

Julia Kristeva: Live Theory

John Lechte and Maria Margaroni

CONTINUUM

The Tower Building
11 York Road
London SE1 7NX

15 East 26th Street
New York
NY 10010

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Introduction

MARIA MARGARONI AND JOHN LECHTE

Our aim in this book is twofold. On the one hand, we want to focus on Kristeva's more recent works (i.e. *New Maladies of the Soul* (1995), the two volumes on *Revolt* (Kristeva 2000a; 2002a) and the three volumes on the *Feminine Genius* (Kristeva 2001a; 2002b; 2002c)) in an attempt to understand the new directions in her thought, her development or reformulation of older concerns and the pressing socio-political questions to which she is currently responding. On the other hand, we return to some of her early key works (i.e. *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984), *Tales of Love* (1987b) and *Black Sun* (1989)) with the objective of proposing a reassessment in light of contemporary debates in philosophy, feminism, politics and psychoanalysis. Our approach is exegetical as well as critical and hermeneutic. Thus, we offer close and detailed readings of individual texts, which we make a conscious effort to reinscribe within their intellectual and socio-political contexts. At the same time, we engage with received interpretations of these texts, throw into relief neglected issues or aspects and present original arguments with regard to specific problems raised in them. Our attitude is, no doubt, 'faithful', appreciative of the richness of the body of writing under analysis and of its significant (albeit controversial) contribution to different areas of contemporary thought. We hope, however, that our faith remains 'passionate' as well as 'questioning' and that, in addressing contentious issues such as the society of the spectacle or the endurance of Oedipus, we have not presumed to close them but to insist on their complexity, to emphasize precisely the difficulty (the impossibility even) of closure (Kristeva 1994a: 97).

In the remainder of this introductory section we would like to give our reader an idea of the main themes and stakes of each chapter. Chapter 1, entitled 'The Semiotic Revolution: Lost Causes, Uncomfortable Remainders, Binding Futures', focuses on Kristeva's first seminal work, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984), and attempts a re-evaluation of its legacy 30 years after its original publication in French (1974). Our aim in this chapter is to clarify Kristeva's political and aesthetic agenda at the time of working on this book (initially submitted as her doctoral dissertation), explain her attitude to the theoretical frameworks dominant in the late 1960s in France and trace her concern with putting forward a more dialectical and embodied understanding of signification as well as the subject. In our reading, an important aspect of the originality of the book and of its enduring significance today relates to Kristeva's theorization of a dialectic that is antagonistic (though not oppositional), materialist (rather than idealist) and non-teleological. The task we have set ourselves in the last section of this chapter is to understand the implications of such theorization for the subject as both an unstable, psychic process and a political agent. We conclude our analysis by taking a step back and risking a contemporary perspective to Kristeva's 1974 semiotic revolution, focusing on what we have called its 'lost causes', its 'uncomfortable remainders' and its 'binding futures'.

While the first chapter centres on the semiotic, the second chapter sets out to understand Kristeva's notion of the Symbolic. Our starting point in 'The Trial of the Third: Kristeva's Oedipus and the Crisis of Identification' is her revisiting of the Oedipus complex in *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt* (2000a) and her determination to reclaim its value in the context of what she feels is a growing distrust in the paternal function. In order to be able to appreciate what is at stake in this revisiting, we begin by offering an overview of the problem of Oedipus in Freud and Lacan. Drawing on Jean-Joseph Goux's critique of psychoanalytic interpretations of the myth, we throw light on the points of friction between Kristeva and her predecessors. As we shall demonstrate, these relate to Freud's and Lacan's uneasiness about the process of identification and the role of the mother in the Oedipal event. They also relate to what from Kristeva's perspective is their reductive conception of

castration. Our contention in this chapter is that Kristeva's renewal of interest in Oedipus is not an isolated event in her theoretical trajectory but constitutes an important moment of what we have called her 'Revolution of the Third'. Our task is to weave together the different threads that make up this Revolution: from her introduction of the Imaginary Father in *Tales of Love* (1987b), her redefinition of castration in *New Maladies of the Soul* (1995) and *Intimate Revolt* (2002a), her return to Freud's 'dark continent' in *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt* (2000a) and her articulation of an alternative paternal space in *The Old Man and the Wolves* (1994a). If at the end of our analysis the Oedipal triangle looks *unheimlich*, this is because it forms part of a savage bond, one grounded on a faith in the sacred and on a 'new' memory of the word.

'Love and Death by Any Other Name . . . (On Love and Melancholia)', the third chapter in the book, goes back to Kristeva's early work, in particular, *Tales of Love* and *Black Sun* (1989). An effort is made, however, to follow the issues raised in these early writings in some of her most recent works, namely, the trilogy on the Feminine Genius, especially Kristeva's biography of Colette. If in this chapter we bring love and melancholia together, it is because, as Kristeva has demonstrated, melancholia lies at the antipodes of love and is the consequence of the subject's denial of whatever makes love possible: i.e. identification with an ideal love-object and the renewing power of language. Our main aim in the first half of this chapter is to emphasize Kristeva's existential, non-metaphysical and non-ontological conception of love. Drawing on Niklas Luhmann's historical approach to the subject, we argue that love in Kristeva is primarily an *enactment*, a fact strengthened by her association of the amorous relationship with the Aristotelian concept of metaphor, understood as Being-in-action. We also emphasize the essentially imaginary nature of love and go on to illuminate this nature with close reference to Kristeva's analysis of primary identification. In the second half of the chapter we focus on melancholia and draw attention to Kristeva's conviction that art, through its pursuit of sublimation, might be a means of overcoming depression and a melancholic disposition that she sees as more and more characteristic of the West. Finally, we open up our exposition to questions that relate to Kristeva's privileging of a

Freudian analytical framework in her theorization of melancholia and love. What is at issue here is not only the scientific validity of her theory but also the potential of its having an impact on concrete social relations.

The fourth chapter, 'Violence, Ethics and Transcendence: Kristeva and Levinas', uses a comparative approach to juxtapose key elements of Kristeva's oeuvre with that of Levinas. The main aim is to show that, by comparison with Levinas's emphasis on ethics as an entirely transcendent ethics of the Other, which means that the world of Being is sidelined, Kristeva is heavily materialist and emphasizes the central role of violence and conflict at the origin of society and the individual. The chapter is less a reading of Kristeva against Levinas, and more an attempt to use the main lines of Levinas's philosophy as a way of highlighting the nature of key themes in Kristeva's work.

We conclude our exposition of Kristeva with a chapter on 'The Imaginary and the Spectacle: Kristeva's View'. The chapter sets out to clarify her use of and commitment to the imaginary in the context of what Guy Debord (1987) has called the postmodern 'society of the spectacle'. The original intervention that we seek to make here consists in our insistence on the double nature of the imaginary. As we shall argue, a reductive view of the imaginary in terms of narcissism does justice to neither Kristeva's complex understanding of it nor to her concern over the contemporary fixation on images, a fixation that is for her a threat to the more radical force of the imaginary. To appreciate this force, we turn to Deleuze and Guattari's 'line of flight', Husserl's transcendental Ego and Georg Cantor's theory of transfinite numbers. Our aim is to throw light on the relation between the imaginary and infinity, understood as corresponding to the realm of transcendence. If, we suggest, the imaginary *is* essential and not just a mode of a contingent self, this is because it denotes a passage beyond individuality and contingency. The imaginary, then, is inextricable from infinity. As a result, rather than the deceptive sphere of illusions, it is, instead, pure possibility: i.e. possibility as the set of *all* possibilities. In our account, this is why Kristeva associates the imaginary with revolt and this is, indeed, why the future of our imaginary is for her equivalent to the future of revolt.

Finally, the interview with Julia Kristeva first of all considers the general character of Kristeva's oeuvre from the perspective in particular of the undercurrent of becoming and enactment that could be seen to underpin much of the main stages of Kristeva's intellectual trajectory. Second, the interview addresses issues deriving from the society of the spectacle, especially the nature of the media and the image. Third, the reception given to Kristeva's most oft-cited book outside France, *Powers of Horror* (1982), is discussed. The interview closes by examining issues relating to multiculturalism, the work of Hannah Arendt, and the role of psychoanalysis in the context of globalization. Here, in particular, Kristeva responds to questions about singularity and community, or 'sharing' in the space of politics.

The Semiotic Revolution: Lost Causes, Uncomfortable Remainders, Binding Futures

MARIA MARGARONI

Dancer in the dark: expending labour in the factory of language

In Lars Von Trier's 2000 film, *Dancer in the Dark*, Selma is an eastern European immigrant to the United States who is employed as an assembly-line worker in a factory. At the same time, she joins an amateur theatre group and spends her evenings rehearsing her part in a musical. Gradually as Selma's genetic eye condition deteriorates, the borders separating the two worlds begin to give way. Outlines become fuzzy and sounds increasingly lose their diacritical quality. In the interspace opened by her growing blindness the factory and the theatre merge. In the workers' routine, automated movements take on the effortless grace of dancers, while behind the efficient monotone of the foreman's commands and the economical rejoinders of the machines a music is heard that ex/presses, as it holds back, the roar of Selma's desire.

Interestingly, at the end of the first part of her doctoral dissertation (published in French in 1974 under the title *La Révolution du langage poétique* and in English in 1984 as *Revolution in Poetic Language*) Julia Kristeva (an eastern European immigrant, like Selma) attempts a similar convergence between the factory and the theatre, the world of labour and the world of representation. Discussing what she calls the 'text', which her book aims to open up as a space for a *new* signifying practice, Kristeva writes: 'Work as process, whatever kind of work it may be – when it is being carried out (and not when it is reified according to the exchange structures of a particular society) – shares something with this signifying

process' (Kristeva 1984: 104). Kristeva is admittedly walking a very fine line here. For, as Karl Marx admits, labour 'is determined by necessity and mundane considerations' in opposition to the text which, under the name of 'literature', has traditionally been associated with spontaneity, leisure, play or the extraordinary, and has functioned as the privileged object of aesthetics (1984: 105). Yet, in rendering their boundaries fuzzy, Kristeva seeks precisely to challenge traditional aesthetics and to redefine its object. By turning to work at this stage of her discussion, her aim is to consolidate an important point she has been making throughout her exposition in Part I of *Revolution in Poetic Language*: i.e. that textual signification unfolds as a *process*. It is only within particular socio-political conjunctures and in the context of bourgeois aesthetics that it is reified (as much as work is, according to Marx) as the *product* of an exceptional authorial mind. In addition, her invocation of work strengthens the bond she has tried to establish between the new signifying practice and what traditional aesthetics has consistently left outside its territory, namely, materiality. As we shall go on to demonstrate, by reclaiming the materiality of the text, Kristeva seeks to do justice not merely to 'the discontinuity of real objects', but, more importantly, to the 'instinctual rhythm' that punctures and punctuates meaning (1984: 100). Indeed, it seeks to do justice to the roar of Selma's desire that releases a music as it reaches out from the dark.

But why does Kristeva plunge into the dark at the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s when she is in the process of writing *Revolution in Poetic Language*? A few words about the dominant intellectual concerns in France at the time might be in order here.¹ Despite the growing alienation of French intellectuals from the official politics of the Communist Party both in France and the USSR, Marxist thought remained very influential. For a lot of men and women engaged in academic and cultural activities the greatest challenge was to find ways of reclaiming the legacy of Marx and his materialist interpretation of Hegelian dialectics. The student uprising of May 1968 and the events that followed become very significant in this context, not so much because they intensified the crisis between intellectuals and the French Communist Party, but because they created a space within which the Orthodox

Marxist understanding of the relation between base and superstructure (i.e. material and cultural production) could be rethought. No longer willing to perceive the latter as a mere reflection of the former, the post-Sartre generation of intellectuals (led by the group of avant-garde critics and writers gathered around the journal *Tel Quel*) emphasized the revolutionary potential of cultural activities which, rather than being dependent on traditional class politics, were seen as capable of offering more radical alternatives to it. The 'new' struggles that, according to Michel Foucault, were thrown into focus with the events of May 1968 are worth mentioning here, for these are struggles that cannot easily fit into the familiar Marxist narrative. As Foucault points out, all these struggles had a common cause in that they foregrounded issues relating to racial and sexual difference, desire, the treatment of the mad or the rights of prisoners. They thus interrogated the very status of the subject: its production through particular discourses and practices, its crises at the nodes between conflicting ideologies, its potential for transgression and reinvention.² If, however, Marx is right and the transformation of the subject is possible 'beyond the sphere of actual material production', in the 'free time' of leisure where, labour is expended, it is no wonder that the post-1968 generation shifted its attention to the 'unproductive' realm of literature and art (1984: 105–6). And it is no wonder that Kristeva, following Marx, attempted what seemed to us initially a rather tricky venture: i.e. the opening up of the *space* of the factory to the leisure *time* of the theatre.

It might be tempting (especially in light of her alleged 'betrayal' in the 1980s of any 'radical potential' she may have had)³ to understand such opening as the superposition of one space (i.e. aesthetics) over another (capitalist economy); in other words, as the reduction of material processes and historically specific social relations to the relations between signifiers and the 'dubious' experimentations of the avant-garde. Yet in *Revolution in Poetic Language* Kristeva (like Selma) never leaves the factory, understood as the space *par excellence* of a process that she wants to re-inscribe into the realm of aesthetics, namely, *production*.⁴ Attentive to structuralist theory, which in the 1960s was beginning to infiltrate every area in the Humanities, Kristeva seeks to demonstrate that a restoration

of the Marxist concept of 'production' in the context of aesthetics will not only dispel the myth of the gifted individual traditionally posited as the semi-divine origin of the artistic work and its meaning, but will also throw light on the incessant *labour* of signification that is irreducible to the work as finished product. What is more, thinking of art or literature in terms of production might help us reconceptualize meaning as the contingent, unstable outcome of a series of relations: i.e. the relations between discrete elements *within* the work and the relations between (social, economic, political or aesthetic) structures forming the 'outside' of the work. In many ways, then, Kristeva is inviting her readers to reimagine the space of signification (language itself) as a factory where the materiality of individual elements (i.e. the sound of a word or the rhythm of a sentence) cannot be excluded from the production of meaning and where processes are both systemic (i.e. pertaining to a distinct system) and social.

Because capitalist society reduces production (be it material, cultural or discursive) to productivity and because processes have been subsumed by their end-products, Kristeva seeks to introduce into the space of the factory an *other* time that neither calculates nor lends itself to calculation. As we have seen above, this is what Marx calls 'free time', the time of leisure that 'transform[s] its possessor into a different subject' but also (as Kristeva reminds us) the time of 'those "truly free works"' that Marx associates with art and that she wants to reclaim in the name of the text as a new signifying practice (1984: 105–6). In contrast to cost-effective time, perceived as a succession of divisible homogeneous points, this is a time of pure duration in Bergson's terms, in other words, a time of heterogeneous continuity in which different temporalities (past, present, future) coexist and where being is open to its becoming. This is also the time of the un/economic economy that Georges Bataille has called the 'general economy' of 'nonproductive expenditure'; for it unfolds as the paradox of a pleasurable loss, indeed, as an unnecessary superfluous waste (the waste of time, money or resources).⁵ In her 'Prolegomenon' to *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva makes it clear that it is this paradoxical loss that interests her, especially as it manifests itself in 'the shattering of discourse' and the 'explosion' of the subject experienced in 'fragmentary

phenomena' such as late-nineteenth-century, French, avant-garde literature (which constitutes the focus of the second half of the book), 'magic, shamanism, esoterism' or 'the carnival' (1984: 15–6). Functioning as 'a passage to [its] outer *boundaries*', these phenomena, she argues, attest to what 'socially useful discourse' represses; that is, 'the *process* that exceeds the subject and his communicative structures' (16–7).

Significantly, Kristeva associates this excess that (in economic terms) can only register itself as 'loss', 'exhaustion' or 'crisis' with yet another time: the Freudian *Zeitlos*, a 'time outside time' which, in *Intimate Revolt*, she calls 'the scandal of the timeless' (2002a: 25, 30). If linear homogeneous time is the time of productive economy and Bergsonian heterogeneous continuity 'the time of life',⁶ *Zeitlos*, Kristeva tells us, is the time of 'the indestructible drive', which 'in the extreme . . . is the time of death' (2002a: 30–1). In her view, the 'incomparable originality' of the Freudian *Zeitlos* 'reside[s] in the bringing to the fore of an unconscious time that is not only not conscious time but encroaches on a prepsychical time and approaches the somatic' (2002a: 31). This, then, is why, at the beginning of this chapter, we suggested that Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language* might be seen as a (temporal) venture into the dark; for its aim is to take us back to an anarchic *arkhe*, a beginning before 'the Beginning' (of time, the word or the subject). It should not come as a surprise that this anamnestic journey returns Kristeva to Freud's 'dark continent'. Like Melanie Klein, she is concerned with restoring to Freud's scandalous temporality the infantile experience of the feminine-maternal and the pre-Oedipal, fragmented body. In attempting to rethink the relationship between this body and the speaking subject, the feminine-maternal and language, Kristeva is taking a step beyond Klein.⁷ In what follows we would like to offer a detailed exposition of this rethinking which admittedly constitutes one of the enduring legacies of Kristeva's 1974 revolution. Before we do so, however, it will be helpful to review the political and aesthetic agenda that frames this revolution.

In the course of this opening section we have emphasized Kristeva's commitment to a reinvestment of Marxist theory in the context of aesthetics. At stake in this commitment was the imperative need felt by a lot of intellectuals at the time to reconceptualize