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PURPLE FASHION

FEATURING **Lily McMenamy**¹⁶², **Asap Rocky**³⁵⁶, **Raf Simons**¹⁹⁸,
Luigi Ontani²⁰⁸, **Carsten Höller**²⁴², **Julia Kristeva**⁴⁶⁸, **Daft Punk**²¹,
G-Dragon³⁶⁶, **Laurie Simmons**¹⁹⁰, *and a book by* **Max Snow...**



\$40.00US





PURPLE PHILOSOPHY

JULIA KRISTEVA is a living legend. She's been fully — as well as discreetly — involved in the French intellectual scene and is one of the key thinkers in structuralism. She introduced the work of Mikhail Bakhtin in French, worked with Emile Benveniste on linguistics and with Roland Barthes on semiology, and figured in all of the theoretical debates of the past 50 years. With her husband, Philippe Sollers, she critically reassessed the role of Maoism in French philosophy.

A writer and brilliant psychoanalyst, Kristeva's influence on aesthetics and feminist discourse reaches across the world. In her most recent publication, "*Pulsion du temps*" (*Urges of Time*), she rethinks one of our world's most crucial issues: its relation to time.

interview by **DONATIEN GRAU**

portrait by **GIASCO BERTOLI**

DONATIEN GRAU — *You've just published a book in which you return to the question of time. Why come back to it now?*
JULIA KRISTEVA — We're living at a time when time itself has never been more problematic. They say we're at the end of time, the thermonuclear and ecological apocalypse at the end of History. And at the same time we are at the beginning of time — since with one "click" we are now able to access information pertaining to all of History. How should we react when time can be performed in this way? The answer is: we ceaselessly experience new beginnings, over and over. Time does not pass, it does not stop, it just keeps on starting over again and again. As Chairman Mao once said, you count on yourself alone. In counting on yourself, yourself is not in itself an identity, nor is it a personality or an individuality. It's the *ecceitas* of John Duns Scotus, the "this," the demonstrative pronoun that has the ability to rebound. It's a permanent resurrection. On the condition, again, that you are able to create connections, which is not possible unless the motor of this personal pronoun is the connection of love, the transfer. This is how I understand Freud's message: It all starts again with the transfer, you begin again. Besides, the goal of psychoanalysis is to help people create connections based on this initiatory new beginning, which initializes the transfer.

DONATIEN GRAU — *For you the encounter is very important.*

JULIA KRISTEVA — Who encounters whom? Because an encounter is a dual thing: I go to meet people, who have in turn chosen to come to meet me. The first people I met were Roland Barthes and then, through him Gérard Genette, who directed me to Philippe Sollers. This moment of germination was very important. At that time, Barthes was trying to explain that truth as a word is not taboo. I had read some of his writings, not much. When I attended their lectures, Genette and Barthes would ask me what I wanted to do, would ask about my thoughts on structuralism and Russian formalism. For me it felt a little out of date, because Mikhail Bakhtin had just been discovered, placing ideology in lieu of the subject and history in meaning. I was asked to give a talk about it at 44 rue de Rennes, where Barthes was giving his lectures. So whether I liked it or not, I positioned myself as the ancestor of post-structuralism by introducing two dimensions: subjectivity in language, and history through context, discussing how the novel as a genre emerged through carnival and religious texts. And in doing that, we breathed new life into semiology, taking it away from Ferdinand de Saussure, trying to build an interpretation of human practices other than Marxism, which reduces the meaning of history and the placement of individuals into production or reproduction. Neither Freudism nor Marxism, but the positioning of individuals in the flow of language. I also collaborated with the linguist Emile Benveniste. His theory of language seemed relevant to me because he was combining these two dimensions, which I then tried to translate into psychoanalysis. I do not use the word “semantics” and prefer to use “semiotics,” which is more oriented toward impulses and the unconscious, and “symbolism,” which returns us to the triangular meaning of the language sign: signifier, signified, referent.

DONATIEN GRAU — *But since your work is also extremely contemporary, what is the contemporary meaning of these debates from the end of the '60s and from the early '70s? Is it still a distant landscape?*

JULIA KRISTEVA — I think we are now experiencing a major repression, which corresponds to what I consider a weak moment of civilization. A weak moment in the civilization of the book, due to the explosion of the image with all the advantages it may bring — speed, fascination, communication — but also major toxicity. It is indeed the opium of the people: here I am sitting in front of my television, my computer screen, my iPhone, calming me and lulling me to sleep. We are living under the influence of various opiates. At the same time, in terms of language, there is the development of this hyper-connected, rapid web, most conducive to the *homo horizontalis*, thus diminishing the vertical dimension, which is the interior experience, the inner self, the psychic life. When it doesn't wipe it out completely, it wipes out what Maurice Merleau-Ponty calls the *flesh*, a word I use in my own way: the flesh of the world, of language, of subjectivity. I call this particular dimension an *asymbol*, because through image, the web, and our hyper-connection, a censure of the essence of language is manifested, which doesn't mean just one thing, but rather stands as a polyphony, a *polysemy* (a diversity of meaning). And this polysemy, because of the toxicity and rapidity, is reduced to utilitarian communication. The eradication of the depth of the sign and its polysemy is a terrible deficiency, a defect, carrying us far from the curiosity we used to have. Yet this curiosity persists as it did in the low times, in closed communities: university spaces, symposia, conferences, research in general. Here I am playing devil's advocate, because it's an invisible dimension in social life today — a discredited dimension, but one which I think exists. It often takes the form of microscopic or abstruse research, but it may well have general consequences if we are capable of approaching it in depth and translating it for greater communication.

DONATIEN GRAU — *Your revolutionary ideal was also very much part of the way you conceived your action back then...*

JULIA KRISTEVA — Back, then, the revolutionary idea was still very much alive. Today, I think it is best embodied in the word “revolt.” When I arrived in France and found myself surrounded by young people interested in political revolution, I thought it was a whim, a passing fancy of the young *bourgeois*, and I interpreted it as a desire to know, an archaeological approach, including the Communist world. This is why we, along with Philippe Sollers, launched a study of Chinese civilization. We needed to appropriate the enigmas that surrounded us intellectually: knowing the past, where it comes from, that sense of tradition. And regarding China, which is often a problem when we are speaking of our “revolutionary” pasts, we would ask ourselves: is there a Chinese socialism, and if so, what does it look like? The real question was to determine if there is a Chinese individual. To all appearances, no, because he belongs either to a clan or to the Tao — he is diffused somewhere inside the flux of the world and social connections. His adaptability matters, not his identity. But inside this structure there is the positioning of the two sexes in Taoism. It is the beginning of a reflection on the role of the woman, which is very important in Chinese civilization, thus facilitating the consideration of psychic bisexuality.

DONATIEN GRAU — *You mentioned psychoanalysis earlier, which seems to be an important form of knowledge for you.*

JULIA KRISTEVA — Psychoanalysis is a form of awareness, but certainly not of knowledge. In Bulgaria, I knew the work of Russian formalists, I knew quite a bit about philosophy, but I did not know that much about psychoanalysis, because the training we had there at the post-doctoral level was oriented toward Hegel and phenomenology, but not at all toward Freud. On the other hand, my father, who was an extremely cultivated man, had the only translation of Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, which was hidden in his library and which we didn't show to others, because Freud was considered bourgeois science. So I knew very little about psychoanalysis, but Sollers took me to Jacques Lacan's classes. I was pretty lost, fascinated by his rather surrealistic presence. I did however realize, as I was preparing my thesis on the avant-gardes, that the language I was dealing with, that of Mallarmé or Lautréamont, with its densities and its esoteric side, could not be interpreted only with the tools of stylistics, grammar, phenomenology, or structuralism, that instead I would have to approach it based on the experience of the subject, his or her construction and deconstruction in and through writing. I would need to confront episodes of depression or psychosis, which these people experienced in solitude or as part of revolutionary movements, for example in Lautréamont's relationship to the Paris Commune. The result was that I decided I'd better get into analysis. I needed to do it to see it from the inside, hunkering down inside the alchemy of the verb, on the couch, and in French.

DONATIEN GRAU — *Your work, from the 1980s onward, on the analysis of the states of the soul, seems very relevant today.*

JULIA KRISTEVA — It seems to have had more echoes abroad than in France. I discussed feminine sexuality at lengths: I engaged again with the issues related to maternity, which except in a few rare texts, had been abandoned by the feminists. Feminists from Simone de Beauvoir's generation were extremely wary of maternity, which they perceived as a form of slavery, the submission of the woman to the paternal phallus, etc. In doing so, they pushed aside a fundamental experience in the lives of women, and limited themselves politically, as well. Maternal eroticism is far from being halcyon. We may have ecstatic moments which facilitate the transmission of sensitivity and language, but there are also moments of extreme violence: the expulsion of the child, the child separating from his or her mother, the mother relating to the child, all sorts of trauma. Which is when I created this notion of abjection, for this time when one is not yet a subject, when there is not yet an object. In this interspace, there is both repulsion and fascination. This idea, which of course comes from psychoanalysis, helped me when I was approaching borderlines states, for example, the characters of Céline, his style, and his way of being, which for me were horrifying.

DONATIEN GRAU — *You've never stopped redefining three domains: the question of the subject, feminist theory, and issues of love.*

JULIA KRISTEVA — I have been deconstructing and reconstructing them for years, but based on personal experience, running up against places that are obscure or not sufficiently developed in Freudian and feminist theory. They now seem to be recognized as neuralgic points, especially in terms of language, meaning, and difference. They also became flash points, targets, not only in terms of erudite thinking, where my question is personal, epistemological — but also in terms of social connections.

DONATIEN GRAU — *Which brings us to the question of politics, because your relationship with it is definitely skewed. You are not in the newspapers, but you seem often to take sides. How do you see your role as an intellectual in politics?*

JULIA KRISTEVA — It's difficult to say because I'm not a media-oriented person. In general, the intellectual is supposed to fertilize or place himself in the political field through the media, and many of them do. I do not feel I can do that. I'm not hysterical enough, in the positive sense of the word — meaning I don't have the exuberance, the glibness, and the ability to seduce, or the conviction to do it. I'm more about being discreet and precise. And I'm not into political commitments either, because being committed means having a cause for which to fight. I think that the role of intellectuals is to detach themselves from any affiliation, to escape any temptation to ally themselves, to remain tangential — while not choosing isolation either.

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