

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 conference² 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 See <https://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 abject 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).

Signifiante 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."

Signifiante 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 late 1960s, 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 that explores 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 *signifiante* – 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 *signifiance* in juxtaposition with Peircean biosemiotics. (Bennett does not use Kristeva's term *signifiance*, 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, Bennett 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 outlines,

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 miss⁶ – 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

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 significance 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 fate 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 *signifiante* 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.

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