



## Kristeva, Julia

Born in Bulgaria in 1941, Julia Kristeva went to Paris in 1966 to finish her dissertation on French literature; there she worked with [Roland Barthes](#) and Lucien Goldmann. By 1979 she had also completed her training in psychoanalysis. Her analytic practice has a significant influence on her writing of the 1980s. *Tales of Love* (1983) and *Black Sun* (1987), for example, include transcripts from her analytic sessions.

In her early writing--*Séméiotiké: Recherches pour une sémanalyse* (1969), *Le Texte du roman* (1970), *La Révolution du langage poétique* (1974), *Polylogue* (1977)--Kristeva is concerned to bring the speaking body back into [Phenomenology](#) and linguistics. In *Revolution in Poetic Language* she says that "our philosophies of Language, embodiments of the Idea, are nothing more than the thoughts of archivists, archaeologists, and necrophiliacs" (13). In order to counteract what she sees as the necrophilia of phenomenology and structural linguistics, which study a dead or silent body, Kristeva develops a new science that she calls "semanalysis." She describes semanalysis as a combination of semiology (or [Semiotics](#)), which starts with [Ferdinand de Saussure](#), and psychoanalysis, which starts with [Sigmund Freud](#). Unlike traditional linguistics, semanalysis addresses an element that is beyond, heterogeneous to, language, Freud's other scene. This other scene, however, challenges the very possibility of science. Semanalysis, in order to avoid the necrophilia of other theories of language, must always question its own presuppositions and uncover, record, and deny its own ideological gestures (*Séméiotiké* 78-79).

With semanalysis, Kristeva attempts to bring the speaking body, complete with drives, back into language. She does this in two ways. First, she argues that the logic of signification is already present in the material body. Within Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, signification is the result of a separation, a lack, which begins in the mirror stage and is completed through castration. [Jacques Lacan](#) explains that this separation necessitates the demand that turns need into desire. While Kristeva works within the Lacanian framework, she criticizes Lacan for overlooking processes that take place prior to the mirror stage.

In *Revolution in Poetic Language* she argues that a logic of material rejection is already operating within the body prior to the onset of signification (17). For example, anality is a process of rejection and separation that prefigures the separation that gives rise to signification. In anality excess leads to separation: too much matter is

expelled. And although it is a privation, it is pleasurable. For Kristeva, the entrance into language is not just the result of lack and castration. Rather, pleasure and excess, as well as lack, motivate the move into language. Kristeva suggests that more people would be psychotic and refuse to leave the safe haven of the maternal body if the entrance into language were motivated solely by threats and lack.

Birth is another example where separation is inherent in the body. As Kristeva points out in *Powers of Horror*, one body is violently separated from another in birth (10). In the maternal body excess gives rise to separation. The maternal body not only embodies a separation that is material but also harbors a regulation that is prior to the mirror stage. The maternal body regulates the availability of the breast, among other things. This maternal regulation operates as a law before the Law. The maternal law prefigures and sets up the paternal Law, which, within traditional psychoanalytic theory, forces the child into language and sociality.

The second way in which Kristeva brings the speaking body back to language is by maintaining that bodily drives make their way into language. One of Kristeva's major contributions to literary theory is her distinction between two heterogeneous elements in signification: the semiotic and the symbolic. Within Kristeva's writings "semiotic" (*le sémiotique*) becomes a technical term which she distinguishes from "semiotics" (*la sémiotique*). The semiotic elements within the signifying process are the drives as they discharge within language. This drive discharge is associated with rhythm and tone. The semiotic is this subterranean element of meaning within signification that does not signify.

The symbolic, on the other hand, is the element of meaning within signification that does signify. The symbolic is associated with syntax or grammar and with the ability to take a position or make a judgment that syntax engenders. The threshold of the symbolic is what Kristeva calls the "thetic" phase, which emerges out of the mirror stage (*Revolution* 49). There is a breaking, a rejection, already within the body that becomes, at a certain threshold, the thetic break. The thetic break is the point at which the subject takes up a position, an identification.

The semiotic gives rise to, and challenges, the symbolic. Kristeva describes the relation between the semiotic and the symbolic as a dialectic oscillation. Without the symbolic we have only delirium or nature, while without the semiotic, language would be completely empty, if not impossible. We would have no reason to speak if it were not for the semiotic drive force. So this oscillation between the semiotic and the symbolic is productive and necessary. It is the oscillation between rejection and stasis, found already within the material body, that produces the speaking subject.

Kristeva's own writing seems to be governed by this logic of oscillation between symbolic identity and semiotic rejection or difference. *Revolution in Poetic Language* and *Powers of Horror* are focused on material maternal rejection, which prefigures signification and sets up the logic of rejection. *Tales of Love* and *Black Sun* are focused on primary narcissism, which prefigures all subsequent identity and sets up the logic of repetition. And *Strangers to Ourselves* (1989) and *Lettre ouverte à Harlem Désir* (1990) are focused on rejection or difference within identity.

Kristeva is concerned with discourses that break identity. She examines crises in signification, places where identity breaks down. She analyzes the extremes of language, the before and after of language, the child's acquisition of language, and the psychotic's loss of language. Three of her models for discourses that challenge identity are Poetry, Maternity, and Psychoanalysis. Poetry, first of all, points to the signifying process qua process. Its attention to sounds and rhythms in language points to the semiotic element in signification, out of which the symbolic and any subject position come. This pointing reactivates the semiotic within language. It reactivates semiotic drives and thereby puts the unified subject in process/on trial.

The maternal body is the very embodiment of the subject in process/on trial. It cannot be neatly divided into subject and object. It is the embodiment of alterity within. Maternity is the most powerful model of alterity within because it exists at the heart of the social and the species. In *Tales of Love* Kristeva uses the maternal body as a model for an outlaw ethics, what she calls "herethics" (263). This ethics binds the subject to the other through love and not through Law.

Like poetry and maternity, psychoanalysis points to alterity or difference within the subject's identity and thereby puts the subject on trial. In *Black Sun* Kristeva says that while literature (as well as religion) is merely an antidepressant, psychoanalysis is a counterdepressant. Psychoanalysis elaborates the semiotic even while discharging it and thereby treats the cause of repression and not just the symptoms. Psychoanalysis is concerned with elaborating semiotic alterity within the subject, the Unconscious as the Other within the subject. Just as Kristeva brings the speaking body back into language by putting language in the body, she brings the subject into the place of the other by putting the other in the subject. Just as the pattern and logic of language are already found within the body, the pattern and logic of alterity are already found within the subject.

In *Strangers to Ourselves* Kristeva emphasizes the ethical and political implications of postulating that the social relation is interior to the psyche. We can now imagine an ethics, such as herethics, that does not merely legislate a relation between a subject and others. We can imagine ethics as an outgrowth of the logic of the psyche. When we learn to embrace the return of the repressed/the foreigner within ourselves, then we learn to live with, and love, others.

*Kelly Oliver*

---

## Notes and Bibliography

See also [Feminist Theory and Criticism: 3. Poststructuralist Feminisms](#), [French Theory and Criticism: 5. 1945-1968](#) and [6. 1968 and After](#), and [Psychoanalytic Theory and Criticism: 3. the Post-Lacanianians](#).

Julia Kristeva, *Au commencement était l'amour: Psychanalyse et foi* (1985, *In the Beginning Was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, 1987), *Étrangers à nous-mêmes* (1989, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon Roudiez, 1991), *Histoires d'amour* (1983, *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon Roudiez, 1987), *The Kristeva Reader* (ed. Toril Moi, 1986), *Le Langage, cet inconnu: Une Initiation à la linguistique* (1981, *Language: The Unknown: An Initiation into Linguistics*, trans. Anne M. Menke, 1989), *Lettre ouverte à Harlem Désir* (1990), *Polylogue* (1977, partial trans., *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon Roudiez, 1980), *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* (1980, *Powers of Horror*, trans. Leon Roudiez, 1982), *La Révolution du langage poétique: L'Avant-garde à la fin du XIXe siècle, Lautréamont et Mallarmé* (1974, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller, 1984), *Les Samouraïs* (1990, *The Samurai: A Novel*, trans. Barbara Bray, 1992), *Séméiotiké: Recherches pour une sémanalyse* (1969), *Soleil noir: Dépression et mélancolie* (1987, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholy*, trans. Leon Roudiez, 1989), *Le Texte du roman: Approche sémiologique d'une structure discursive transformationnelle* (1970).

Judith Butler, "The Body Politics of Julia Kristeva," *Hypatia* 3 (1989); John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin, eds., *Abjection, Melancholia, and Love* (1990); Jane Gallop, *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (1982); Elizabeth A. Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminisms* (1989); Alice Jardine, "Opaque Texts and Transparent Contexts: The Political Difference of Julia Kristeva" (*The Poetics of Gender*, ed. Nancy K. Miller, 1986); Ann Rosalind Jones, "Julia Kristeva on Femininity: The Limits of a Semiotic Politics," *Feminist Review* 18 (1984); John Lechte, *Julia Kristeva* (1990); Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (1985); Kelly Oliver, *Unraveling the Double-bind: Julia Kristeva's Theory of the Subject on Trial* (1992); Jacqueline Rose, "Julia Kristeva: Take Two," *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (1986); Ewa Ziarek, "At the Limits of Discourse: Heterogeneity, Alterity, and the Maternal Body in Kristeva's Thought," *Hypatia* 7 (1992).

*Topics Index Cross-references for this Guide entry:*

[feminism](#), [mirror stage](#), [poetic language](#), [semiotic/symbolic](#)

---

Basic

| Contents

| List of Entries

| About the Guide

| Search

---

Copyright © 1997 The Johns Hopkins University Press. All rights reserved. This document may be used, with this notice included, for noncommercial purposes within a purchasing institution. No copies of this work may be distributed electronically outside of the subscribed institution, in whole or in part, without written [permission](#) from the [JHU Press](#).