Kristeva's approach in *Revolution in Poetic Language* has not been

interpreted as ontological; in particular, more attention is due to Hegel, above all *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, chapter 6. B, "Culture." While readers have drawn the consequences of Kristeva's remarkable analysis of Hegel's "Force and Understanding" and Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as organizing division one of *Revolution in Poetic Language*, much less attention has been paid to just how deeply Kristeva is steeped in both Hegel's Culture and *The Science of Logic*. Notably, the past two decades of Hegel scholarship have proven productive specifically in reading *The Philosophy of Right*, *The Science of Logic* and *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, taken together, on ontological grounds. The view that governs my reading is informed by ontological-epistemic work on Hegel (Zambrana 2015; Nuzzo 1999, 1–17). Those readers of Kristeva who have approached her focus on culture via Theodor Adorno (Sjöholm 2006) or via Hegel (Beardsworth 2004) have not sufficiently stressed the ontological element in Hegel as a question of method. What needs more attention is how to read what Kristeva develops as "oblique negation," or "genuine negativity" in Hegel.

Putting death-in-life already holds true of Hegel's putting body and soul in one, e.g., a shape, figure, sculpture, ratio, in the lectures on aesthetics. Nancy, in his version of negativity, which argues that, in Hegel, loss and the loss of loss return "for us," comments on *partes extra partes* in Descartes, the theme of the Fourfold, and more generally on the Being of the human as being mortal-immortal (Morin 2022). He calls the truth of this shape of cognition the incorporeality of the body, namely the phenomenon of self-effacement of the body as origin (as a self-origin). Accordingly, he takes this "no" of the inscribing, meaning the "no" of negation, as a kind of writing, inscription, and this terminology, then, involves freedom's excription.

Kristeva's work on secondary identification with the mother shares some commonalities with Nancy, yet also has specificities that set it apart. In Kristeva, as Rosemary Balsam notes, the supple shape of cognition of deliasion, debinding through the death drive, is that of the grammatical form of chiasmus, "when you come I will already have left; and I will be leaving when you will no longer be here" (Balsam 2014, 87–100). In her own pioneering work, Beardsworth explains this same negativity as the modern subject's stricture as well, more particularly as a form of maternal reliance, a tendential severance as confession (Beardsworth 2004). Chiasmus expresses the

logical aspect of the concept understood as recurrence, the negativity of incomplete being. On the basis of this incompletion Kristeva posits desire's capacity for reversal, theorizing the philosophical form of a normativity of dependency relations on systematic foundations.

Notably, chiasmus as the shape of cognition of the incomplete resorts to the overfamiliarity of predicate contradiction, which need not amount to an objective contradiction. Beardsworth turns to the use of empty equivocation, following Adorno: "myth is already enlightenment; enlightenment will one day already revert to myth" (Beardsworth 2017, 60–65). Chiasmus is the aspect of analysis taken to its limit at which point we no longer have an identity proposition, e.g., myth either is or is not enlightenment; nevertheless, we may have still not achieved awareness of the banality, overfamiliarity of the contradiction. In early Kristeva, the use of chiasmus is part of her method. As Sid K. Hansen and Rebecca Tuvel likewise posit, "Just as the semiotic is already and not yet symbolic, the Symbolic is still but no longer semiotic; amid its logical and grammatical structures, there is the insistent presence of drives. [...] Poetry and avant-guarde writing neither destroy the Symbolic nor allow semiotic drives to devolve into chaos" (Hansen and Tuvel 2017, 13).

I argue that Kristeva emulates Hegel in her approach to Antigone's deed (and to Jocasta), by availing herself of the richness of the shape of chiasmus. That is, in form we deal with the metamorphosis of the shape of forgiveness (morality, subjective spirit). Hegel sets up this latter shape of cognition of knowledge, both as the result of the logic of the concept (moving past Culture) and as indebtedness to incompletion, a recurrence of negativity, taking back into existence the essence of the earlier shape (ethicality, objective spirit), i.e., tracing the deed from out of the totality of the idea in its pure unfolding. Antigone's action becomes unforgivable after Culture has mirrored it, showing its insufficiency. Against the backdrop of Culture, according to Hegel's chapter 6. B, the deed amounts to a translation into a revolutionary posture: a shockingly incongruous revolution, in the sense of a *philosophical* revolution. This form logically operates on the same level as what Watkin calls the poet's good old nostalgic longing for a lost authenticity. It is the form through which trauma enters as a logic of loss and return "for us." I will use the rest of this section to prepare an entry into the theme of forgiveness in Kristeva, by first taking it back to post-structuralist 1970s work on Antigone, starting with Derrida.

1. Introducing Derrida

In opening with Derrida, I briefly indicate what becomes of Hegel's idea of forgiveness (morality) if we approach it as interrupting thought and its acts, once both Antigone's deed (ethicality) and Culture have moved into the past. Going back to Derrida's work on Antigone, the passage between *Sittlichkeit* and *Moralität* is a movement tied primarily to the introduction of difference/subjectivity into (symbolic) language. This is Derrida's analysis of the occasion of Antigone: "In terms of the logic of this passage, it is impossible to distinguish any longer between, on the one hand, the pleasure principle, and, on the other hand, a death drive that now appears not as the external but rather as the *internal* limitation or inhibition of the pleasure principle—that is, as the *telos* of pleasure" (Gearhart 1998, 64).

What makes it necessary that, in Hegel, there are structurally always two aspects to the movement's necessity actualizing a single temporal totality, the true Spirit's totality? How do we distinguish the one, the *Sittlichkeit* of the abstractness of law, from the other, the logic/desire for recognition, and the culminating movement of both in *Moralität*'s unity of the "one" with the "good" of forgiveness?

The totality of the human in Hegel is not a representational entity. In the first place, even if Antigone forgives Polynices, who fights outside of lawful boundaries and against the defenders of the *polis*, does Hegel's concept of the phenomenological logic of the *polis* reduce to "passage" "in time"? Alternatively, does it reduce to a logic of binary sexual difference and a logic of oppositions of determinate negations, where gender and race privilege patriarchy, ever free of the risk of the logic of supplementarity of spurious nonoppositional opposites? Evidently not. In Hegel, the totality of the human grasps its own essence as consummating the essential development of substance, thought opposing itself to itself as something irreducible to actually present being as Substance (Hegel 1977, M18).

If Antigone and Polynices are not complete totalities, both quite other to extant external reality, should we not have to see them both and individually, successively and consequentially as unified first of all as temporal totalities turning toward each other, demanding to be "brought together" as "one" temporal totality differentially? And shall we thus think together the difference of this more composite "one" as unfolding the figure of the indivisible remainder of the human totality more inceptively (*Ursprung*) (Nancy 2000, 70; see Hegel 1977, M164)? I

am proposing that the two are to be thought as but "one" human totality, immanent to a playful ahistorical emergence and origin, and thus in the fragment the two are to be "thought together." Only in this way does it make sense to say that thought and the essence of thought, co-emerging and in co-belonging, are both committed to the materiality of site and origin.

If we are to recognize the role that the debt to incalculable singularity plays in Hegel (Hegel 1977, ix–xi) – with Derrida and Nancy – we need to agree on this: Indeed Polynices' death activates Antigone's desire (i.e. through her deed of giving her brother a proper burial, which the laws of the *polis* and her uncle Creon prohibit). But this means that his death activates the unique (political) prevention against the deadlock of time falling into the flatness of the legible "now" of *Jetztzeit*, so what is here activated is *not* really a passage into time (but cf. *Zeitigung/Zeitlichkeit* and *Ereignis*) (Nelson 2014, 51–75).

As I want to show, Hegel refers the "truth" of ethical substance to a concern for the more essential truth that also pertains to the incorporeal, auto-hetero-affective and impermeable essence of "substance." We have shown that this affective regime of interaction between two (I/You) "refuses" to reduce affective identification to overt levels – of actually extant "being" – the always finite existence of such derivative, conceptual unities as the intuitive, the political, or the familial.

2. Introducing Nancy

Nancy, following in the footsteps of Derrida, offers the hypothesis of a more complex humanism in Hegel. For my reconstruction of Nancy (via Lacoue-Labarthe), the prehistory of Antigone's entrance into Hegel is most important – Sophocles' trilogy. A German translation of the trilogy appeared around 1804, at approximately the same time that Hegel, a friend of the translator, the poet Hölderlin, was completing work on *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (Lacoue-Labarthe 1998, 208–36). Hölderlin himself points to a "hyperbologic" at play, naming its property "caesura," *Zäsura*. Having completed the translation, he remained preoccupied by Sophocles' three-part tragedy, to the extent that he changed the order of the plays when they appeared, putting *Oedipus Rex* first as an introduction, followed by *Antigone*. Represented by a figure or sign in poetics, the *Zäsura* is a term from metrics that refers to discord, lack of articulation, cut, a suspension or "catastrophic" alternation of representations, a "pure word" that

enables the opening up of the play of aletheaic structure, absence/presence, concealment/unconcealment (Lacoue-Labarthe 1998, 228). Hölderlin saw Oedipus as the incarnation of the "demented quest for consciousness" (Lacoue-Labarthe 1998, 228) or, as Lacoue-Labarthe comments on it, the "madness of knowledge," the "madness of self-consciousness" (Lacoue-Labarthe 1998, 234). Yet *Antigone* speaks differently to Hölderlin, there is something which makes him go back to Aristotle's theory of mimesis in the *Poetics*, and reinterpret it away from its emphasis on imitation, the "spectacular" (Lacoue-Labarthe 1998, 232) relation to the subject of tragedy, and the effect of dramatic utterance in the theory of catharsis – leaning instead in the direction of "regression," or the "reversal of idealism," of the "good" associated with Plato (Lacoue-Labarthe 1998, 233).

On Nancy's view, this positioning of *Antigone* after *Oedipus* in the trilogy matters to Hegel. For the poet Hölderlin, Sophocles' Antigone comes to stand as the exemplary case of the appropriation of a divine position, for she positions herself against Creon and the rules of the city, thus presupposing the "appropriation of the right to institute difference by oneself" (Lacoue-Labarthe 1998, 233). And yet, Antigone "errs," "suffers," rather than transgresses the human limit in the manner typical of a tragic hero – one who "desires difference and exclusion excludes himself, and suffers, to the point of irreversible loss" (Lacoue-Labarthe 1998, 233). As Greek tragedy is about "expulsion," and thus about transgression generally, the question that Hölderlin ponders in his "return" (Lacoue-Labarthe 1998, 229) to Sophocles' *Antigone* is the clue to Nancy's commentary on Hegel.

For Nancy, this question is monstrous to us: How is one, how are we, even to seek to forgive the "crime" of Antigone? Antigone does not stand for the aspect of forgiveness that is made in the symbol of modern humanity, and which can henceforth speak in the name of the law bringing about totality (recall Derrida's first aspect below). For what or who are we remembering, were we to suppose the law in Derrida's first aspect – who or what is Antigone vis-à-vis the recognizable symbol of this "humanity that needs to forgive itself that [crime] and continue living while believing in the Power of 'the laws of the spirit'" (Derrida 2001, 32).

Antigone's crime does not assume the form of transgression, and is not explicitly concerned with the particularities of instituting difference by oneself, as is the case with the decidedly "modern"

(Lacoue-Labarthe 1998, 228) tragic personality of Oedipus that "goes into particulars," offering up a religious and sacrificial interpretation of the social ill. For Hölderlin, the "fable" of Oedipus is recognizably a humanism, its symbol, set as a "trial of heresy," the tragic fault falling with the individual who *"interprets too infinitely* the word of the oracle and in which he is *tempted in the direction of the nefas.* [The transgression, the sacrilege, is thus the excess of interpretation]" (Lacoue-Labarthe 1998, 233; emphasis in original).

Rather, I suggest Nancy draws from Derrida's second aspect of forgiveness, and radically. For Nancy, the concern with "crime" (not transgression) in *Antigone,* as well as the change of order and topic in Hölderlin, and in Hegel, signals this: With *Antigone,* Sophocles undertakes to expose the aesthetic theory of "denegation" of Aristotelian mimetology of the original, copy and catharsis, including the experience of guilt as purification according to the spectacular (imitative) relation to the subject. In other words, the very case of Antigone is different.

To generalize, interest in the "denegation" of mimetology, the imitative relation to the auto-affective subject (the theory of self-affection in Kant's *Gemüt* and a utopian description of the will) here signals that, unless we fully grasp the art of undoing the schematism of imagination that Antigone's deed stands for, we will misunderstand Nancy's Hegel. Giving mind to Derrida's second aspect of forgiveness, we here see, I claim, a Hegel for whom the sharpening of the metaphysical question contributes to the very notion of forgiveness that the *Phenomenology* introduces, as a question of ethics as "first" philosophy. Derrida asks regarding this more profound role: "to begin from the fact that yes, there is the unforgivable. Is this not, in truth, the only thing to forgive? The only thing in truth that *calls* for forgiveness" (Derrida 2001, 32; emphasis in original). What is, then, meant by this question?

For Nancy the denegation that Antigone's "deed"/"crime" introduces occurs at the same level as that played by the role of memory and history as constructions, as constructed symbols. And role they must play in the ways of art when it is "great art," i.e. emerging in the states of affairs of the social partnership tied to the site and origin of the historical appearance of human community (*bürgerliche Gesellschaft/ Sittliche Gemeinschaft*). That is to say, the deed introduces the emergence "into" consciousness, the birth of finite thinking "into" being, but as an

internal rupture within essentially human states of affairs, whose very existence is, in turn, better grasped as emerging from unforgivable deeds. So, in Hegel, forgiveness introduces a difference (the excess of the love-death relation) into symbolic constructions (history and memory), and bases these on "various aspects of love," inherent in the material concern for the other.

Hegel in Nancy, surely, is indebted to what Lacoue-Labarthe names the poetic device of the caesura: the deployment by the poet of the negativity of the suffering "introduces in its doubling of the dialectical-sacrificial process [the hyperbologic] in such a way as to prevent its culmination and paralyze it *from within*" (Lacoue-Labarthe 1998, 233; emphasis in original). A special meaning, an "absence of 'moment'" attaches to preventing this culmination of the conflict, the contradiction, the tragic guilt, and simultaneously to paralyzing it from within. Lacoue-Labarthe ponders further: "the more the tragic is identified with the speculative desire for the infinite and the divine, the more tragedy presents it as a casting into separation, differentiation, finitude. Tragedy, then, is the catharsis of the speculative" (Lacoue-Labarthe 1998, 232). In short, since historical Absolutism is confounded with German Romanticism, it is the romanticization of the artwork as incarnation of the absolute that Hegel targets.

To sum up. With respect to the first or totalizing aspect of forgiveness, above, Nancy claims that Hegel surely chastises the Romantic individual as it relates to Antigone conceived as Romantic ideal. In Hegel's chapter 6, the Substantiality of the individual as incarnation of the idea, the "ethical totality" of Essence or Substance as Subject, as depicted in Antigone's guilt, serves to set the standard of completion of the Concept. But with respect to the second aspect, or, the radical empiricist and the deconstructive, "making-material" aspect of memory and history, we must also account for how Antigone's crime adheres to and inscribes Hegel's own generative logic and its tripartite syllogism of man, nature, art. In our view, to read the tripartite syllogism this way amounts to exculpating Hegel as regards the question of the radicalization of the debt owed to incalculable singularity, with two important consequences. First, we recognize that this debt is nothing other than evidence that, for Hegel, "the unification of the concept with empirical existence cannot be explained by anything external to the System" (Malabou 2005, 18). And, second, for Hegel, this very rule that "nothing is explained by anything external to the system" is to

be thought as inscription of finite materiality, at the same level as the "evidence of [plasticity's] distinct mode of presence, which is that of the originary synthesis, maintained only in the interval between presence and absence [...] accounting for the incarnation, or the incorporation of spirit" (Malabou 2005, 18).

3. Implications

The above argument about the system will lead Nancy to conclude that there is a view from a-cosmogony in Hegel, the creation of the world. In Kristeva, ontology runs parallel to this, in the logic of rupture, limit and horizon, around Antigone.

In general, we have proposed that it is only this complicated conception of Antigone that leads Hegel to reason that she makes of death "the result of an act *consciously done*" (Hegel 1977, M453; emphasis in original). Antigone's deed is the founding moment of the "true [*eigentliche*, *ursprüngliche*] spirit," thus become identical with "the right of consciousness to be asserted in it [the something done]" (Hegel 1977, M452). This temporal totality of the event of subjectivity paradoxically introduces both freedom (metaphysics) and political difference (physics), without opposition, on the level of and at the heart of the system's limit. If it is indeed the case that both are openings from the same source and origin of *Phusis*, it follows that we must think the two together as, at the same time, opening to the Law of the uniquely human polis of the human community, and simultaneously opening to the clue of Antigone's deed; and, thus, preventing closure so that the "future will [...] be the present which will then become the present past or the past present" (Derrida 2005, xix)

Thus, in Nancy, the "guilt" associated with Antigone in Hegel's chapter 6, though singular, paradoxically belongs to two sets of values at once, two cultural-historical epochs, the modern Romantic theory of individuality, "speculative suicide" or sacrifice, and at the same time, the ancient mimetic theory of catharsis, the purification of passion, tragic effect or guilt. But according to the "same" law it also belongs to neither (Lacoue-Labarthe 1998, 222).

Is it possible to exculpate Hegel, then? Can Hegel's Subject reflect on the entire process of its formation? Does Hegel offer the concept as ready-made synthesis? (This is what Judith Butler asks in relation to Hegel's Antigone.) Before moving to Kristeva, I have to address this matter of clarification. I will do so via a brief detour through Lacan. In

Bodies That Matter, Butler says that in Hegel, the "subject [can] reflect on the entire process of its formation" (Butler 1993, 76). However, Butler is wrong that Hegel sides with the State and therefore errs vis-à-vis, e.g., sexual difference (*Antigone's Claim*).

Butler writes this in a deeply Hegelian study of Lacan that treats him as too Hegelian. I give two lengthy quotations. In Butler's own words, "The Lacanian position suggests not only that identifications *precede* the ego, but that the identificatory relation to the image establishes the ego. *Moreover, the ego established through this identificatory relation is itself a relation, indeed the cumulative history of such relations* [emphasis added]. As a result, the ego is not a self-identical substance, but a sedimented history of imaginary relations which locate the center of the ego outside itself, in the externalized *imago* which confers and produces bodily contours. In this sense, Lacan's mirror does not reflect or represent a preexisting ego, but, rather, provides the frame, the boundary, the spatial delineation for the projective elaboration of the ego itself. Hence, Lacan claims, 'the image of the body gives the subject the first form which allows him [*sic*] to locate what pertains to the ego ["*ce qui est du moi*"] and what does not'" (Butler 1993, 74)

This section has demonstrated that Hegel is crucial to evaluating Lacan's mirror as providing something like the frame, the boundary, the spatial delineation for the projective delineation of the ego itself. Kristeva's 1974 critique of metalanguage in favor of the earliest mimetic identification with the mother involves the exercise of negativity. Lacan's point coincides with assigning Hegel's theory of negativity value as a point of necessity or dialectic with its immanent cancellation, simultaneously with it being paralyzed from within. Lacoue-Labarthe, as well as Nancy, ponders Hegel's peculiar position on negativity, the catharsis of the speculative: "the more the tragic is identified with the speculative desire for the infinite and the divine, the more tragedy presents it as a casting into separation, differentiation, finitude. Tragedy, then, is the catharsis of the speculative" (Lacoue-Labarthe 1998, 232). It will be seen below that Kristeva's theory of secondary identification with the mother allows for a more radical conception of negativity and the ontico-ontological difference via Adorno, on the model of the Unhappy Consciousness, which allows the projective elaboration of an ideality in excess of the ego itself, preparatory for a pre-Oedipal Antigone.

II. Kristeva and Secondary Identification

I draw from Kristeva's less well-known essay, "Antigone: Limit and Horizon," from the early 2000s, a contribution to a collection of feminist readings of *Antigone*. We find Antigone positioned in the temporal event, "at the limit state of an indivisible identity" (viz. "the triumph of sublimation at the edge of an originary repression, at the frontier of life, that the speaking ndividual experiences as a going outside of the self" [Kristeva 2010, 218]), a "focal point," a "between," the suspension of an indefinite relation between potentiality and actuality. Kristeva qualifies this practically unqualifiable relation as a more complex negation or rejection: "indifference can flash out even in the midst of care, and the abjection of life can perpetuate itself in an insane disobedience that regenerates the social bond" (Kristeva 2010, 218). I will draw attention in particular to the use of indifference that "can flash out even in care" and abjection of life as a surrogate of "the uncompromising death drive" (Kristeva 2010, 218), that even as it perpetuates in "disobedience" can "regenerate the social bond."

Does Kristeva have a viable response to the Arendtian challenge of existential boredom and leveling, that the egalitarian law totalizing the public domain of Culture, Hegel's modernity, knows no exception, that is, leaves the private entirely out? I situate Kristeva with Arendt, which I explain via Adorno and Benjamin below, in order to arrive at her modification of Hegel, in the final account.

According to Fanny Söderbäck, the editor of the collection in which Kristeva's essay appeared, Kristeva emphasizes the "role of [the] maternal figure as she, for the first time, engages in an extended discussion of *Antigone*" (Söderbäck 2010, 12). This reading is in a league of its own. "While Butler [another contributor] skillfully demonstrates that Antigone 'occupies, linguistically, every kin position *except* "mother,"' and while Cavarero (also in the volume) notes that Antigone inhabits the position of sister and daughter, and not wife and mother (a rare phenomenon in Greek drama), Kristeva—in the final chapter of this volume [. . .] argues that it is precisely the maternal position that our heroine desires to inhabit" (Söderbäck 2010, 12). Although Antigone indeed dies without children and is not a wife, Kristeva nonetheless claims approaching her through secondary identification with the maternal figure is the better reading, as I wish to claim.

More generally, I argue that Kristeva's ethics of Antigone adopts something approximating the second formulation of Kant's categorical imperative. Leonard Lawlor describes it succinctly: "never to treat the person in oneself or in others merely as a means, but always as an end in itself" (Lawlor 2016, 270–71); and provides a variant: "Let Others be Ends in Themselves" (Lawlor 2016, 269). That is, the reader is to grasp the imperative as deriving from the implication of the material inclusion of each and every one in the set of the multitude of individuals. And must know and not forget that '[i]ntensification brings us to the [more complicated experience of freeing up, *Gelassenheit*, a negativity that binds and intensifies] *essence*'" (Lawlor 2016, 269). In other words, we shall treat Kristeva's Antigone as the speaking subject who, in speaking out, crosses the chiasmus with or in the "language of being" – a figure very similar to the proviso in Sara Beardsworth's grammatical chiasmus. Grammatical chiasmus entails the condition that, through the language of "dual semiotic authority," the "speaking subject" opens to the exposure of knowledge as experience of the discrepancy (the vulnerability of alterity), to the negativity of this "passion" (pain, suffering), the "crux." Just what might this "crux" be?

Indifference "can flash out even in the midst of care," and it can even take the shape of the "abjection of life" and, in a paroxysm, regenerate the ties of the social bond. To begin with, we recognize that along with Lacan's instruction, "Do not give way on your desire," the model here presents desire's double reversal, Kristeva's revival of hysteria as neurosis. Yet this is still indebted to Lacan. Kristeva maintains that Antigone does not flee from sickness, she "flees *into* death": "a reading of sickness […] which the common sense of various translators (before Lacan) […] usually, and wrongly, assume[s] that human beings can only 'flee *from* the disease'" (Kristeva 2010, 223–24). Antigone is, then, a case of pseudo-sickness. It is not sickness as "common sense" understands it; her sickness is a "sacred trick" (*amêkhanón*), and it is "more than a defense" […] adds Lacan, as the symptom of an unconscious revolt or of an unbearable desire, through which the daughter of Oedipus escapes from both human and divine laws" (Kristeva 2010, 224).

1. Introducing Arendt's Modernity via Adorno's Hegel

Arendt's observations on the modern age provide a theoretical, Kantian context for the philosophical discussion of the singularity of suffering and the need for a spectator as well. For Kant, and his

Emilia Angelova

bourgeois citizen as subject of the moral law, the subject of modernity, the plurality of the human condition is the condition of the possibility of action. But for the individual as the agent transgressing the limits of the ethico-political order, and the unique human *polis* to be thought as such, requires the spacing of a precarious intervention, which alone is capable of rendering time consistent with this condition. For Ewa Ziarek and Cecilia Sjöholm, as for Kristeva, Antigone in Arendt is a new beginning, a new narrative, and a new action. This is, paradoxically, a striking claim in Arendt, for survival here includes the spectator. I have developed the point elsewhere, but here I wish to emphasize the very idea of the "onlooker," inverting the theory of Kant's Copernican revolution, which functions as a means of regressing, a retroactive self-grounding, negativity, and a revival of the value of alienation that concentrates the objective analysis of the impasse of modernity. This inverted theory of the spectator informs Adorno's variant of Hegel's Culture, explaining the spectator as figuring the impasse as the "dialectic" in the crisis of the Enlightenment. The subject of the plural condition of the *polis* returns us to "Force and Understanding," as put to work by Kristeva, helping the assessment of her transition from Kant "to" Hegel.

To make the point differently, Antigone is (as also in Hegel) the one in whom the law of ethical substance does not coincide with itself. Kristeva points out that Antigone flees into death, following the necessity of this non-coincidence, and assumes the shape of the "eclipse" of the whole layer of suffering, the way that affective labor invests the form of Nature, and then is barbarized, in Hegel (Adorno): paving the path to civilization. How does Antigone, who flees into death, follow the necessity of this non-coincidence? For instance, assuming Arendt's viewpoint, Kristeva writes:

> We must acknowledge that the actor himself, no matter how heroic his exploits themselves may be, cannot constitute wonderful action. Action is wonderful only if it is memorable. And where should we search for memory? The spectators are the ones who "accomplish" history, thanks to a thought that follows the act. This accomplishment takes place through recollection, without which there is simply nothing to recount. It is not the actors but spectators … who make the polis a productive place to organize memory and/ history and stories. (Qtd. in Söderbäck 2010a, 71)

Kristeva's Arendtian point is that the "spectator," classically looking "in" from the "outside" for a lost intimacy and, in some sense, "suffering" – both are necessary; yet the abjection of life, a flash of indifference (e.g., the inseparability, the invisibility of the other's witness, the loss of loss) is necessary too. What is called the "accomplishment" of history could only take place if the shock value of the experience were felt, i.e., to displace estrangement, if it "takes place through recollection." Fanny Söderbäck summarizes this point: "Political action, we might say following Arendt, unfolds in three steps: first in an action, then in the witnessing of this action, and finally in the memory and commemoration of it. Heroic deeds only attain full significance if they are witnessed by spectators who are willing to remember and recount them" (Söderbäck 2010a, 71).

At this point a new question emerges: How does Antigone meet the narrativity criterion and how does Kristeva satisfactorily answer the challenge that she identifies Antigone with Jocasta, the maternal figure (as already mentioned, this sets Kristeva apart from other feminist readers)?

1. Kristeva's Defense of Arendt Regarding the Need of the Spectator

As a point of access to my answers, I will use Herder's invocation *contra* Hegel (cf. Söderbäck 2010a, 65–83): the "need to reverse everything" and "everything must be reversed." I do this with an eye to demonstrating how Kristeva might situate herself *contra* the historicist school. Kristeva opposes the latter, and I wish to enter the further nuance, below, that Hegel, also opposes the historicist. Before reaching this goal, I want to make three points.

My first point, which I develop in some detail, concerns the opposition to the historicist. Giambattista Vico was the first to assert, in the eighteenth century, that human beings are, as it were, blind to the effects of their own actions, but obey the tug of history and Providence achieves its own purposes through them. This is precisely the idea that Hegel subsequently made famous under the name of the "cunning of reason." According to Hegel, objective spirit, the world spirit, prevails by dint of the passions and needs of mankind. But in Hegel's objective spirit, the idea of reflection of the mind, the self-knowing subject, is not alien.

Against the historicist, Kristeva recasts the idea of Hegel's court of judgment. It is "through the dialectic that the universal spirit, the spirit of the world, produces itself in its freedom from all limits, and it is

this spirit which exercises its right—which is the highest right of all— over finite spirits in world history as the world's court of judgement [*Weltgericht*]" (Hegel 1991, §341). The passage that informs Kristeva's essay on Antigone is from Hegel's chapter 6. A, Ethical Action: "Just as previously only the Penates succumbed to the national Spirit, so now the *living* spirits of the nation succumb through their own individuality and perish in an *universal* community, whose simple universality is soulless and dead, and is alive only in the *single* individual qua single. The ethical shape of Spirit has vanished and another takes its place" (Hegel 1977, M475). What happens when we resist the historicist, as Hegel does, and simultaneously add a variant, also resisting the opposition, like Hölderlin proposed, with Hegel neutralizing a more genuine relationship to reality?

Kristeva's Hegel preserves Hölderlin. The question rather becomes how Hölderlin's "genuine relationship to reality, critical and utopian" (Adorno 2008, 290) is retained via Hegel. This is not to say that we are left with accepting the romanticization of the individual, and a romanticizing of Antigone.

Arendt is against the romanticization of the individual – and Söderbäck and Sjöholm agree with this, and resort to Herder. Invoking Arendt and Kristeva on the need to salvage the silence of the spectator, Söderbäck resorts to Herder *contra* Hegel, understandably. Antigone is confined to the "domestic."

Rightly, then, Söderbäck draws on the private, silent space of a suffering subjectivity from Arendt. To clarify. As I developed the point in the first section, Hegel's Antigone must be taken as both an ancient and modern individual (paradoxically, as Lacoue-Labarthe notes, belonging to *two cultural epochs at once and yet belonging to neither*), as indeed Hegel uses *hyperbologically*, interchangeably, *Sittliche Gemeinschaft* and *Bürgerliche Gesellschaft*. For Kant, the autonomy of practical reason as legislator and lawgiver, this agent of modernity and Enlightenment, is on Arendt's view the bourgeois citizen. The ruler/ruled relation between the government and the citizen does not involve deciding, agreeing – the objective appearance of the political is premised on the possibility of foreclosure of the symbol, as well as resistance. Arendt's point is that, since Aristotle, the law of the *polis* stands for the activity of the builder, acting as law-making. Building the laws of the *polis* is like the citizen building a home for the family. A home, a dwelling place, is a dwelling poetically, in the first place

ontico-ontologically and differentially, creating symbols, and only then a construct, a building.

That is, the condition of plurality, as thoroughly unfolded in eighteenth-century France, according to Arendt's notation, and *more ambiguously via Hegel's hyperbology*, demands that public space be utterly egalitarian; "freedom" added to "equality." Accordingly, private space is not a binary or opposed to the public. It remains the space of "resistance" and so remains the witness of the other (barbarity is what "man" has done with "nature"). In this hyperbology, not an identity proposition, not even a contradiction between public and private, Kristeva finds a way to work with negation/rejection, her 1974 normativity of "genuine negativity" turned into a theory of abjection in 1980, and of melancholia in 1987, and of intimate revolt by the mid-1990s.

My second point on hyperbology supports the aim that is Arendt's concern. Hegel leveled charges against the historicist for misconstruing the self-knowing subject. In *Faith and Knowledge*, Hegel levels an objection against Herder from a position which he calls the cognition of the Absolute: "Herder's way of doing philosophy is only a slight modification of this typical pattern. The *Absolute cannot be tolerated in the form that it has for rational cognition,* but only in a game with concepts of reflection, or in sporadic invocations which bring philosophy directly to an end, just as these seem to be about to begin it – even as *Kant ends with the Idea as practical faith. Or else the rational can only be tolerated as beautiful feeling* (*Empfindung*), as instinct, as individuality" (qtd. In Adorno 2008, 284; emphasis added).

Thirdly, Kristeva's requirement of recollection as narrativity, regarding the writers of history, is decisive for Söderbäck. The concern is the aggrandizement of a monolithic history by instrumental reason. So Adorno warns against "the totality on the road to self-realization." Benjamin answers his own question: "with whom does historicism actually sympathize? *The answer is inevitable: with the victor*. All rulers are the heirs of prior conquerors. Hence, empathizing with the victor invariably benefits the current rulers" (qtd. in Adorno 2008, 277; emphasis added).

2. Kristeva's Antigone and History's Empty Transmission of Trauma

In this part I draw from Kristeva's text the two kinds of sovereign, itself a form of the double reversal of desire, the perversion of the

mother-child link, that Kristeva identifies in the study of the pre-Oedipal mother-daughter relationship.

Addressing Antigone, Kristeva writes: "It was, therefore, necessary that the desire to reunite with your family in death, foreshadowed at the beginning of the play [...] already be inscribed in the name of the heroine: against the Mother [*contre la Mère*] and/or *in her place*. In order to be free, or at least autonomous [a sovereign individual], you consecrate yourself, Antigone, to incarnating the death of the desire for life, Eros' double [*doublure*] [death drive's de-binding (*déliaison*)]" (Kristeva 2010, 221; emphasis in original). Kristeva's point here is that we distinguish between at least two kinds of sovereign. First: "Sovereignty obtained by means of exclusion (*anti*) [as if citing Judith Butler] is always ready to abolish itself in a sudden annulment of itself" (Kristeva 2010, 219). Still another ("mature") sovereign emerges in the argument over *dike* between Creon and Antigone. This leads Kristeva to observe: "the triumph of sublimation at the edge of an originary repression, at the frontier of life, that the speaking individual experiences as a going outside of the self—the limit state of an indivisible identity. Mature, sovereign" (Kristeva 2010, 218). Let us unpack the above propositions. I will make four points.

In the first place, *Até* is the limit of the human. In a way, as I claimed via Nancy, Antigone and Polynices are the outermost limit of the human, the empirical concept of the *polis* as expressive of the idea of human totality. Yet when Kristeva says that Antigone has already transgressed and yet still does not transgress the limit, since, structured as an *arche*-trace, it is barely sensible (the "symptom of unbearable desire," "revolt"), she means, as Beardsworth argues, an "anticipatory structure." This structure is anticipatory since it sets itself up as the surrogate of a boundary, a determinate negation, loss, and the loss of loss, the ego grasped as borderline, if language is to have a history. The reason for this is that death-in-life, making the temporality of death cohabit with the place of the living, the space of life as the limit and horizon on which Being stands, is not traversed. Inhibiting the life drive will ensure entrance into language; conversely, moving outside of it, the life drive is traversed.

My second point is identical to Lacan's about Culture in Hegel. In 1953, Lacan claimed that, in the chapter on Desire, "Lordship and Bondage," in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, the classical dialectic of desire and recognition is intersubjective; the master and slave relation

is an imaginary one, as we noted about the mirror stage above. And yet, as Kristeva also agrees, in the previous chapters, specifically in "Force and Understanding," Hegel logically posits a foundation of presuppositionless thinking as the beginning of any properly "scientific" (*wissenschaftlich*) dialectical thought, taken as pure being, "that" it is, and consequently a relational ontological form of desire, a "genuine negativity." This more durable form of desire, I argue, becomes the correlate of Kristeva's underlying idea of the rebellious motility of the semiotic, negation/rejection, developed in division two of *Revolution in Poetic Language*.

That is, with Culture, the self-alienating battle between two forms of alienation, Faith and Enlightenment, notably when Hegel analyzes the Enlightenment not being "too enlightened" about itself, Hegel's French Revolution fails to terminate in the Terror. The form of logic of the Terror is one: "Hegel makes it bitterly clear that the sublime purity of the moral will can be no antidote to the terrifying purity of revolutionary virtue" (Comay 2011, 93) – the threat of it at any moment "reverting to myth," since by means of this figure, Hegel develops the more general point that Culture, through its abstractly theoretical institutions vis-à-vis an equally abstract symbolic subject, renders biological death indiscernible. Kristeva theorizes the *technē* of memory's making-material, which is not yet the negative dialectic of an instrumental reason's tool-making, but rather depends on inscription (Nancy resorts to schematism, above), giving a systematic philosophical foundation made of fractured origins yet to provide the meaning of the human as the horizon of the symbol. "Antigone uncovers a placid energy that cuts the bonds, and effects a de-binding [*déliaison*] that annuls identities and differences in order to install the subject, beyond loss, depression, and suffering, in the *pathos of dispassionating*" (Kristeva 2010, 218; emphasis in original).

My third point is that Creon and Polynices are prelinguistic, and what matters to them is the status and substance of laws; for Kristeva, however, Antigone is linguistic, and what matters to her is intention (the "anticipatory structure" above) toward the law "as" Divine law. That is, the intention toward the being of the law as form – that it "exists," its essence (e.g., imperceptibility, invisibility) – manifests concretely for another being. This accords with Derrida, who maintains that Antigone institutes a law that is ontological, the unconscious is ontological, it exists, in that it manifests to her concretely. "Her

de-binding [*déliaison*] does not accept [the gods'] 'laws' because these 'are not written laws,' but a sort of trace without representation, which a human being cannot transgress" (Kristeva 2010, 223). Kristeva requires that on the occasion (*Beispiel*) of this example, the addressee reflect the method of experience of the *Phenomenology*. As concerns the ethical law in general, the laws of the gods cannot be transgressed, and Kristeva is right. Yet, within the symbolic, Antigone's action generates the enabling conditions of the laws of the polity, allowing them to be discerned by the polity from the dividing line that separates non-being and being. "More or less than the *dikè* of the gods, it would only be a question of a horizon (*horos*) that Antigone allows herself to aim for, to the point of reflecting it in the radiance of her sovereign identity (Kristeva 2010, 223).

My fourth point concerns Kristeva's 1988 formulation in "L'Impossibilité de perdre," via the Lacan of trauma. In summary – in contrast to Hölderlin, for whom the gods have fled; Kant, for whom the Thing itself has fled; or Heidegger, for whom Being has withdrawn – Kristeva positions what she calls the semiotic subject conceived as discourse, operating as founded on an inner void, a *trauma psychique* rather than a *trauma réel*. She posits a reactivation of retroactive repetition: "Trauma places the subject in relation to the Thing" (Critchley 2009, 1999–216). This trauma, which is premised on the possibility of recollective return, is secondary identification with the mother. The topological ground in the positionality of the Kleinian mother-infant dyad implies an origin that assumes an identity prior to the installment of the subject at the roots of the Oedipal stage, which depends on the preservation of its remainder, *reste*, trace. *Trauma psychique* is methodologically anterior to memory in the formation of the psychic life of the child.

Conclusion. Dual Semiotic Authority, the Collapse of Psychic Space in Modernity, and the Necessity of Myth in Kristeva's Development of Love Transference

In "L'Impossibilité de perdre," Kristeva distances herself from Lacan and his view of sublimation. She articulates her view of traumatism in relation to the archaic maternal: "in commenting on the notion of *das Ding* [the thing] in Freud's *Entwurf*, Lacan claims that however withdrawn the Freudian Thing may be from judging

consciousness, it is always already given in the presence of language" (qtd. in Critchley 1999, 216). Kristeva tells us that affect is anterior to language, that it is generative of significance and yet cannot be signified in language. How do we conceptualize affect through the archaic maternal repressed? All efforts to breach, separate from, and master the semiotic implode within the symbolic. Into the 1990s, this shattering is central to Kristeva's concept of intimate revolt. Affect as oppositional force, as a capacity of psychic or semiotic retroaction, is the means through which traumatism enters, breaching the symbolic.

In other words, Kristeva focuses on the "infantile event" as a structural precondition of trauma, and she contrasts this to Lacan's view of the subversion of the subject – specifically in the structure of "subject/other." As Kristeva argues, this revives the point of the "original unknown" of the origin of so-called trauma: "*ce n'est pas un événement originaire, mais un second, réactivant le premier, qui constitue de cet 'inconnu originaire' un trauma*" (Kristeva 1988, 30).

Trauma réel and *trauma psychique* constitute the central feature of this claim. Kristeva brings the "I" to the vital necessity of embarking on an existential choice, that of individuation as subject, living in the world with others. This implies asserting the law of the sociohistorical symbolic order and affirming subordination to its consequences. As a speaking being, the capacity to live an independent life with others depends on the ability to renounce difference, yet this simultaneously entails a refusal of differentiation from the perceived and real object of one's being a whole, since a connection must be preserved to having-been. At the foundation of the production of symbolic equations, Kristeva will situate the story of the fourth negation, *rejet* as a productive rejection, along with the cooperation of the symbolic, semiotic, and thetic. In this way, she affirms an ideality larger than the atomism of an ego-based identity of the subject can admit. Kristeva further posits that, without assuming the existence of "pre-psychical memory," the "word," the meaning and interpretation of the symbol of the "good," does not understand itself with reference to its function. The complex of acquiring consciousness and its time-space, a "pre-psychical memory" or "memory-trace," cannot be symbolized in the subject. Instead, Kristeva writes, symbolization requires attention to the uncanny experience of the "memory-trace, whose repetition is unaware of time, can sometimes seep into very concealed, elaborate, and sublimatory formations and mark them with the unsettling strangeness of the

atemporal" (Kristeva 2002, 35). The symbol symbolizes by "splitting" the subject (who cannot symbolize debt in relation to her creditors, e.g., the parental other and consciousness) and thus symbolizes by splitting the universal at the very foundation of its "origin" in consciousness (in a relation of debt to the "gift," e.g., the somatization of "body").

To return this to Hegel and the Unhappy Consciousness, sandwiched between the classical chapters on Desire and the Ethical Order, I have prepared the path to show that, for Kristeva, Antigone already inaugurates the more complex negativity of Hegel's Unhappy Consciousness.

In brief, Hegel here turns the dialectic from a negative to a positive relation – one of love. He asserts that the "single individual consciousness is in itself Absolute Essence" (Hegel 1977, M231), which is the turning point of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. The triad that constitutes this unity has three moments: the single individual consciousness, the mediator, and lastly Absolute Essence. The binding relation of this unity, in its "prerational" conception, is one of pure negativity. This unity as a whole is what constitutes the Unhappy Consciousness. It is only through achieving Unhappy Consciousness, or the third form (consciousness and self-consciousness being the previous two), that negativity changes into a new relation, a positive relation, that is, a negated negation. The first act is to drop the middle term, the mediator who is "the unity directly aware of both [the first and the second], and connecting them" (Hegel 1977, M231). This mediator is aware that it is itself a consciousness and acts so as to link the single individual consciousness and Absolute Essence. Significantly, when this mediator is dropped, the individual consciousness is now aware of itself as a reliable mediator to Absolute Essence; it can now understand unity for itself as well as possess awareness of the Thing.

As with every new beginning, with making room for new acts, new things in the world, in Kristeva the child constitutes the inception of the mother-child link. Hegel's self-consciousness started as a negation only concerning itself with its independence and freedom: both Independence and Freedom. But in light of the process that it *worked* via this negative relation, realizing the limitations of both its independence and freedom, reason allowed it to preserve the unity of independence and freedom by being at peace with the world. Maternal love, the dialectic of hate and forgiveness, as per Kristeva's secondary identification with the mother, is modeled on this.

References

Adorno, Theodor W. 2008. *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-65*, edited by Rolf Tidemann. Translated by Rodney Livingstone. London: Polity.

Balsam, Rosemary. 2014. "The Embodied Mother: Commentary on Kristeva," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 62, no. 1 (February 2014): 87–100.

Beardsworth, Sara. 2004. *Julia Kristeva: Psychoanalysis and Modernity*. New York: SUNY Press.

———. 2017. "The Chiasmus of Action and Revolt: Julia Kristeva, Hannah Arendt, and Gillian Rose." In *New Forms of Revolt: Essays on Kristeva's Intimate Politics*, edited by S. K. Hansen and Rebecca Tuvel, 43–67. New York: SUNY Press.
Butler, Judith. 2000. *Antigone's Claim.* London: Routledge.

———. 2003. *Bodies that Matter*. London: Routledge.

Comay, Rebecca. 2011. *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

———. "Resistance and Repetition: Hegel and Freud." In *Hegel and Resistance*: *History, Politics and Dialectics*, edited by Rebecca Comay and Bart Zantvoort, 35–57. London: Bloomsbury.

Critchley, Simon. 2009. *Ethics–Politics–Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought*. London: Verso.

Derrida, Jacques. 2005. "Preface." In Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel*. Translated by Lisabeth During. London: Routledge.

———. 2022 [1961]. *Penser, c'est dire non*. Paris: Seuil.

Gearhart, Suzanne. 1998. "The Remnants of Philosophy: Psychoanalysis After *Glas*." In *Hegel After Derrida*, edited by Stuart Barnett. London and New York: Routledge.

Hansen, S. K. and Rebecca Tuvel, "Introduction." In *New Forms of Revolt: Essays on Kristeva's Intimate Politics*, edited by S. K. Hansen and Rebecca Tuvel, 1–14. New York: SUNY Press.
Hegel, G. W. F. 1977. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated by A. V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

———. 1991. *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, edited by Allen W. Wood. Translated by H. B. Nissbet. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

———. 1997. *Hegel's Science of Logic*. Translated by A. V. Miller. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.

Houlgate, Stephen. 2006. *The Opening of Hegel's* Logic*: From Being to Infinity*. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press.

Kristeva, Julia. 1984 [1974]. *Revolution in Poetic Language.* Translated by Margaret Waller. New York: Columbia University Press.

———. 1988. "L'Impossibilité de perdre," *Les Cahiers de l'Institut de Psycho-Pathologie Clinique* 8 (November 1988), special issue on "Trauma réel, trauma psychique."

———. 2002. *Intimate Revolt: The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis*, volume 2. Translated by Jeanine Herman. New York: Columbia University Press.

———. 2010 [2005]. *Hatred and Forgiveness.* Translated by Jeanine Herman. New York: Columbia University Press.

———. 2010. "Antigone: Limit and Horizon." In *Feminist Readings of Antigone*, edited by Fanny Söderbäck, 215–31. New York: SUNY Press.

Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe. 1989. *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, edited by Christopher Fynsk. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Lawlor, Len. 2016. *Striking Violence and Speaking Out*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Lechte, John. 1990. "Art, Love, and Melancholy in the Work of Julia Kristeva." In *Abjection, Melancholia and Love*, edited by John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin, 24–41. London: Routledge.

Malabou, Catherine. 2005. *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic*. Translated by Lisabeth During. London: Routledge.

Morin, Marie-Eve. 2022. *Merleau-Ponty and Nancy on Sense and Being: At the Limits of Phenomenology*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Nancy, Jean-Luc. 2000. *Being Singular Plural.* Translated by Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Nelson, Eric S. 2014. "Heidegger, Levinas, and the Other of History." In *Between Levinas and Heidegger*, edited by John E. Drabinski and Eric S. Nelson, 75–84. New York: SUNY Press.

Nuzzo, Angelica. 1999. "The Idea of 'Method' in Hegel's Science of Logic—a Method for Finite Thinking and Absolute Reason," *Bulletin of the Hegel Society of Great Britain* 1–2, nos. 39–40: 1–17.

Sjöholm, Cecilia. 2006. *Kristeva and the Political*. London: Routledge.

Söderbäck, Fanny. 2010. "Introduction." In *Feminist Readings of Antigone*, edited by Fanny Söderbäck, 1–13. New York: SUNY Press.

Stawarska, Beata. 2017. "Language as *Poeisis*: Productivity and Forms of Resistance in Kristeva and Saussure." In *New Forms of Revolt: Essays on Kristeva's Intimate Politics*, edited by S. K. Hansen and Rebecca Tuvel, 129-155. New York: SUNY Press.

Thompson, Kevin. 2019. *Hegel's Theory of Normativity: The Systematic Foundations of the Philosophical Science of Right*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Watkin, William. 2003. "Melancholia, Revolution and Materiality in the Work of Julia Kristeva." *Paragraph* 26, no. 3 (November 2003): 86–107.

Zambrana, Rocio. 2015. *Hegel's Theory of Intelligibility*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

Evangelos Kourdis

Kristeva's Impact on Translation and the Interplay of Intertextuality, Transposition and Intersemiosis

Abstract

This essay attempts to present the impact of Kristeva's concepts of intertextuality and transposition on translation studies. The concept of intertextuality contributed significantly to the study of the concept of intersemiosis, although quite often it is difficult to distinguish the two in translation studies. Interestingly, even though intersemiosis or intersemiotic translation is the object of study in translation studies, the translation of intertextuality is a much more prominent focus for translation scholars. At the same time, intersemiosis is considered the most important subject for translation scholars and translation semioticians, who should have the first say. To sum up, Kristeva's important contribution lies in the fact that two important terms, "intertextuality" and "transposition," important terms for the study of literature, have also become objects of study in theoretical and applied translation studies.

Keywords

Kristeva, intertextuality, transposition, intersemiosis, translation studies

Semiotics and Translation

Very early on, translation studies used semiotic terms existing in other disciplines, mainly introduced from literary translation and linguistics. Semiotics as a theory and method of cultural analysis was expected to interact with translation, a cultural activity whose roots go a long way back in history, as well as to expand its boundaries by participating in what translation studies calls the *cultural turn*.

The interdependency of translation and culture was noted by Umberto Eco, according to whom "culture continuously translates signs into signs, and definitions into other definitions, words into icons

[...] [and] in this way it proposes to its members an uninterrupted chain of cultural units, composing other cultural units, and thus translating and explaining them" (Eco 1976, 71). Early semiotic theorists, such as Charles Sanders Peirce, Juri Lotman, Roman Jakobson, Algirdas Julien Greimas and Joseph Courtés, address the translational dimension of cultural phenomena. More specifically, Peirce argues that meaning is "the translation of a sign into another system of signs" (Peirce 1931–1958, 4:127). Lotman considers that "[t]he instrument of semiotic research is translation" (Lotman 1990, 271). Jakobson proposes a typology of translation inspired from the concept of *equivalence*, a concept of great concern to later translation scholars, arguing that "translation involves two equivalent messages in two different codes" (Jakobson 1959, 233).

In the interaction between semiotics and translation, no other term has been so widely accepted by translation scholars as *intertextuality*, widely used in the study of literature before its adoption in translation studies. It even marginalized the term *intersemiosis*, associated with translation before "intertextuality." In fact, translation scholars were not excited by the concept of intersemiosis, but welcomed intertextuality more since intertextuality was associated with the relationship between linguistic texts. Greimas and Courtés point out that "[c]overing and expanding, without contradicting it, the concept of intertextuality, was imposed over that of intersemiosis, in semiotic theory, in the name of respect for immanence" (Greimas and Courtés 1986, 119).

Although Kristeva's work is not related to translation studies, the concepts of intertextuality and transposition, which she introduced and analyzed, became key concepts in that field. As Eco and Nergaard observe, "[t]ranslation studies is increasingly adopting an interdisciplinary approach to the study of translation as intertextual and intercultural transposition" (Eco and Nergaard 2001, 218). Both terms seem to attract the interest of translation scholars as they refer to the passage from one cultural text to another, highlighting the relationships between them.

Intertextuality and Translation

The dimension of translation emerged in Kristeva's work through the concept of *transformation*, i.e. the *permutation* of texts. More

specifically, Kristeva argues that "every text is the absorption and transformation of another text" (Kristeva 1969, 85).[1] This is a very interesting position in literature; however, it poses a few problems for translation studies, as it is very important to determine the source text in intralingual and interlingual translation.

For translation studies scholars, the concept of intertextuality was directly linked to Kristeva's own research, later further pursued by Roland Barthes and Gérard Genette (Barthes 1973; Genette 1992, 1997a, 1997b). The concept of intertextuality has been present in European thought since the 1920s, thanks to the translinguistic analysis of Mikhail Bakhtin, disseminated in France thanks to the studies of Julia Kristeva (Kristeva 1969). Acknowledging Kristeva's contribution, Greimas and Courtés state that the pre-theoretical concept of intertextuality is part of Kristeva's multidirectional and avant-garde vision of the Text, defined in terms of process and production (Greimas and Courtés 1986, 119–20). For Kristeva, intertextuality is "a crossing of statements taken from other texts [...] a transposition into communicative speech of previous or synchronic statements [...] which evades intersubjectivity" (1969, 378). It is worth mentioning that Kristeva draws a distinction between two types of intertextuality: *horizontal* and *vertical*. More precisely,

> [the] horizontal axis (subject-addressee) and vertical axis (text-context) coincide, bringing to light an important fact: namely that each word (text) is an intersection of words (texts), where at least one other word (text) can be read. In Bakhtin's work, these two axes, which he calls *dialogue* and *ambivalence*, are not clearly distinguished. Yet, what appears as lack of rigor is, in fact, an insight first introduced into literary theory by Bakhtin: any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of *intertextuality* replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least *double*. (Kristeva 1980, 66; emphasis in original)

Basil Hatim observes that "such taxonomies are of little use, say, in the practice of translating, unless related to the complex decision-making process that typifies activities such as translation"

---

[1]   Unless otherwise noted, all translations from French are the author's.

(Hatim 1997, 31).[2] Overall, translation scholars insist that intertextuality should be acknowledged by the translator, who should translate it to achieve successful cultural communication. Thus, Lawrence Venuti argues that "[i]ntertextuality is central to the production and reception of translations [...] The creation of a receiving intertext allows a translation to be read and comprehended by translating-language readers [...] Intertextuality enables and complicates translation, preventing it from being an untroubled communication, and opening the translated text to interpretive possibilities that vary with cultural constituencies in the receiving situation" (Venuti 2009, 57). Moreover, "the intertextuality of texts enables translators to find relevant evidence and references in translation practice, but the intertextuality of texts also puts forward higher requirements for translators in terms of cultural quality" (Long and Yu 2020, 1109). In short, the translation of instances of intertextuality poses a challenge.

It is worth noting that the translation of intertextuality is not only a challenge for interlingual translation but also occupies an important place in translation studies subfields such as *adaptation* and *audiovisual translation*. Georges Bastin highlights the importance of intertextuality to adaptation, "given that the reader is assumed to compare the adapted text not only with the original but also with other adaptations and similar texts in an ongoing dialogical process" (Bastin 2021, 13). Particularly in the case of humorous communication in which adaptations or intersemiotic translations of already familiar cultural texts, such as films, theatrical plays, etc., are produced, this risk is much greater. Marta Muñoz Gil observes that "intertextuality is one of the fundamental strategies used to convey most of the parody and the satirical content [...] Intertextuality may be present either in implicit references to films or other audiovisual programmes or in references to past events, just to mention a few possibilities" (Gil 2009, 148).

The recursive and evocative aspect in the above texts, characterizing intertextuality and intersemiosis, has led several researchers to directly link the two phenomena. Panagiotis Sakellariou emphasizes the intersemiotic aspect of intertextuality since "[i]n audiovisual

---

[2] According to Honghui Zhao, "[a]pplying the concepts introduced by Kristeva and citing the work of Bakhtin, Hatim continues to distinguish between these two concepts. In horizontal intertextuality the relation between two texts is explicit, that is, a text, or extract thereof, written in reply to or development of another one, for example. In contrast, vertical intertextuality is more implicit, and may relate to writing conventions" (Zhao 2017, 121)

translation, intertextuality involves greater inter-semiotic interaction between different elements of the situation, and in that respect the translated text can be said to come closer to Kristeva's concept of a translinguistic apparatus" (Sakellariou 2021, 269). Da'an Pan argues that "[t]ranslation in terms of intertextuality and subtextuality can be called 'intersemiotic translation', to borrow Roman Jakobson's term" (Pan 2000, 58). In my opinion, translation scholars and translation semioticians should treat this connection, however justified, with caution because of the extent of intersemiotic translation, as we shall see below.

Transposition and translation

The notion of intertextuality is closely related to that of *transposition*. Kristeva claims that "transposition is essential for intertextuality, which controls the signified process of a text" (Kristeva 1974, 340). Transposition is also associated with translation since the latter involves the exchange and permutation of signs:

> We shall call *transposition* the signifying process' ability to pass from one sign system to another, to exchange and permutate them; and *representability* the specific articulation of the semiotic and the thetic for a sign system. Transposition plays an essential role here inasmuch as it implies the abandonment of a former sign system, the passage to a second via an instinctual intermediary common to the two systems, and the articulation of the new system with its new representability. (Kristeva 1984, 60; emphasis in original)

When, in her later work, Kristeva analyzes the aspect of forgiveness, she states that "writing is transformation, transposition, translation" (Kristeva 1989, 217), directly relating transposition to translation. It should be noted that the term "transposition" is widely used in translation studies (both as a translation technique and as a cultural phenomenon). In this light, Dinda L. Gorlée observes that "[a]s a translation-related concept, Kristeva's transposition shows the possibility of the signifying process to transform itself and be transformed" (Gorlée 2004, 58). For Gorlée, "transposition is compatible with Bakhtin's dialogism

and akin to the earlier concept, intertextuality, as well as to Greimas' intersémioticité" (Gorlée 1994, 22).[3]

In fact, "transposition" is used by both Jakobson and Kristeva, and quite common in translation studies. In a seminal article, "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation," Jakobson identifies *transposition* with *intersemiotic translation* or *transmutation*. More precisely, Jakobson argues that "only creative transposition is possible: either intralingual transposition – from one poetic shape into another – or interlingual transposition – from one language into another – or, finally, intersemiotic transposition – from one system of signs into another, e.g., from verbal art into music, dance, cinema, or painting" (Jakobson 1959, 238). It is through this third category, apparently influenced by the Paris School of Semiotics, that Jakobson first links semiotics to translation.

Jakobson's use of "transposition" suggests an openness to include all the transmutations of semiotic systems, not all necessarily linguistic, in translation phenomena. In this situation, the concept of transposition may prove useful, a possibility highlighted also by other researchers. Britt W. Svenhard argues that, "when extending Jakobson's principle to include the translation of any system of signs into any other system, Julia Kristeva's concept of intertextuality and her term transposition may be applied" (Svenhard 2021, 408).

In his seminal 1959 work, Jakobson uses intersemiotic translation or transmutation as an umbrella term for transposition. However, Nicola Dusi considers transposition as an umbrella term for all intersemiotic phenomena:[4]

> it can be proposed that all cases of "intersemiotic translation,"
> "transmutation" or "adaptation" should be grouped together
> in the sphere of transposition, irrespective of whether they are
> audiovisual, musical, theatrical, performative, and so on. [...] The
> term "transposition," on the other hand, by virtue of the prefix
> "trans," involves a going beyond (as in "transgress") and a transferral
> (as in "transfuse"), drawing attention to the notion of moving beyond

Evangelos Kourdis

148

---

[3]   A decade later Gorlée reiterated this position, stating that "Julia Kristeva introduced into this body of thought the notion of transposition, a notion that crosses Saussure's division between signifier and signified and approaches Greimas' 'intersemioticity'" (Gorlée 2004, 57).

[4]   Similarly, João Queiroz, Ana Paula Vitorio and Ana Luiza Fernandes observe that "[i]n interarts and in intermediality studies, intersemiotic translation is described as medial transposition" (Queiroz, Vitorio and Fernandes 2022, 231).

the original text, passing through it, in other words, multiplying its semantic potential. (Dusi, 2015, 202–3)

This can be better understood since "[t]ransposition corresponds to an extremely rich and varied field of writing practices, or more exactly of rewriting among translation" (Limat-Letellier and Miguet-Ollagnier 1998, 39). The term "transposition" seems to better describe the passage from one cultural text to another, and this may be one reason why it is preferred by literary scholars. Translation is defined as the transposition of a *prototext* into a *metatext*[5] linking two more or less similar textocultural worlds (Osimo 2011).

Intersemiosis in translation

Intersemiotic translation was proposed as a type of translation by Jakobson. As a structuralist linguist and semiotician, Jakobson considers the linguistic system necessary in intersemiotic translation and argues that "[i]ntersemiotic translation or transmutation is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems" (Jakobson 1959, 233). His examples range from verbal art to music, dance, cinema, and painting. In these examples, he not only speaks of intersemiotic translation and transmutation, but uses a third term as well, transposition. Jakobson always considers language as the primary semiotic system, the basic scientific position of the Paris School of Semiotics with which he was affiliated. Thus, Jakobson never discusses the issue of intersemiotic translation without language as one of the two poles in the translation process.

It is worth mentioning that Jakobson proposed the three terms to describe the interpretation of verbal signs by nonverbal signs (Jakobson 1959). However, nowadays, semioticians accept that intersemiotic translation may occur among nonverbal messages (e.g. Lawendowski 1978; Sonesson 1996; Torop 2000; Fabbri 2008; Kourdis

---

[5]   The two terms are related to the intersemiotic environment and to the act of translation. As Peeter Torop claims, "if we start from the already created text that switches into the intersemiotic space of culture it, as a prototext, becomes a foundation for an infinite number of metatexts; it creates intertextual and other connections and loses its ontological boundaries in the end. [...] Evaluating a text from the side of reception we can, on the one hand, estimate the translatability of a text into other texts and into other sign systems by the comparison of the prototext and metatext" (Torop 2004, 63).

and Yoka 2014). This position is aptly expressed by Susan Petrilli, who states that "translative processes may be internal to the same language; they may occur from verbal sign systems to nonverbal sign systems and vice versa; or among nonverbal sign systems" (Petrilli 2003, 18). Absence of the language system makes the translation between iconic messages, also known as *intericonicity*, part of intersemiotic translation, or transmutation, or transposition. Indeed, it provides an opportunity for semioticians to undertake further categorizations of this cultural phenomenon. Within this framework, Göran Sonesson claims that "we will have to take into account the possibility of *intrapictorial translation* (e.g., exchanging one drawing for another) and *interpictorial translation* (e.g., substituting a photograph for a drawing)" (Sonesson 1996, 10; emphasis in original).

Intertextual or intersemiotic translation?

It was argued above that intertextuality, although introduced later in the field, has had more impact on translation studies than intersemiosis. At the same time, there appears to be a tendency to use the two terms interchangeably, which creates confusion as both intertextuality[6] and intersemiosis, as cultural phenomena, are linked to other texts. A problem arises when intertextuality is used outside of the linguistic text and, in particular, when addressing iconic texts (metatexts).

According to Hatim, intertextuality "is an all-pervasive textual phenomenon which, especially when opaque, can be an important source of ambiguity in texts and thus a particularly problematic area in translation" (Hatim 1997, 29). Intertextuality, however, can involve either complete texts or parts of them, without thereby being necessarily held by the question of the source text. For intersemiosis as a cultural phenomenon characterized by a translational dimension, identifying the source text (prototext) is important, and usually these texts are cultural texts deeply rooted in a shared cultural memory. As both link cognitive cultural texts, I claim that anything intersemiotic is always intertextual; however, the converse is not necessarily true. This is because intersemiosis is associated with transmuting the informational load,

---

[6] Zhao agrees that "[a]s [i]ntertextuality can be discussed at different levels, it may cause confusion" (Zhao 2017, 126).

whereas intertextuality can involve simply an allusion or a connection to a very small part of the informational load of the original source.

Another problem is that a special case of intersemiosis, intericonicity, is also confused with intertextuality. Intericonicity is too often defined as the *intertextuality of images* or *visual intertextuality*. Thus, Thierry Groensteen claims that intericonicity is the persistent and highly dynamic visual intertextuality that pervades a text and activates another process that slows down reading (Groensteen 2017). Anne-Marie Houdebine argues that "the notion of intertextuality has been extended to relations between discourses (intersubjectivity) or between iconic (intericonicity) and media texts (intermediality)" (Houdebine 2009, 213). Yves Quairiaux claims that "the notion of intericonicity relays that of intertextuality to explore the manifest or secret relationships between images" (Quairiaux 2001). The above positions seems to be answered by Beatriz Hoster, María José Lobato Suero and Alberto Manuel Ruiz Campos who claim that,

> [w]hile "intertextuality" initially refers to literary works only, the notion has been expanded to refer to artistic allusions in other media and art forms as well. In order to develop more distinctive frameworks, art historians have advocated using the term "interpictoriality" (some have even suggested "intericonicity") instead [...] This notion refers to the process of an image referring to another image, whether painting, an illustration in a book, or a movie. (Hoster, Lobato Suero and Ruiz Campos 2017, 93)

Similarly, for Claire Omhovere, "[i]nter-iconicity is modelled on the concept of intertextuality as initially defined by Julia Kristeva and later elaborated by Gérard Genette" (Omhovere 2017, 147). Several translation semioticians consider intericonicity to be a special case of intersemiotic translation,[7] based on the fact that intersemiotic translation can be realized without the use of the linguistic semiotic system. Below, I provide two examples to define the boundary between intertextuality and intericonicity as a special case of intersemiosis. I argue that if we approach these two cultural phenomena from the viewpoint of information, we can understand the difference between them more easily.

---

7   See Kourdis and Yoka 2014.

The first example involves a snapshot of a television commercial by the Greek telecommunications company Cosmote (fig. 1), which shows four men on a zebra crossing in Athens, talking on their mobile phones. The image recalls the picture on the Beatles' *Abbey Road* album cover, in which George Harrison, Paul McCartney, Ringo Starr, and John Lennon are seen striding across the road outside EMI studios in St John's Wood – probably the most iconic photo of the band (fig.2). However, the Greek snapshot clearly does not take place in London nor does it depict the Beatles, so the two iconic texts do not share the same informational load. This is an instance of intertextuality. On the other hand, the postage stamp issued in 2007 (fig. 3) and the 2020 animation (fig. 4), although they belong to different semiotic systems from the album cover, share the same informational load and can be viewed as an intersemiotic translation, more specifically an intericonic one.

Fig 1: Caption from Cosmote TV spot (2022)

Fig. 2: The Beatles' walking photo across a pedestrian crossing in London (1969)
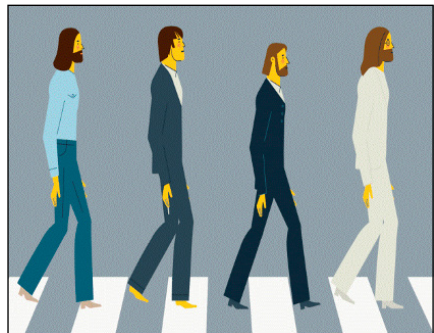

Fig.3: Royal Mail stamps (2007)

Fig. 4: Animation by Joe Gast (2020)[8]

Evangelos Kourdis

152

---

8   See https://bit.ly/3yGB8FE (accessed March 13, 2024).

The second example comes from the 2015 refugee crisis: the two-year-old Syrian boy Aylan Kurdi, drowned on September 2, 2015 in the Mediterranean along with his mother and brother. The photo of the dead body recovered by Turkish police (fig. 5) made global headlines. To commemorate Aylan Kurdi, a few days later, on September 7, thirty people lay face down on a beach in Rabat, Morocco, in an attempt to recreate the harrowing scene (fig. 6).[9] The people sought to evoke the event, despite the numerous dissimilarities at the level of informational load (most of the people involved were adults, in Turkey and not in Morocco, thirty in number, not refugees but beachgoers, etc.). The semiotic systems relied upon were color and posture. Some wore the same combination of clothes – a red shirt and blue trousers – and stayed in position for about twenty minutes.

Fig. 5: The photo of drowned Aylan Kurdi

Fig. 6: Beachgoers commemorate Aylan Kurdi

On the other hand, transmuting the initial photo into a work of art made of sand (fig. 7)[10] or into a 120-square-meter mural (fig. 8),[11] by Justus Becker and Oğuz Şen in Frankfurt on March 9, 2016, were examples of the intersemiotic translation of the same informational load into different sign systems. Sand sculptures and murals belong to different semiotic systems from photography, since they have their own expression and structure.

These examples may all well be approached in the light of Jakobson's creative transposition or Kristeva's permutation of signs. In both cases we are talking about a transfer of information into a different medium

---

9   See https://bit.ly/3wsf2Uw (accessed March 13, 2024).
10   See https://bit.ly/3LpAvTp (accessed March 13, 2024).
11   See https://bit.ly/3Pxmiay (accessed March 13, 2024).

or semiotic system, a kind of transformation possessing a translational dimension.

Fig. 7: Sand art showing Syrian toddler Aylan Kurdi

Fig. 8: Mural of Syrian toddler Aylan Kurdi
©Freedom House: CC by-SA 2.9 ©Reuters

Conclusions

The two phenomena, intertextuality and transposition or interse-miosis, which are common in everyday cultural communication, are closely related; however, we should distinguish them. Intertextuality and transposition or intersemiosis share the following characteristics:

- they are cultural semiotic phenomena
- they characterize the translation process as serial phenomena
- they refer to prior cultural texts
- they constitute a cognitive process
- they are based on shared cultural knowledge

Nevertheless, even though they recall other (previously created) cultural texts, the two do not necessarily share the same information. In my view, any intersemiotic translation has an intertextual relationship with its source text, but not every intertextual relationship is intersemiotic. This constitutes an essential difference between the two phenomena.

It is no surprise that intertextuality, "as an instrument of analysis [...] has not been systematically elaborated; rather, it has remained an underdeveloped category covering heterogeneous phenomena" (Sakellariou 2020, 270). It is quite typical that many translation scholars confuse the semiotic phenomena of intertextuality and transposition or intersemiosis, finding it difficult to discern their boundaries. They also

seem to have a better understanding of the concept of intertextuality, even though intersemiosis or transposition predates intertextuality.

In intertextuality there is a link (allusion, enthymeme, etc.) between texts that is not always obvious. The notion of intersubjectivity, to which Kristeva refers (Kristeva 1969), is not typical of intersemiosis, since the source and target texts are usually part of a shared cultural background. In addition, in the case of intersemiosis we speak of the transmutation/transposition of the informational load of the text. This procedure can be studied employing concepts such as *similarity*, *substitution*, or *reproduction* between two texts. These are translation concepts as well.

A high degree of subjectivity is involved in intertextuality. Recalling another cultural text, in whole or in part, requires extensive cultural knowledge, conditioned by the duration of the interpreter's contact with the intertext and, of course, by the personal experiences of the interpreter. In intersemiosis, however, which acknowledges the informational load of a cultural text, subjectivity is much diminished as it involves a greater extent of shared cultural knowledge. This is because the cultural texts being transmuted are recognizable texts, inscribed in so-called common cultural memory.

Kristeva's important contribution lies in the fact that "intertextuality" and "transposition," important terms for literature, have also become part of the research of theoretical and applied translation studies. They are also directly or indirectly linked to intersemiosis and its typologies, thus allowing the comprehension of the transmutation of cultural phenomena, that is, cultural communication.

References

Barthes, Roland. 1973. "Texte (Théorie du)." Encyclopedia Universalis. https://www.universalis.fr/encyclopedie/theorie-du-texte/.

Bastin, Georges. 2021. "Adaptation." In The Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies, edited by Mona Baker and Gabriela Saldanha, 10–14. London and New York: Routledge.

Dusi, Nicola. 2015. "Intersemiotic translation: Theories, problems, analysis," Semiotica 206, no. 1: 181–205.

Eco, Umberto and Siri Nergaard. 2001. "Semiotic Approaches." In The Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies, edited by Mona

Baker and Gabriela Saldanha, 218–22. London and New York: Routledge.

Eco, Umberto. 1976. A Theory of Semiotics. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Fabbri, Paolo. 2008. Le tournant sémiotique. Paris: Lavoisier.

Genette, Gérard. 1992. The Architext: An Introduction. Translated by Jane E. Lewin. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

———. 1997a. Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree. Translated by Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky. Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press.

———. 1997b. Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation. Translated by Jane E. Lewin. Lincoln, NE and London: University of Nebraska Press.

Gorlée, Dinda L. 1994. Semiotics and the Problem of Translation: With Special Reference to the Semiotics of Charles S. Peirce. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

———. 2004. "Translation as a semiotic problem, including intersemiotic translation." In Übersetzung–Translation–Traduction: Ein internationals Handbuchzur Übersetzungsforschung–An International Handbook of Translation Studies–Encyclopédie internationale de la recherche sur la traduction, vol. 1, edited by Harald Kittel, Armin Paul Frank, Norbert Greiner, Theo Hermans, Werner Koller, José Lambert, and Fritz Paul, 53–61. Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter.

Greimas, Algirdas-Julien, and Joseph Courtés. 1986. Sémiotique. Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage, vol. 2. Paris: Hachette.

Groensteen, Thierry. 2017. The Expanding Art of Comics: Ten Modern Masterpieces. Translated by Ann Miller. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi

Hatim, Basil. 1997. "Intertextual Intrusions: Towards a Framework for Harnessing the Power of the Absent Text in Translation." In Translating Sensitive Texts: Linguistic Aspects, edited by Karl Simms, 29–46. Amsterdam: Rodopi,.

Hoster Cabo, Beatriz, María José Lobato Suero, Alberto Manuel Ruiz Campos. 2017. "Interpictoriality in Picturebooks." In The Routledge Companion to Picturebooks, edited by Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer, 91–102. New York: Routledge.

Houdebine, Anne-Marie. 2009. "Intericonicité (relations intericoniques/ relations intermédiatiques)." In Vocabulaire des études sémiotiques et sémiologiques, edited by Driss Abdali and Dominique Ducard, 213. Paris: Honoré Champion, Besançon/ Presses Universitaires de Franche-Comté.

Jakobson, Roman. 1959. "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation." In On Translation, edited by Reuben Arthur Brower, 232–39. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Kourdis, Evangelos, and Charikleia Yoka. 2014. "Intericonicity as intersemiotic translation in a globalized culture". In Our World: A Kaleidoscopic Semiotic Network. Proceedings of the 11th World Congress of the IASS/AIS, 5-9 October 2012, Nanjing Normal University, edited by Yongxiang Wang and Haihong Ji, 162–76. Hohai: Hohai University Press.

Kristeva Julia. 1974. La révolution du langage poétique. L'avant-garde à la fin du XIXe siècle: Lautréamont et Mallarmé. Paris: Seuil.

———. 1969. Σημειωτική. Recherches pour une sémanalyse. Paris: Seuil.

———. 1980. Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art, edited by Leon S. Roudiez. Translated by Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.

———. 1984. Revolution in Poetic Language. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.

———. 1989. Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.

Lawendowski, Boguslaw. 1978. "On semiotic aspects of translation." In Sight, Sound, and Sense, edited by Thomas Sebeok, 264–82. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Limat-Letellier, Nathalie, and Marie Miguet-Ollagnier. 1998. L'intertextualité. Besançon: Presses Universitaires Franche-Comté.

Long Y., G. Yu. 2020. "Intertextuality Theory and Translation". Theory and Practice in Language Studies, Vol 10, No 9, 1106–1110.

Lotman, Yuri M. 1990. Universe of the Mind. A Semiotic Theory of Culture. Translated by Ann Shukman. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Muñoz Gil, Marta. 2009. "Dubbing The Simpsons in Spain: A Case Study." In New Trends in Audiovisual Translation, edited by Jorge Díaz Cintas, 142–57. Bristol, Buffalo, Toronto: Multilingual Matters,.

Omhovere, Claire. 2017. "Canadian Photography and the Exhaustion of Landscape." *Beyond "Understanding Canada": Transnational Perspectives on Canadian Literature*, edited by Melissa Tanti, Jerewmy Haynes, Daniel Coleman, and Lorraine York, 131–50. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press.

Osimo, Bruno. 2011. "Translation Science 1959–2009: Contributions from Eastern Europe." In *The Translator as Author: Perspectives on Literary Translation*, edited by Claudia Buffagnio, Beatrice Garzelli, and Serenella Zanotti, 45–59. Berlin: LIT.

Pan, Da'an. 2000. "De-otherizing the Textual Other: Intertextual Semiotics and the Translation of Chinese Poetry," *Comparative Literature: East & West* 2, no. 1: 57–77.

Peirce, Charles Sanders. 1931–1958. *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vols 1–6, edited by Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss. Cambridge MA : The Belknap Press.

Petrilli, Susan. 2003. "Translation and semiosis. Introduction." In *Translation Translation*, edited by Susan Petrilli, 17–37. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi.

Quairiaux, Yves. 2001. *De qui se moque-t-on ? Caricatures d'hier et d'aujourd'hui, de Rops à Kroll*. Morlanwelz: Musée royal de Mariemont.

Queiroz, João, Ana Paula Vitorio and Ana Luiza Fernandes. 2022. "Translation in Intermedial Studies." In *Translation Beyond Translation Studies*, edited by Kobus Marais, 231–45. London, New York and Dublin: Bloomsbury.

Sakellariou, Panagiotis. 2020. "Intertextuality." In *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, edited by Mona Baker and Gabriela Saldanha, 266–70. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.

Sonesson, Göran. 1996. "The Quadrature of the Hermeneutic Circle: The Picture as 'Text'." In *LSP and Theory of Translation. Acts of the XVI Vakki symposion, Text and Image, Vöjri, February 10-12, 1996*, 9–3. Vaasa: University of Vaasa, 9–33.

Svenhard, Britt W. 2021. "'There must be trolls in what I write': Ipsen's Mythopoesis Adapted (in)to Music and Film." In *Song Translation: Lyrics in Contexts*, edited by Johan Franzon, Annjo K. Grenall, Sigmund Kvam, and Anastasia Parianou, 397–426. Berlin: Frank & Timme GmbH.

Torop, Peeter. 2000. "Intersemiosis and Intersemiotic Translation," *European Journal for Semiotic Studies* 12, no. 1: 71–100.

———. 2003. "Intersemiosis and Intersemiotic Translation." In *Translation Translation*, edited by Susan Petrilli, 271–82. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

———. 2004. "Locations in Intersemiotic Space." In *Koht ja Paik /Place and Location. Studies in Environmental Aesthetics and Semiotics IV*, edited by Virve Sarapik, Näripea, and Jaak Tomberg, 59–68. Tallinn: The Research Group of Cultural and Literary Theory, Institute of Art History & Estonian Semiotics Association.

Venuti, Lawrence. 2009. "Translation, Intertextuality, Interpretation," *Romance Studies* 27, no. 3: 157–73.

Zhao, Honghui. 2017. "An Intertextual Approach to Translation at the Micro-Level," *Open Journal of Social Sciences* 5: 119–27.

Acta Nova Humanistica 2024 | I | 1

Cecilia Sjöholm is professor of Aesthetics at Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences (INN). Her published research is particularly focused on the relation between art and politics in contemporary culture, and she has published extensively on art, psychoanalysis and critical theory, for instance *The Antigone Complex* (Stanford UP 2004), *Kristeva and the Political* (Routledge 2005), *Regionality/ Mondiality* (Södertörn UP 2012 with Charlotte Bydler) *Aisthesis I* (ed. with Sven-Olov Wallenstein, Thales 2012) and *Aisthesis II* (ed. with Sven-Olov Wallenstein, 2023), *Doing Aesthetics with Arendt; How to See Things* (Columbia UP 2015). Her latest book *Through the Eyes of Descartes: Seeing, Thinking, Writing* (with Marcia Cavalcante Schuback, Indiana UP, 2024), examines Descartes as a thinker of a baroque aesthetics, and brings forth a pre-conceptual subject of the senses, and of desires and drives, with its roots in infantile experiences. In this way, Descartes is a precursor of psychoanalytic theory.

Darin Tenev is an Associate Professor in the Literary Theory Department of the Faculty of Slavic Studies at the University of Sofia "St. Kliment Ohridski", Bulgaria. He teaches also in the Sociology and the Human Sciences Department at the University of Plovdiv "Paisii Hilendarski". His main interests are in the fields of deconstruction, literary theory, phenomenology, psychoanalysis, critical theory, modernist literature, Japanese literature. He has published three books: *Fikcia i obraz. Modeli* [*Fiction and Image. Models*], 2012; *Otkloneniya. Opiti vurhu Jacques Derrida* [*Digressions. Essays on Jacques Derrida*] and most recently *Tri lekcii varhu Heidegger. Modalnost i indeksichnost v* Bitie i vreme [*Modality and Indexicality in* Being and Time. *Three Lectures on Heidegger*], 2023. He is one of the translators of the selection of Jacques Lacan's *Écrits* in Bulgarian published in 2023. He has also translated texts by Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida, Karatani Kojin, Ueno Chizuko, Nishida Kitaro, Miki Kiyoshi, and others. darin.tenev@gmail.com

Emilia Angelova is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Concordia University, Montreal, Canada. She holds a PhD from the University of Toronto. Her research is in 19th and 20th Century Continental Philosophy, with special emphasis on the reception of themes such as, e.g., selfhood, temporality, freedom and the imagination, as raised by Kant and Hegel, and taken up by contemporary philosophy, in Heidegger and French Theory, especially Kristeva. Her publications include articles in *Idealistic Studies*, *Symposium: the Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy*, *The Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, and multiple book chapters, theorizing Hegel in relation to Heidegger, Levinas, Deleuze, Nancy, and most recently Kristeva. Emilia.Angelova@concordia.ca

Evangelos Kourdis is a Professor in Translation Semiotics at the School of French Language and Literature, Faculty of Philosophy, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. He is Director of the Laboratory of Semiotics (AUTH SemioLab) and of the Joint Master's Program "Semiotics, Culture and Communication" of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Editor of *Syn-Thèses* Journal, and Review Editor of *Punctum-international Journal of Semiotics*. His research interests include Sociosemiotics, Sociolinguistics, Language Ideology, Social Dialectology, and Cultural Communication. He is the National Representative for Greece in the International Association for Semiotic Studies, Vice President of the Hellenic Semiotics Society, founding member of the Hellenic Society for Translation Studies and delegate in Greece of the Société d'Etudes des Pratiques et Théories en traduction (SEPTET, France).

Miglena Nikolchina is Professor at the Theory and History of Literature Department, Sofia University 'St. Kliment Ohridski'. Her research interests involve the interactions of literature and philosophy. In English, her publications include numerous articles as well as the books *Matricide in Language: Writing Theory in Kristeva and Woolf* (2004) and *Lost Unicorns of the Velvet Revolutions: Heterotopias of the Seminar* (2013). She guest-edited a special issue of differences (2021, 32.1) on "The Undead of Literary Theory." Her most recent books (in Bulgarian) are *God*

with Machine: Subtracting the Human (2022) and the collective volume *Video Games: The Dangerous Muse* (2023).
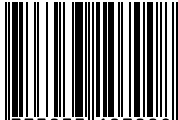
Tyler James Bennett holds a master's degree in semiotics and a doctoral degree in philosophy, both from the University of Tartu, Estonia. His research interests include literary theory, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, cognitive, bio- and existential semiotics. His current project at the Palacký University Department of General Linguistics is *Digital Ideology Critique*. He is also a director of the *International Semiotics Institute* (ISI). Tyler has been co-host and organizer of *Semiosalong*, the Afterhours Tartu Semiotic Salon, for seven years. He also operates a personal YouTube channel for general semiotics. He was instructor of the course Methodology for Semiotic Analysis at the University of Tartu for five years, before relocating to Olomouc. He has presented at twenty-four international conferences in eleven countries. tyler.bennett1984@gmail.com

William Watkin is Professor of Contemporary Philosophy and Literature at Brunel University, West London. He is the author of numerous books including *In the Process of Poetry: The New York School and the Avant-Garde, On Mourning, The Literary Agamben,* and the celebrated *Agamben and Indifference.* Aside from his sustained engagement with Agamben and biopolitics, he is also well known for his extended work on Alain Badiou in *Badiou and Indifferent Being* and *Badiou and Communicable Worlds*. Prof. Watkin believes passionately in real-world applications of theory as can be seen in his recent book, *Bioviolence: How the powers that be make us do what they want*, and his forthcoming *Herd Immunities: The Philosophy of Covid.* William has been working for over a decade on the philosophy of indifference, the first volume of which, *Infinite Existence*, was published in the spring of 2024. The second volume, *Indifference*, will appear sometime in 2025.