

REVIEW ESSAY

John Lechte, *Julia Kristeva*, (London, Routledge, 1990)

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The name Julia Kristeva usually evokes the image of the quintessential "French intellectual" and all that conjures up in the Anglo-Saxon mind of the labyrinthine excesses of "French theory". Indeed as John Lechte suggests in his excellent book on Kristeva she is almost "too French". But as he and a number of other commentators are quick to point out, she is not quite what she seems. Kristeva is in fact a "foreigner", having arrived in France as a young doctoral student from Bulgaria in 1965. ¹ The extraordinary ease of her insertion into the Parisian intellectual milieu can perhaps be at least partially explained by her education at a French school in Sophia. This combined with her exotic knowledge of Russian linguistic formalism (her first article published in France was on Mikhail Bakhtin) allowed her to make an important and valued contribution to then fashionable structuralist currents of thought.² Indeed, so rapidly was she assimilated that she is now not only seen by Anglo-Saxon readers as the archetypal French intellectual, but she also - at least on most occasions - sees herself as such. ³

Outside France, as Lechte notes, Kristeva's name is most commonly associated with that phenomenon known as "French feminism". But there is in fact a sizeable "other dimension" to her work and it is this dimension which forms the main focus of his treatment. Taking what is now perhaps a fairly standard approach, Lechte divides Kristeva's work into three distinct if interrelated phases. The first period includes the writings of the 1960s and early 1970s during which Kristeva concentrated on semiotics, linguistics, logic and mathematics in an attempt to develop a theory of the poetic dimensions of language. The second period of her work marks the increased influence of psychoanalytic theory and the development of various theories of the "feminine", the avant-garde and an unarticulated, pre verbal, "pre-symbolic" realm. Since 1980, Kristeva has moved further away from semiotics towards psychoanalysis increasingly using works of art as illustrations for her psychoanalytical theses rather than the reverse as had been the case in her earlier work.

Lechte's aim in writing his book, he says, is "not to read Kristeva for someone else; it is rather to help people read Kristeva for themselves" (xiii). It is perhaps this approach that accounts for the curiously bland almost neutral tone of much of the book. Yet this self-effacing style is highly deceptive, as on occasions the author will explain Kristeva's ideas more clearly than she does herself. Rather perhaps than being notable for its point of view or sustained arguments concerning Kristeva's work, this book makes its contribution in the subtle brilliance of its formulations and insights into the ideas of a number of French thinkers including Kristeva. In one short sentence Lechte will often provide a new and unexpected angle on some aspect of an author's work or clarify an idea that had previously languished in unintelligible obscurity. The effect of this presentation is to encourage the reader to hasten towards Kristeva's own works but unfortunately these do not always deliver: Lechte's intriguing summary of the last (untranslated) section of *La révolution poétique*, is for example, far more accessible than the original.

The question of the difficulty and lack of accessibility of French thought is, as Lechte remarks, the subject of an almost obsessive concern amongst English language critics and Kristeva's work is by no means exempt on this front. Although her recent work is fairly readable (if one excludes certain psychoanalytic excesses), the earlier work often places a wall of impenetrable technical jargon before the reader. Lechte draws attention to this perceived difficulty but argues that it has as much to do with the difference between the French and Anglo-Saxon intellectual mentalities as with any intrinsic difficulty of her work. Some knowledge of the context of Kristeva's work, he says, could go a long way towards resolving this issue. Indeed almost half the book does not deal directly with Kristeva's work, but rather with its intellectual antecedents. The first chapter which sets the "intellectual scene" in France, borrows its title - "Too French"- from a short item by new novelist Philippe Sollers. Sollers' piece was originally published as a response to an article by the Leisure and Arts editor of *The Wall Street Journal* in 1983, which portentously announced the "nullity" of contemporary French culture.⁴ This somewhat rash assertion stirred up an instant hornet's nest provoking an outraged reaction from virtually the entire French literary and intellectual establishment. The French, as Lechte emphasises, have a very strong sense of national identity. To attack the "intellectual" and the culture they promulgate is to attack the honour and very heart of French cultural integrity. Indeed, according to Kristeva, it is precisely this sense of French cultural identity and its resistance to assimilating the foreign within its own boundaries, which paradoxically fosters the production of new thought. As she says, "French cultural life as I have come to know it has always been marked by a reserved but generous curiosity, one that is reticent but, everything considered, receptive to the nomad, the outlandish, the implant and the exogamous of all kinds"(14). In respecting the other and the foreign in its difference, rather than

simply absorbing it without comment, the Same produces an illuminating spark in the shock of its contact with the Other.

Kristeva's constant preoccupation with "exile" and "foreign-ness", whether on the physical or psychic planes, is the subject of an extended discussion in Lechte's book. All artistic activity, Kristeva says, depends on some kind of exile, the existence of a distance in whatever guise from the routine and the everyday. But if exile produces positive outcomes in the forms of art and freedom from the crushing monotony of the familiar, it can also produce far less desirable outcomes in the forms of rejection and a terrible alienation. One does not need to be in a strange land to be an exile: women, for example, are already exiles in their own country, alienated by a masculine language and culture which only recognises the feminine in its divergence from a masculine norm. The categories of alienation are proliferating endlessly in our late twentieth century culture and the condition of the "foreigner" has become endemic to our time: we are all exiles, "we are all E.T.s".⁵ As a solution to this "radical foreign-ness" Kristeva suggests a cosmopolitanism⁶ and love which recognise and welcome the stranger in all his or her difference. But in a world left void by the failure of a belief in a God who is love, the only site where a true "amatory code" or discourse is possible, is psychoanalysis: "the analyst's couch is the only place where the social contract explicitly allows a search - albeit a private one - for love".⁷ Love bypasses ensnaring games of seduction and power,⁸ it allows the subject to freely choose the Other, to open itself up to being changed by the "outside" and that which is different. It enables the subject to become an "open system" capable of adaptation and change - and happiness. Love is actually premised on an initial separation or exile - a separation from the mother (to use Kristeva's psychoanalytic jargon) and can only exist in the recognition of the radical difference and value of the Other. It is through love that the individual becomes a subject in the modern sense of the term, (171) or in other words, an entity that recognises its own uniqueness and separateness in relation to others.

Love, psychoanalysis and literature are all inextricably linked in Kristeva's system. They are all ways of facing and dealing with the frightening void of disorder and non-meaning. Like love, writing creates the subject, which means that rather than simply "expressing himself", the artist in producing his art is at the same time creating himself. So much so, that "if the artist doesn't work, if he doesn't produce his music or his page or his sculpture, he would be quite simply, ill or not alive".⁹ The work of art is a "work in progress" capable of modifying the psychic structure of both artist and consumer (217).¹⁰ This is a recurrent theme which emerges in various guises throughout Kristeva's work and again is one that Lechte traces with detailed attention.

Nonetheless, after all Lechte's thought provoking invitations to read Kristeva, the final chapter which assesses her importance is a little disappointing in its very partisan appreciation of her work. In particular, the treatment of some of the problems raised by Kristeva's extensive reliance on psychoanalytic modes of interpretation are less than convincing. In this connection Lechte cites a very interesting passage from a book by Stephen Frosh: *The Politics of Psychoanalysis*. Frosh argues that not only is the analyst patient relationship entirely saturated by power, but that everything is done within that context to accentuate the power imbalance (211). Nothing escapes from the psychoanalytic grid; there is no "outside" or alternative to the psychoanalytic interpretation. In Kristeva's defence, Lechte asserts that because psychoanalysis is dealing with "non-meaning", rather than with a "hidden meaning" confessed by an "essential subject", it is not therefore claiming a superior truth. (212). Unfortunately, as Foucault has shown, psychoanalysis is more than capable of inventing an "essential subject" of its own for purposes which have much to do with processes of control and normalisation. Far from allowing "non-meaning" and the "other" to speak, psychoanalysis filters that chaotic voice through a very rigid conceptual and linguistic order. In Foucault's words:

the confession has become in the West, one of the most highly valorised techniques for producing the true ... The obligation to confess has become so profoundly incorporated within us that we no longer see it as the effect of a power which constrains us; on the contrary it seems to us that the truth in our most secret depths is only "asking" to see the light of day.¹¹

Kristeva's psychoanalytic grid also produces a highly dehistoricised reading in spite of the impressive wealth of historical documentation contained in her books. Ancient Greek, Medieval and Renaissance as well as more recent literature all become fodder for the psychoanalytic mill which produces a reading true for all times and places. Psychoanalysis as an ultra-modern way of dealing with subjectivity cannot help but produce such an ahistorical reading if one defines the past as something quite separate and different from the present.¹² It also induces strongly terrorist effects as any criticisms of the discipline can be, and indeed are, recuperated and explained in its own terms. Lechte does concede that there is in fact a marked "danger of imperialism" in relation to psychoanalysis but his argument that like philosophy it is simply another "mode of thinking and interpretation" (213) does little to solve the problem. It is a mode of interpretation which has an unfortunate tendency to voraciously engulf other areas at the expense of entering into any real dialogue with them. In short, this form of theory forms a closed system which, it might be noted, comes directly into conflict with

Kristeva's own notion of love as an "open system" where the subject escapes into the unnameable, the "semiotic" and the different at every point. Even God is infinitely analysable and what more extravagant claim to truth can one possibly make than this?¹³

For all this however, Lechte's final object is to "help people read Kristeva for themselves" and his extensively referenced study certainly succeeds admirably in this aim. It not only provide valuable insights into Kristeva's own fascinating œuvre, but also offers a range of enlightening perspectives relating to the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu, Georges Bataille, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan as well as others. The end result is what is perhaps the most useful of books - a book jam packed with ideas and avenues for further reflection.

¹ See Roland Barthes, "L'étrangère" in *Essais Critiques IV: Le Bruissement de la langue*, (Paris, Seuil, 1984), pp. 197-200. This piece, which appeared originally in 1970, is a review of Kristeva's first book *Séméiotikè, Recherches pour une sémanalyse*, (Paris, Seuil, 1969). See also Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, (London, Methuen, 1985), p. 150

² See Niilo Kauppi, *Tel Quel: La constitution sociale d'une avant-garde*, Commentationes Scientiarum Socialium, 43, 1990, (Helsinki, Finnish Society of Sciences and Letters), pp. 101-105 for a fascinating account, Bourdieu style, of Kristeva's arrival and success on the Parisian intellectual circuit. See also Edith Kurzweil, "An Interview with Julia Kristeva", *Partisan Review*, 53, 2 (1986), p. 218. Kristeva says, "I wrote my first paper in France for Roland Barthes's 1966 seminar about Mikhail Bakhtin. He soon became an important figure". Cf Kristeva, "Mémoire", *L'Infini*, 1 (Winter 1983), pp. 42-44

³ Kurzweil, pp. 216-18. However Kristeva noted in this interview that due to her upbringing in socialist Bulgaria, she was less favourably disposed than most French intellectuals to the socialist government in France and

should not be considered a “French intellectual” at least on this front.
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- 4 Raymond Sokolov, “Junket of the Year: ‘Les Intellos’, *The Wall Street Journal*, (15 February 1983), p. 32. Sokolov’s announcement that France had “produced no novelist of real importance in 20 years, except Michel Tournier”, was guaranteed not to endear him to prominent French novelists such as Sollers.
- 5 Julia Kristeva, *Histoires d’Amour*, (Paris, Denoël, 1983), p.356. Cf her remark in “A paradoxical community is emerging, made up of strangers who accept themselves in so far as they recognise themselves to be strangers”. *Etrangers à nous-memes*, (Paris, Fayard, 1988), p. 290.
- 6 Kristeva develops her ideas on cosmopolitanism in *Etrangers à nous-memes* and reiterates these in a text which appeared after the publication of Lechte's study: *Lettre ouverte à Harlem Désir*, (Paris, Rivages, 1990)
- 7 *Histoires d’Amour*, p. 13 Kristeva sums up her argument succinctly on the back cover of this book: “Being a psychoanalyst is knowing that all stories come down to speaking about love ... Our society no longer has an amatory code ... Idealisation, trembling, exaltation, passion, desire for fusion, mortal catastrophe reaching towards immortality, love is the figure of insoluble contradictions, the laboratory of our destiny. Philosophy, religion, poetry, fiction? Stories of love ... Being psychically alive means that you are in love, in analysis or absorbed in literature. As if the whole of human history was nothing more than an immense and permanent *transference*.”

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- 8 Elsewhere with the conscious perversity for which he is well known, Jean Baudrillard declares that he prefers seduction to love. Love is “sentimental” and “pathetic” whereas seduction maintains the form of an “enigmatic duel” “a secret distance” and a “perpetual antagonism”, in other words a relationship of power. *Les Stratégies fatales*, Paris: Grasset, 1983, p. 109
- 9 Perry Meisel, “Interview with Julia Kristeva”, *Partisan Review*, 51 (Winter 1984). pp. 131-132, cited in Lechte's excellent discussion on this theme, “Art, Love, and Melancholy in the Work of Julia Kristeva” in John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin (eds), *Abjection, Melancholia and Love*, (London, Routledge, 1990), p. 25.
- 10 Similar concerns are also to be found in the last works of Michel Foucault. See *Histoire de la sexualité t. 2 L'usage des plaisirs*, Paris: Gallimard, 1984 pp 14-15. Foucault asks what point there is to acquiring knowledge and writing philosophy is if it does not modify the writer himself?
- 11 Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité. t. 1 La volonté de savoir*, (Paris, Gallimard, 1976), pp. 79-80
- 12 On this subject of the difference between past and present (an anti-historicist history) see Foucault, “Foucault répond à Sartre”, *La Quinzaine littéraire*, (1 March 1968), pp. 21-22; Foucault, *L'Archéologie du savoir*, (Paris, Gallimard, 1969). p. 17, Philippe Ariès, *Le Temps de l'histoire*, (Monaco, Editions du Rocher), 1954, p. 40
- 13 “Beyond the uncertainties and perversities of analytical institutions, psychoanalysis seems to me to be the lay version, and the only one, of

this search for the truth of the speaking being which, from another point of view, is symbolised by religion for certain of my friends and contemporaries. My own prejudice is believing that God is analysable. Infinitely". Julia Kristeva, "Mémoire", p. 45.