

Indifferentiating the Undifferentiated in Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language*

Abstract

When Kristeva published her doctoral thesis *La révolution du langage poétique* in the early 1970s, its engagement with the philosophy of difference was groundbreaking. However, nearly fifty years later, the rise of indifferential systems of thought in continental philosophy, such as we find in Giorgio Agamben's archeology, Alain Badiou's ontology, set theory, and analytic extensionalism, means that, returning to Kristeva's foundational text, it can appear dated and impossible to recuperate for a twenty-first century philosophical situation.

Yet central to Kristeva's work is the semiotic *chora*, which is described as uncertain, indeterminate, quantity without quality, suspensive, nonexpressive and *un*-differentiated. While, intrinsic to her theorization of the thetic as central to the symbolic order is Frege's extensional, indifferent theory of denotation and the indifference of truth. Both the semiotic and the thetic suggest that Kristeva is not insensible to the conceptual potential of the philosophy of indifference. Taking the semiotic *chora* and the positing function of the thetic as our starting point, therefore, this paper will attempt a remapping of Kristeva's work by thinking of the *chora*, and the thetic indifferentially.

Keywords

Kristeva, Chora, indifference, semiotic, thetic

When Kristeva published *Revolution in Poetic Language* in 1974, it was at the cutting edge of continental thought. Yet returning to the work today, one is tempted to say it has been superseded. The conceptual paradigm in continental philosophy has shifted dramatically away from difference and otherness, towards indifference and neutrality. The leading figures of this movement, Giorgio Agamben and Alain Badiou, have completely rewritten the future of philosophy in a manner that seems to leave little or no room for those poststructural

thinkers who came just before them. What will our relationship to our teachers be, one of rejection and abjection, or can we find a healthier, more normative state of intellectual recuperation? This is a particularly pressing question for the Kristeva of *Revolution in Poetic Language*, for almost every aspect of that book is based on a presupposition around difference, dialectic, otherness, heterogeneity, negativity, death, separation, scission, sacrifice, syntax, and language, that has been thoroughly destabilized by the indifferential thought of Agamben in particular. While, basing her whole system on the biological materialism of the sign, and assuming that stability arrives from the double articulation of a sign working within a symbolic order, makes little sense when one reads Badiou, who founds his indifferent materialism on the simple assertion that multiples are real, and whose description of the thetic stability *he* calls nature, is entirely devoid of linguistic theory, being reliant instead on the mathematics of sets. In fact, you could sum up this dramatic conceptual shift simply as indifference not difference, suspension not deconstruction, sets not signs.

The situation is exacerbated by Kristeva's clear antipathy towards indistinct, asymbolic, indifferential situations, in her early work at least. In *Revolution* she clearly dislikes indifference, calling it psychotic, schizophrenic and life-threatening. By the time of *Powers of Horror* a handful of years later, *everyone*, she assures us, dislikes the pseudo-object held in a position of indeterminate irresolution between subject and object (Kristeva 1982).

Indifference is a state of emotional indecision or better of being affectively noncommittal. You do not care one way or another. It is a homeostatic moment of suspension between those opposing states determined by the drives. Indifference takes on philosophical significance for modern thought in Hegel's *Phenomenology* where he refutes what he calls "indifferent difference," in favor of the dialectic (Hegel 1977). Indifferent difference is pure difference as such. It allows you to say X does not equal Y, without saying what X is or what Y is. We will call this content neutrality or qualitative indifference (Watkin 2017, 60–62). Two things here are different, irrespective of what they are or what they are like. Hegel refutes "indifferent difference" because it results in the rejection of what he calls "determinate nothingness, one which has a *content*" (Hegel 1977, 51; emphasis in original), a section Kristeva quotes (Kristeva 1984, 183), resulting

instead in an indeterminate and contentless nothingness that arrives either at the indifference of pure determination, in which all objects relate to all other objects equally, meaning abstract notions can get no hold of them and place them in orderly conceptual sets; or else in a state where all beings are monadic, self-enclosed abstractions with no relation to the physical world they claim to conceptually generalize.

Hegel's refusal of indifferent difference due to logical impossibility was precipitous, because just a few decades later, Boole, Cantor, Frege and finally Wittgenstein formalize it as extensional logic and change history. Extensionality then is our third definition of indifference. Extensional reasoning is the rational basis for analytic philosophy for much of the last century and is also a logical and mathematical language of indifferent differences. Extensional logic is the result of a brave refutation of the concept of Aristotelian classes still very much in play in Hegel's phenomenology, a system that defines being in terms of essence, judgment and properties (Bar-Am 2008). All three functions, essence, judgment and properties, being modalities of avoiding the actual infinity of matter in the world by defining an immaterial truth, a philosopher who decides, and entry requirements, based on quality content. What Boole, Frege and Cantor realized was that the Greek system of Aristotelian classes is based on a superstition. There are no essences. Accept this and everything else falls by the wayside or falls into place. Extensionalism is thus named because it proves logically that the co-extensionality of two objects in the same set, their identity, why they are in the set, what allows you to collect them as one thing, is defined by their sharing the same extensional concept (basically you are to be included in this set), not essence nor property nor judgment. Extensionalism suggests a flat and unequivocal identification of terms with their extensions, resulting in a context-free, epistemically neutral language with inferences that require no extra-logical judgments as props. A class (we will call it a set) is no longer Aristotelian, but any arbitrary collection of particular objects and a handful of logical terms that designate truths about their extensions.

Extensionalism is an indifferent system, especially when applied to the mathematics of the set by Cantor. It is Cantor's extensionalism that concerns us here as it is Badiou's realization, in 1988, that the problems of ontology are solved by mathematics that marks a watershed moment in the rise of the philosophy of indifference (Watkin 2017; Badiou 2005). Leaving the math to one side, Badiou realizes that the elements of our

tripartite problem – essence, proliferation into infinite regress, and judgment – are each solved unequivocally by some simple axioms in set theory. Essence is replaced by the void set and Badiou's contention that Being is simply another name for structural consistency. The problem of infinity and regress is not a problem. Actually infinite sets not only exist, but can be easily proven, and they are the norm. And, finally, judgment is superseded by a simple ontological statement: there are only multiples of multiples. They exist, you don't judge them, you just count them (Badiou 2005, 23–30). The aporias of ontology are no longer paradoxical or contradictory, Badiou concludes. Indifferent difference works, Hegel was wrong, the dialectic was a solution to the problem of Aristotelian classes, just before they were completely swept away by extensional sets.

We can summarize Badiou's system as being is-not, multiples of multiples and actual infinity, but why is this schema indifferent? First, being is radically non-relational, it is-not, it is in-different, outside all mechanisms of differentiation. Nonrelationality is a key component of all indifferent systems. Second, multiples are in sets due to their quantity, not quality. What multiples are, their essence, due to a judgment regarding properties, is irrelevant. Multiples are content-neutral, quality-indifferent when you define them ontologically. You collect multiples based on their numerical collectability, not the fact that they are cats: FIVE cats, not five CATS. Finally, the assumption that content neutral sets are chaotic examples of Hegelian 'bad infinity' is proven false by the ubiquity and stability of actual infinite sets.

Badiou formalizes an indifferent, mathematized ontology in 1988 but indifference does not become a dominant force in continental thought until the popularization of the work of Agamben. His *Homo Sacer* of 1995 presents a theory of life and its abjection, based on a figure whose presence indifferentiates key ontological oppositions such as human and animal, life and death, nomos and anomie, sacred and profane, inside and outside. It makes them indistinct from each other at the moment they need to be incompatible. Indifference thereafter slowly replaces deconstruction as the premier mode of turning the texts of our tradition against themselves through suspending their internalized oppositions. More on Agamben's system soon enough. For now, we close with these five aspects of indifference – disaffection, indifferent difference, extensionalism, content neutral sets and

dialectical suspension – and ruefully note that none of them seem compatible with Kristeva’s theory of *signifiante*.

Revolution in Poetic Language presents one fundamental idea: “the dialectical materialist theory of signifiante [...] which will explore the specific ways in which symbolic and/or signifying unity is shattered, and through which a new symbolic device is constituted – a new reality corresponding to a new heterogeneous object” (Kristeva 1984, 181). The book proposes to take the existing structures of dialectical reasoning we will call the philosophies of difference, and locate these abstract, rational, logical and theoretical modes in an actual, biological materiality. Rather than try and prove the dialectic is true, accept the idea of logical truth in Frege. Concede thethetic subject in Husserl, or of enunciation in Benveniste. Concur with Derrida over the logical impossibilities of metaphysical language. Ally herself with Saussure’s theory of the sign, or concede that the signifier is a metonymic wild goose chase for an ideal object that never was (her critique of Lacan). By so doing she is able to find alliances with different voices simply because what they say is in accord with how the drives work within the human body, and then by implication suggest that dialectics, extensional logic, phenomenology, deconstruction, linguistics and psychoanalysis are all materially determined due to the biology of the drives. We shall call this biological dialectics. It is somaticized dialectical materialism. It means *signifiante* is an epistemology, not an ontology or aesthetics, and can only be questioned empirically, and scientifically. It cannot be logically disproven. In all the thinkers she engages with, what she finds missing from their work is not rational veracity or logical consistency, but a lack of an embodied affectual drive. And because of this, *signifiante* can reject dominant symbolic structures, and go back to that initial materiality, creating what she calls a “new heterogeneous object” or the semiotic.

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. This materiality is the semiotic or all the noises a child makes before it can speak, before it can think of itself as a subject, that do not signify, but are deeply meaningful in the affective, pre-conceptual sense of meaning. Reconstituted after the onset of language and the mirror stage, first as the material basis for the symbolic order and signifying practice, but then also as a materially embodied

memory in every subject, or what is called the engram, put in place during the holophrastic stages of the pre-symbolic which the subject can and will return to in later life (Kristeva 1984, 170), the materiality of *signifiance*, the semiotic, is a means of breaking the dominant hold of the symbolic order. Such a fracture allows one to come into full subjectivity as a practice or process of rejection and reconstitution, rather than a completed, well-adjusted, Austrian or French citizen, with just the occasional neurotic impulses.

What is compelling about this proposition is that Kristeva's *signifiance* refutes the basic idea of contradiction and paradox in rational thought, by claiming that all such ideas do not come out of logical reasoning, which is what contradiction ultimately is, but thanks to material heterogeneity in the pre-rational infantile body. This, in a sense, future-proofs her work against indifference which is a logical system, not an embodied one. A contradiction, for Kristeva, is not insisting that something both exists and inexists, or that two mutually exclusive objects occupy the same space, or saying one thing and its opposite at the same time. Rather, a contradiction, the basis of all Western rationality including post-structuralism and deconstruction and indifferential reasoning, is the material tension between two drives occupying the same body at the same time in a state of homeostasis (Kristeva 1984, 98). As if this were not disruptive enough, there is also a second aspect to our opening quote to contend with. Not only does *signifiance* present a new kind of signification, and a new idea about contradiction, it also proposes a new object, a heterogeneous object that does not stand in the normal, oppositional or correlational pairing of subject to object, nor function as the material basis for logical proofs, or theories of the subject and the real. It is an object made up of two materialities, an external stimulus, that breast, and an internal one, how much you like it, such that the subject and its drives are located both inside and outside the body in a logically contradictory manner. An object that exists inside and outside at the same time is a recurrent observation in *Revolution* that she then she pushes to its limits in *Powers of Horror* just a few years later. It is a bodily contradiction except that it exists in reality and so is not a contradiction at all. If we asked, extensionally, is there an object that is both inside and outside at the same time, a logical impossibility according to the language of extensionality, Kristeva can point to at

least two, the semiotic and the object. And add, within this object there are two mutually exclusive drives that actually coexist.

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. Her refutation of contradiction in favor of heterogeneity should immunize her textual body against all elements of indifference because she is not making a logical argument. This triad of ideas is both the basis of the lasting reputation of Kristeva's work, and the potential point of her irrelevancy for twenty-first century indifferent thought. She is radically nonrelational to it, because *signifiance* does not think. Yet immediately, having said that, as my title suggests, I am struck by a certain indifferent quality to the un-differentiated semiotic heterogeneity of *signifiance*, a certain relation to indetermination, asymbolia, indecision, a kind of affective suspension, an indifferentiation and indetermination, an occupation of a suspended state of inside and outside,thetic stasis and semiotic irruption, a basic suspension of true and false, the neutralization of logical contradiction; which, on the surface at least, is impossible to think via the philosophy of difference.

Kristeva is very clear how much she dislikes indifferentiation within the semiotic, yet at the same time the semiotic *chora*, the engine that drives the rejecting economy of *signifiance* is itself without clear differentiation. She calls *signifiance* "unlimited and unbounded" (Kristeva 1984, 17), i.e. without structural determination. While the *chora* is "uncertain and indeterminate" (Kristeva 1984, 26). When she defines the important process of somatic separation as rejection, she is at pains to explain that the syntax of rejection is "nonexpressive," yet its very definition is its "distinctiveness" (Kristeva 1984, 25). Yet she then immediately distinguishes her signifying practice in, say, a poetic genotext, from the "'drifting-into-non-sense' [*dérive*] that characterizes neurotic discourse" (Kristeva 1984, 51). In her consideration of Frege, she focuses entirely on his infamous statement that all truth objects are indifferentially the same. When speaking of semiotic mimesis, she notes it is a mimesis not of external objects but of the internalization of truth agreements, such as we find in Frege, using a language "which is neither true nor false" (Kristeva 1984, 58).

Moving on, this is all in textual chronological order, her definition of the semiotic *chora* is that it is digital, a continuous syntax of discrete

elements which, however, do not signify, leaving us to ask how do we determine their discreteness then? When Kristeva speaks of the famous genotext she notes it is a space where the subject is “not yet a split unity” (Kristeva 1984, 87). In other words, the subject is in the pre-differential state of in-differentiation. When speaking of sacrifice she admits that without the murder of rejection, the violent insistence on a social boundary of censorship and taboo, then cultures collapse into indifference. “On the other side of this boundary is the a-symbolic, the dissolution of order, the erasing of differences, and finally the disappearance of the human in animality” (Kristeva 1984, 76).

Although she constantly drifts across the landscape of indifference, Kristeva’s antipathy for indifferentiation never waivers. In the sections where she defines different orders of discourse, narrative is defined, and rejected, as when “*instinctual dyads* [...] are articulated as nondisjunction (-v-). In other words, the two ‘terms’ are distinct, differentiated, and opposed but their opposition is later disavowed” (Kristeva 1984, 90; emphasis in original). The disjunction of narrative eradicates the true differentiation of drives that determine language. Similarly meta-discourse is rejected because it neutralizes subjective embodied specificity into a kind of neutral, anonymous, impersonal “we”: “an indifferent subject, supposedly everyone” (Kristeva 1984, 95). When she turns to her lengthy engagement with theory, the third discourse, she warns us not to confuse the heterogeneous drives for simply two sides of a logical argument where said dyads “are knotted into a nonsynthetic combination in which ‘plus’ and ‘minus’ interpenetrate like the ends of a magnetized chain” (Kristeva 1984, 95), or what she calls the “*Aufhebung* of the *instinctual chora* [...] [is] inseparably symbolic” (Kristeva 1984, 96). The symbolic, therefore, indifferentiates the radical in-difference of material heterogeneity in the form of drives.

Yet at the same time, if *signifiante* is not symbolized, the syntax of pure semiosis, without thesis, positing, symbols, mirrors, phalluses and fathers, she tells us, leads to insanity. The only form of discourse she sanctions is the text or, later, genotext, where the “*instinctual binomial* consists of two opposing terms that alternate in an endless rhythm” a material discontinuity which is “both continuous and discontinuous” (Kristeva 1984, 99; emphasis in original). This, she says, “is not simply a unity but a plural totality with separate members that have no identity but constitute the place where the drives are applied”

(Kristeva 1984, 101). The semiotic indifferentiates the copula or correlation of continuity and discontinuity; it is both at the same time. A plural totality where the members have no identity but constitute the place, is purely and simply a definition of extensional, indifferent sets, except that, when they lack essence and content, what keeps them consistent is the force of drives, not mathematical axioms. These are not unreasonable positions, but when Kristeva then “talks” with Hegel it is to bemoan that his concept of force is the force of thought only, lacking in cathexis, which results in the collapse of the actuality of material substances “unresistingly into an undifferentiated unity” (Kristeva 1984, 116). Rejection, she argues, is only possible physically, yet the signifying crucible of the semiotic *chora*, the origin of all rejection, has to say no to negation by entering into symbolization, “saving it from foundering in inarticulate instinctuality” (Kristeva 1984, 148), or what we are calling drive-indifference. Left to its own devices, without stasis, semiotic “rejection could not produce something *new* and displace boundaries; it would be merely mechanical repetition of an undifferentiated ‘identity’” (Kristeva 1984, 171; emphasis in original). And so on and so forth. Time and again across the entire body of the text, Kristeva describes the complex economy and syntax of thesis and rejection, rejection and thesis. It is an economy that here appears to capture what can only be called Kristeva’s fort-da game with indifference. Sending it away, only to call it back. *Signifiance* is not indifferent, but there would be no *signifiance* without this complex game of indifference she is playing so beautifully: DA! And yet Kristeva’s entire system is totally incompatible with indifferential philosophy, at least that practiced by Giorgio Agamben: FORT!

Agamben has created a philosophical archeology of signatures for the purpose of their indifferential suspension, as opposed to their differential deconstruction. Western metaphysics is dominated by pairs, correlations, couples, of oppositional terms, as Derrida has proven, and as the drives demand. These can be located in a dialectical tension where one term is the founding, common, universal one, essence or the death drive; and the other is the founded, proper, specific multiple, property or the life drive. This abstract model can be found as the basis of all our major concepts. Agamben calls these meta-signs, signatures. It is assumed that the word “language” extends over objects in the world which actuate it. Language is composed of signs. Yet when you extend language over all signs, you discover that there

is no sign for language qua language. This is Russell's famous barber paradox, language as the system that names everything that does not name itself. It cannot, due to Gödel's incompleteness theorems. This is why language never has the floor, as Heidegger famously lamented. It is the floor. If you remain in the Greek model of an ontology of concepts as essences, you will never resolve this problem. Look at it from the other direction, signs as signs. What if signs did not need structuration by a *langue*, what if there were a pure free-play of the signifier? Why, then there would be no code and this is either impossible (Derrida) or life-threatening (Kristeva).

Agamben's next discovery is perhaps even more disturbing. He says, take the term in question, here "language." Although he calls this a signature, as I have recently shown, it is actually the name of a set (Watkin 2021). Language itself as a set is "in force without signification," a phrase Agamben takes from Kafka's "Before the Law" (Agamben 1998, 49–62). Language does not have a referent, an actual signified; rather, it is the sign we use for any "linguistic" system. There is no *actual* language, only what we have said about it so far. In the set [language] are all statements about language ever made in the West, for example since the Greeks. At any one time in history – let's take 1982, the year Agamben first published this theory (Agamben 1991) – the set [language] contains both all the statements on language, and specifically some statements that are paradigmatic of language at that time. These paradigmatic statements have to follow one structural rule, that of the dialectical pairing of a common and proper because, in the West, no other ontology or epistemology is possible to us. Thus, one paradigm will be defined as the foundation or common, and the other as the actuation of real examples of this foundation. Agamben calls this the basic economy or *oikonomia* of all signatures or all our concepts (Watkin 2014, 216–20). The motility of the economy keeps the signature alive. When that motility falters, for example if some bright spark questions Saussure's structural view of linguistics, or Derridean deconstruction, the new paradigms have to take up the two key positions of common and proper.

All this movement, all this frenzied activity, just to keep Western concepts in a state of homeostatic stability, because built into every signatory unity is its conceptual death. Death in philosophy comes in the form of irresolvable contradiction and paradox: our language/barber problem. If language is a sign, then the sign is made up of a

foundation, meaning, the signified. Meanings are stable, there will always be red, rabbits, love, the phallus. The signified is the common. This makes the signifier the proper, all those words changing over time. Yet is this true, or did I get it mixed up? If there is no language without signifiers, which makes sense, then surely it is the materiality of the signifier that is the foundation of language, and meaning comes after? After all, every culture uses semiotic modalities of expression; these are universal, according to Kristeva for example, as they are based on bodily drives that we all have. As to what they signify, that depends on contingent social forces.

If the sign is the paradigmatic example of language for Derrida and Kristeva, in 1982, which is the common, and which is the proper? Is the signified the common? Yes and no. Is the signifier the proper? No and yes. This moment of indistinction – which is identity, which is different, which is common, which is proper – indifferentially suspends the dialectical economy. Motility comes to a halt. This dialectic suspension, or dialectic at a standstill as Walter Benjamin describes it, puts the signature at risk. Why? Because the signature [language], currently, in 1982, filled with the paradigm of the sign, is itself contentless, content neutral; it is just the set as a receptacle for the dialectical economy of oppositions between the one and the many. Even worse, language as a signature, is not actually a sign. It does not refer. It is a signifier with no referent, an asymbolic materiality of expression, whose “meaning” lies in the fact of its economic motility between two positions, that of conceptual stability, identity, and its disruption by multiplicity, difference. As long as two terms battle it out below, the signature is secure above, whichever term wins; but, as soon as the oppositional differential positions become mixed up, such that the economic motility of the machine comes to a halt, is suspended, this becomes an existential threat to the whole system, which only lives qua economical motility. Thus, it must never stop, and yet it has to, because it is based on an illogicality that can never be resolved unless you accept the replacement of Aristotelian classes with extensional sets. At this point, the content of the signature, here the sign, now totally exhausted, is replaced by new paradigms, and the machine rises from the ashes and begins all over again.

Everything about this system both echoes and negates everything that Kristeva calls *signifiance*. The two systems are absolutely irreconcilable and yet exceptionally similar. They overlap remarkably

on issues of signification, sacrifice, inside/outside, economy, semiotics, motility, poetics, life, death, and the body. In fact, at second glance, one can see that in a sense indifferential suspension and the heterogeneous economy of *signifiante* are almost identical. Both consider a homeostatic economy, and go so far as to define being as the economy itself. Both appreciate that said economy runs the risk of dramatic indistinction, indifferenciation, asymbolia, and contentlessness. The difference is that Agamben openly encourages the permanent inoperativity of the homeostasis between common and proper, while Kristeva's *signifiante* actively encourages the economy to avoid the death that would be its suspension. Second, while both appreciate that the economy of heterogeneity is based on the economy of mutually exclusive yet totally interlinked positions, the common, death, the proper, life (or is it the other way around?), for Agamben this is an economy of contradiction, i.e. self-negating because it is based on not being contradictory. For Kristeva, on the other hand, this is an economy of heterogeneity, not contradiction. As we have seen, heterogeneity is precognitive; it exists before logical thought. This is absolutely one of the most explosive and fascinating conversations of our age, whichever side you choose.

If Agambenian indifference makes it impossible to recuperate Kristeva's commitment to the sign, semiotics, sacrifice and the body, on the surface Badiou's version looks equally inhospitable to *signifiante*. His work is not linguistically based, or embodied; in fact, he openly mocks such systems in *Logics of Worlds* (Badiou 2009, 1–10). Yet, at the same time, Badiou shares a great deal in common with Kristeva: dialectics, materiality, radical irruption, retroaction, Lacan, the real, revolution, and of course a theory of the subject. More pertinently, Kristeva's description of the prelinguistic, the archaic infant, the semiotic *chora*, rejection, its experiments with cathexis and its relation to the maternal body, even abjection, in many instances overlap with Badiou's theory of indifferent sets in a manner quite surprising. Not least because Kristeva describes the semiotic as undifferentiated, both in the *chora*, and later in *signifiante*. In her early work at least, Kristeva is at pains to describe pre-signifying states such as the semiotic *chora*, and then the abject, as facilitations of the symbolic signifying system, but our contention is different. The pre-symbolic is not the affective investment into the structure of the sign, not least because, as we have seen, the sign has been indifferentially suspended by Agamben, and totally abandoned by Badiou. And what comes "before" language is

not the functionality of separation. That is a retrospective application of how we think now onto how we didn't think at all then, as a very young child. Instead, before we speak and thus separate, we collect and combine. Sets come before signs, numbers precede words, the semiotic is not a proto-linguistic function at all, but a system of multiplicities and their gathering into contentless ones, which is then later overwritten by the intensional nature of expression. Gathered, in Kristeva, by affect-laden, material semiotics. What if the semiotic did not describe the pre-linguistic function of material separation, but the pre-linguistic function of material collection? Let's take some basic functions from Badiou's indifferential set theory and test that.

The child is not yet born. They live in a state of blissful indistinction, in the womb, with the maternal body. In that every material need of the child is met immediately, they are not perceived as needs. Once they are born and they slowly come to appreciate they are a separate body, the radical indistinction of the maternal body becomes the origin of its abjection, its cultural association with being unclean, especially around issues of menstruation and food. *Powers of Horror* is an essay on indifference, on our horror of the indistinction between subject and object. The abjection of some matter is due to its partiality, it defines a zone of indistinction as Agamben would call it, between subject and object. However, the abject horror associated with the maternal body is due to another kind of indistinction, that of totalization. The body of the mother is typical of the indifference of pure determination: there is no relationality with the mother's body because there is no distinction between the child and her body. She is overwhelming, she has no outside, she is infinite, she possesses no gaps, she is non-successive. 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. Being has no outside, it is not even the boundary of the set, because boundary suggests a limit between one being and another being and the logic of sets does not allow this. Being, determined by the classical logic of the void set, is unique. All mothers are the same mother, like all truths in Frege. The mother, on this reading, is truth: a single, indistinct, impossible-to-argue-with fact. Badiou calls her nature.

Kristeva tells us the other monstrous function of the mother is her generative ability. She herself knows of no separation yet she generates new object-subjects. This I think explains her abject nature more clearly. She has no outside, she is complete without distinction

or parts, and yet from inside she makes new ones, meaning again the distinction between inside and outside is problematized. However, this impossible function is deemed impossible only for Aristotelian classes. When it comes to extensional sets it is not only eminently possible, it is the very definition of what sets do. All sets emerge from that initial void set, our mother set, due to certain axioms of recurrence, the +1, collection, and the fact that the empty set never belongs but can always be included. Actual infinities are made up of recurrent collections of empty sets, the most miraculous result in set theory and ontology. What is clearly paradoxical here is that the maternal body can be complete, and yet from it can emerge something that is not her body, which itself is complete, and which does not leave the mother incomplete. More than this, birth contravenes the maternal essence, its totalizing indistinctness. How can you separate an object from an inseparable unity? This is only a problem for necrophiliac minds, as Kristeva memorably calls them (Kristeva 1984, 13). Living minds look at extensional set theory as the basis of our ontology, rather than Aristotelian classes, and realize this is the very essence of sets. Because the maternal being is not complete, it “is-not,” it allows structures to attain stable consistency when they are radically incomplete, when they are infinite, when they are empty, when they proliferate, when they are endlessly divisible, when their contents are neutral, when they experience birth and death, when they are semiotic.

The basic recurrent process of collection, and the +1 generation of sets out of literally nothing, leads to some qualities of sets that are perpetually astonishing and directly pertinent to the maternal body and the separation of the infant. For example, the inside of sets is larger than their overall size. Like the mother’s body, every set contains more than its apparent being, that being its cardinal number or how big it is. For example, the set of zero contains one empty receptacle determined by the axiom of collection or separation, what we might call the axiom of the semiotic. This 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, or what makes it a crucible for the generation of the syntax of the semiotic. No sooner does the child experience its emptiness – that it is a receptacle, a collection – than materiality and cathexis flood the *chora*, said receptacle, in an infinity of undifferentiated semiotics, infinite because finitude is a meaningful,

consistent structure. Not only is this a good fit for the semiotic *chora*, it appears to me the only viable explanation of how it functions.

So we have being qua void as a model for the maternal body. We have the child as emerging out of the maternal, the +1 and collection functions, where it finds its void immediately filling up. It is filled, Kristeva tells us, with an infinite, stable, uncountable, and thus noncompletable set of semiotic expressiveness. The *chora* is not some mystical neoplatonic essence function, but simply any infinite set. Inside the *chora*, those semiotic materialities are multiples. Multiples are pre-linguistic, content neutral, yet distinct and syntactically ordered differential units that are totally consistent within an infinite set: the child. The semiotic is, in other words, composed of multiples, not pre-signifying signifiers.

Kristeva uses the term “infinity” to describe her semiotic on a regular basis, always in the negative. Yet another astonishing result of basic set theory is that infinite sets not only exist, and are stable, but that finite sets are derived from them, they come after. Like the finitude of the set of the infant as they cease to be empty, and slowly fill themselves with semiotic material in a nonclosed yet consistent count: an actual infinity. Kristeva’s fear of infinite semiotics is either misplaced, or what she fears in her patients is not infinity but something else. Schizophrenics are not infinite sets. Infinity, in set theory, is a stable collection of content-neutral multiples. The semiotic is also composed of content-neutral multiples, noises that are collected in the body and in the pre-conscious mind, those engrams, without their having any referential meaning yet. The infinite is also defined as an uncountable yet stable set. The semiotic *chora* is the same. It is a stable receptacle, within which are collected emotionally directed noises. There is no limit or way of counting semiotics, yet they are placed in a syntax, and they are enclosed in a set. This makes the archaic child, that self-filling void set, immediately full of infinite noise, infinite, that is, as uncountable yet consistent.

It appears impossible to think that the dialectic of drives is manifested in anything other than the prelinguistic signifier but, as we are arguing, it is just as credible to say that the prelinguistic is not semiotic but numerical. Where does this leave the separation of the infant? Kristeva argues that separation occurs piecemeal as the child plays with its voice, the breast, vomit, spools and finally mirrors. Yet what would happen if the reverse were the case? The

child's semiotic *chora* is not then a means of learning its own separation and enclosedness through learning to separate the object, as Hegel contends, but is the child learning to collect. To cathect is to collect. The precognitive experiments are actually experiments in agglomeration, collection, gathering, togetherness, and infinity. What the child is toying with in the semiotic *chora* is not a transition into subjective finitude, but the reality of its subjective infinitude. Isn't that a better description of the later, retroactive process of *signifiance*? The finitude of subjectivity is a later construction of the infinity of being. This explains why *signifiance* and the semiotic irruption exist, because we are infinite beings, before and after we are finite subjects. The *sujet en procès* is the subject who experiences this, a stable set, a subject, full of an infinity of material, the semiotic, that is content neutral, breaks with referential signifieds, and which is built out of the void, the semiotic *chora*.

What is this mouth of mine? What is its function? Does it expel and separate, or ingest and collect? It collects, and gathers, and agglomerates. The eyes do the same. The ears, these hands, our skin, noses. All of our proprioceptive senses are modalities of sense-data collection, forming into engrammatic neural patterns, which become conscious forms, to which society gives names and meanings. As this happens, energy is expended, pleasure provided, as Freud suspected, but collection is not a dialectical process of signification, at least not at first. So, when does separation occur? In a sense, it never does. We are not separate. We are closed loop systems. We are DNA continuum bearers, not separate organisms worried about our organs. We are multiples of multiples. Our mothers remain as much inside of us as we were once inside of them, without contradiction or abjection, thanks to the axioms of sets. Perhaps it is time to accept that there is no difference between the child and its mother, between subjects and objects, between girls and boys, between humans and animals. This is the truth of nature, and it should not disgust us.

Signifiance: the embodied materiality of the mathematical miracle of being. That we are all infinite sets, composed of content-neutral and non-relational collections of indifferent zeros. Can mathematics be indifferent *and* embodied? I leave that question hanging, suspended, rejected, abjected, yet hopefully productive.

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