Tanya Loughead

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Kristeva on Exile, Artificial Intelligence, and the One-dimensional Universe

Abstract

In the beginning of the twenty-first century, when algorithms are monitoring our most intimate activities, the data-driven relationships created by digital hyperconnectivity attempt to reduce the distance between us and flatten our differences. Kristeva's question, "Can the 'foreigner' [...] disappear from modern societies?" (Kristeva 1991, 1), raises concerns about this ostensibly frictionless future. She sees the difference inherent in foreignness as a flux of possibilities to be explored, rather than a quality to be homogenized, as data algorithms do. However, the desire to encounter the "*essential enigma*" of foreignness (Kristeva 1991, 33; emphasis in original) both with regards to an external Other and to our own unconscious, has been rendered not only redundant but progressively vestigial by the intellectual, cultural, and material vacuums created by artificial intelligence (AI). In an age when the superficial comfort of hyperconnectivity proclaims to alleviate the sense of being uprooted "from a family, a country or a language," Kristeva reminds us that "[w]riting is impossible without some kind of exile" (Kristeva 1986, 298). To attempt to resurrect the potential of dissidence Kristeva sees in exile would be to dissolve AI's maniacal efforts to categorize identity in favor of disarticulating it – a task at the heart of Kristeva's intellectual project. It would also imply undermining the centrality of efficiency in neoliberal societies, because the quest for efficiency culminates in a system for the accounting-like management of life as well as in the adolescent "malady of ideality" (Kristeva 2019, 322), which seeks to extract a neatly structured order from the disorganized plurality of human activity at the nexus of the semiotic and the symbolic. This essay aims to provide not only a Kristevan critique of AI's flattening of life's dimensions, but also open potential avenues for revolt based on Kristeva's psychoanalytic and political work.

Keywords

Julia Kristeva, psychoanalysis, exile, artificial intelligence, critique of the digital

1. Introduction

This essay, which sits at the intersection of the humanities and social sciences, embodies a decade-long conversation between a philosopher and an Internet researcher. The American academy, like other institutions, increasingly seeks to encourage interdisciplinary exchanges and yet, despite its efforts, or perhaps precisely because of them, such dialogic spaces continue to shrink and disappear, supplanted rather by interdisciplinarity in name only, of the "just add *n* number of disciplines together and stir" variety.[1] Nonetheless, we continue to come together to discuss the exigencies of our time, in this case through the lens of Julia Kristeva's work, whose contributions to literary theory, semiotics, philosophy, and psychoanalysis alike allows a much more organic commitment to interdisciplinarity. In the context of the increasing number of reports proclaiming the potential of technology and its latest manifestation, artificial intelligence (AI), to solve virtually every human problem, including saving the planet from climate change (Gonzalez 2022), making doctors obsolete (Thompson 2018), and revolutionizing even creative domains of life such as art (Zelevansky 2022), we recall Kristeva's suspicion of promises of mass liberation from above. As a result, we seek to understand the concrete ways in which Kristeva's work can help elucidate the problems posed by the new modes of existence in the age of AI.

Rather than attempting to retrofit Kristeva's theories to the newly emerging cultural context of digital hyperconnectivity, or to use her insights to extend social scientific empirical methodologies for the sake of greater "accuracy" or "precision," this essay aims to explore what Kristeva herself has to say about the digital age, in the hopes that those interested in studying the digital will discover a different way of relating to it – one that might very well be incommensurate with the superficial measurement-oriented tools and paradigms currently in circulation in the digital humanities and social sciences. Specifically, we focus on the aspects of subjectivity and the pitfalls of "post-theory science," as part of living in the age of AI, that Kristeva's work helps elucidate.

[1] See, for example, Augsburg and Henry2009, especially Raymond C. Miller's chapter, "Interdisciplinary Studies at San Francisco State University: A Personal Perspective," which calls interdisciplinarity in name only, without actual commitment to the process, "weak interdisciplinarity" (Miller 2009, 112).

2. The contemporary subject in the regime of AI

2.1 Between exile and the reign of "talking points"

In the early days of the worldwide web, the possibility of virtual connection afforded by the Internet was accepted as incontestably positive in both popular culture and academic circles – an attitude espoused even by highly vigilant critical scholars. The sociologist Fatima Mernissi, for instance, marveled at the opportunity for democratic public debate the "magic window" of the Internet appeared to afford, and at the power of information technology to shape political discourse (Mernissi 2009, xi–xii).

We now understand that the reality is far more complex. The field of data science – the backbone of the Internet's "magic window," or, more formally, the theory and practice of "extraction of information and knowledge from data" (Provost & Fawcett 2013, 52) – is only just beginning to grapple with the full range of the societal effects of the Internet as a democratizing force for toppling oppressive regimes, on the one hand,[2] and as a harbor for the proliferation and intensification of extreme views, on the other.[3] Ewa Płonowska Ziarek has referred to this inherent duality, combined with a general sense of disorientation, confusion, and loss of reality, with a series of interchangeable terms – "digital regime of power," "digital worldlessness," "global regimes of Big Data and AI" – in which the digital constitutes "a new horizon not only for the economy, but also for politics and culture" (Ziarek 2022, n.p.). In another insightful analysis, Miglena Nikolchina comments on the "synthetic potentialities" of a specific manifestation of the digital in the form of video games, emphasizing their multidimensionality as sociotechnical artifacts that include aspects of technology, the game itself, and aesthetics (Nikolchina 2017).

In this context, Kristeva's ideas about the Internet and the digital, though not necessarily elaborated in a focused manner, can be useful. Combining semiotics, psychoanalysis, literary criticism, and philosophy, Kristeva sees beyond the superficial promise of

2 For a detailed account of the role of the Internet in the Arab Spring, see Tufekci 2017.

3 We do not claim that social media necessarily *causes* revolutions, terrorist acts, and other significant events in human history, but we do agree with information operations expert Robin Thompson when she says that "it helped increase the effectiveness of the events; provided command, control, and communication capabilities for protestors; and reported the events in real time as they unfolded, which in turn, raised awareness and motivation for the participants and those who desired change in other parts" (Thompson 2011, 178).

what the new technology can do for us and points to how this new regime of communication (and, more broadly, existence) can affect our very subjectivity. In *Passions of Our Time*, Kristeva writes: "The unidimensional humanity of last century has been replaced by today's hyperconnected and rushed person who communicates in 'tweets' and, whatever the risks of chaos and absence of truth in his virtual world, seems, nevertheless, to reject any supreme authority, whether political or spiritual" (Kristeva 2019, 17). Is her diagnosis optimistic, heralding the start of a new era marked by a lack of idols and unprecedented ease of expression in virtual space, both of which may result in greater freedom than the previous era? We do not think so – on the contrary: as Kristeva pointed out in her 2022 Kristeva Circle keynote lecture in Sofia, Bulgaria, in the digital age, "you have no more anguish but liquid anxieties, no more desires but buying fevers, no more pleasures but urgent discharges on lots of applications, no more friends but Instagram and likes" (Kristeva 2022, n.p.).

It is tempting to focus on the seemingly antithetical differences in this statement – on the difference between the one-dimensional humanity of the twentieth century and the "toxic hold of images" today (Kristeva 2019, 132). Yet what we consider crucial in Kristeva's diagnosis of digital humanity is the idea that the subject's multidimensional life, then and now, is under attack; an attack, today, no doubt different from the brutality of the world wars that defined the twentieth century and yet resulting, once again, in "nihilism" or "its double, fundamentalism" (Kristeva 2019, 31). "A denial of language is moving in," Kristeva declares in her essay "Firewalls," "and digital hypercommunication, with its 'talking points' that dot the minds at the highest political levels, contributes to it" (Kristeva 2019, 67). The metaphor of talking points is an apt description of the piecemeal bits of information delivered by "tweets" or "Facebook posts," which are typically devoid of intellectual or cultural depth and provide little invitation to reflect and analyze; instead, they offer automated judgment, "asymbolia," and the "promise of hedonism for all" (Kristeva 2019, 67), eventually automating humanity itself.

In their quest to make everything, even the most remote places, cultures, and lives familiar, constantly updated global news and digital hyperconnection effectively erase the possibility of *estrangement*, in the mystical sense of the Kabbalah that Kristeva sees at work in Gershom Scholem, where the capacity to "exile oneself from oneself"

is, according to her, "the very condition of the act of thinking, of thinking oneself, of infinitely interpreting the tetragram of all identity (national, political, sexual, etc.)" (Kristeva 2019, 227). This state of self-exile, a kind of internal foreignness which allows one to self-reflect but also to see the Other anew, outside the regime of "talking points," stands in stark contrast, if not opposition, to the goals of the purveyors of the digital to "organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful" (Google's mission statement) and "give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together" (Facebook's mission statement). Despite their upbeat and optimistic tone, these mission statements conceal impenetrable automation mechanisms that make these impossible promises a reality: Google only displays the information its algorithms and staff deem useful, and Facebook's relationship- and community-building algorithms are ultimately based on mathematical models that seek to optimize *engagement* and – ultimately – profit, rather than happiness or flourishing.

2.2 The digital as a crisis of (self-)analysis

Is there a way out of the cycle of hyperconnection? Kristeva offers a possible answer in her essay, "The Lacan Event": "in people who, in our world of images, reduce their verbal expression to 'tweets' and SMSs, while the truth of their unconsciousness is hidden as if encrypted," the analyst hears the "semiotic" (Kristeva 2019, 145). The analyst is able to do so because of *psychoanalysis* which, according to Kristeva, prompts us "not to accept… [a] 'unifying link' [such as religion] but the desire to analyze all identities and all links" (Kristeva 2019, 63). It also encourages us to "take pleasure in the work [of] this elucidation" (Kristeva 2019, 63). The desire and pleasure of thinking "over and over" can expand the psychic space under constant attack by the digital. Elsewhere, Kristeva admits that not everyone can afford an analyst and that psychoanalysis is often perceived as a privileged activity only a small number of people can enjoy. What, then, of this "counterdepressant" (Kristeva 1989, 1), as she describes psychoanalysis in *Black Sun*, and which she prescribes for the new maladies of the soul in the regime of the digital and its automatization through shallow hedonistic "talking points"?

In her essay, "Ten Principles for Twenty-First-Century Humanism," Kristeva responds as follows: "Because we are speaking, writing,

sketching, painting, music making, playing, calculating, imagining, and thinking human beings, we are not condemned to become 'talking points' in speeded up hyperconnection. The infinity of capacities of representation is our habitat; depth and deliverance are our freedom" (Kristeva 2019, 282). The twenty-first century answer to Hannah Arendt's twentieth-century prescription to develop critical thinking, or the ability *to think*, is, according to Kristeva, the cultivation of analysis and self-analysis. In a manner similar to Arendt's revelation of Adolf Eichmann's profound inability to think (Arendt 1965), the inability to (self-)analyze can aid in understanding one of the greatest atrocities in which AI-curated digital media is implicated: the proliferation of extremist views which can subsequently translate into real-life violence.[4]

In the manifesto he posted online shortly before killing ten people and injuring three others at a supermarket in Buffalo, New York on May 14, 2022, the male white supremacist mass shooter stated, "I never even saw this information until I found these [Internet] sites" (New York State Attorney General 2022). The killer specifically mentioned "infographics and memes" as the agents of his radicalization, and websites like 4chan as their source. After a detailed investigation, the office of the New York State's Attorney General, Letitia James, issued a report in October 2022, concluding that: "fringe online platforms, like 4chan, radicalized the shooter; livestreaming platforms, like Twitch, were weaponized to publicize and encourage copycat violent attacks; and a lack of oversight, transparency, and accountability of these platforms allowed hateful and extremist views to proliferate online, leading to radicalization and violence" (New York State Attorney General 2022).

Imagery blended with text, telling stories of false oppression parading as truthful information, like the "white replacement" conspiracy theory the Buffalo shooter embraced: it is by now customary for Internet researchers and social media scholars to refer to the proliferation of such digital hypercommunication "talking points" (Kristeva 2019, 67) as mis- or disinformation.[5] In the fight against

[4] We do not claim that the Internet causes extremism and nihilism; rather, we highlight its role in disseminating and amplifying long-standing ideological messages, some of which are sexist and racist.

[5] The European Commission defines disinformation as "false, inaccurate or misleading information that is designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or gain profit," and stresses that disinformation is different from misinformation, "which only refers to the inadvertent sharing of false information" (European Commission DG Connect 2018, n.p.).

disinformation, social and data scientists "scrape," "clean," "mine," and "analyze"[6] text and other forms of digital content generated by Internet users to evaluate computationally-defined features such as volume, valence, or sentiment, employing "state-of-the-art" natural language processing techniques such as "large language" AI algorithms. Indeed, such methods were attempted in the aftermath of the Buffalo shooting and ostensibly even resulted in a computational "solution" to the problem of disinformation through the application of the so-called "average softening of extremes" "via organic deliberation in anonymous, heterogeneous groups formed online around a given topic" (Restrepo et al. 2022, n.p.). It is truly alarming that even "organic deliberation" is now deemed controllable and amenable to automation, to the point where it can be "scaled up," packaged as a model, and "exported" to other parts of the Internet to alleviate hate speech online.

3. Kristeva's theory as an antidote to AI-fueled "post-science"

3.1 The two faces of analysis

Herein lies the paradox of the digital regime of the image whose psychic dimensions Kristeva describes: it is common knowledge that AI algorithms are profoundly shaping our identities online – and also offline, because the two are always already interconnected – but those ostensibly best equipped to study these effects, the scholars of the digital, are increasingly allowing these same algorithms to inform and frame their own analysis, to the point where the algorithms are progressively *becoming* the analysis. The automation of analysis has made it far too simple for someone with little to no programming experience to deploy highly sophisticated AI models on data and produce results whose veracity is unquestioned. These results, which appear in the form of a prediction, pattern, or classification category, come to embody truth and reality in a methodological move, claiming complete objectivity while obfuscating the inescapable need for subjective interpretation. "The Numbers Don't Speak for Themselves" (D'Ignazio & Klein 2020, 149): this is a caveat data feminism issues as a

[6] Common steps in the data science analysis framework, reflected, for example, in van den Broucke & Baesens (2018).

reminder that *people*, rather than data, tell the story of computational analysis, and that despite its seeming neutrality, the mathematical modeling at the heart of computation is always invoked by *someone* for a specific reason in a specific context.

In order to "optimize" the calibration of text recognition machine learning models, we blindly collect millions of "tweets," diligently "clean" this data by removing "stop words" and other textual excess ostensibly devoid of meaning, and then "feed" these "bags of words"[7] to pre-trained language models, which can purportedly process social media posts on an enormous scale. In addition to becoming prevalent in digital-native disciplines like computational linguistics, new media studies, and information science, this computational approach to studying online content is also growing in fields with a long hermeneutical tradition, such as literary criticism and sociology. One is no longer "a *subject in* analysis" (Kristeva 2019, 98; emphasis added) but rather an *object of* analysis, where the goal is not to cultivate the skill of "permanent questioning and self-reflection," the self-analysis that lies "at the core of our being" (Kritzman 2019, xi), but precisely the opposite – the outsourcing of questioning and decision-making to computational systems which, we are told, are more precise, more accurate, and even more fair than human experts.

This computational turn appears to have created a new unhealthy standard in academia: replacing the obsession with causality and the scientific method with "pattern discovery in massive datasets,"[8] which proudly proclaims itself not just as "scientific truth" but as reality itself. Following the former editor-in-chief of *Wired* magazine, Chris Anderson, who in 2008 declared the "end of theory" (Anderson 2008), some social scientists refer to this shift as "post-theory science" (Spinney 2022). They argue that in the age of ubiquitous datafication, when almost every human activity is converted into bits of data, all that is needed to answer most questions about humanity is a data collection method, since pervasive data has practically solved the fundamental problem in inferential statistics of the difference between a limited sample and the total population it purports to represent. In other words, the promise of Big Data is that we no longer need to make

[7] This is text analytics terminology commonly used in manuals; see, for example, Zhang, Jin & Zhou (2010).

[8] There are numerous examples of computational tools which claim to help with this process. See, for example, Jiang *et al.* (2017).

inferences based on statistical sampling – we can, in principle, simply target the entire population because data science has made data collection from virtually anyone possible.

To those who are not convinced, perhaps having a background in the humanities that might question such totalizing gestures, the computational turn offers more nuanced and somewhat less sweeping methodologies, such as Lev Manovich's "cultural analytics" (Manovich 2020) and Franco Moretti's "distant reading" (Moretti 2013). However, these are animated by the same impulse that engendered "post-theory science," as they also rely on the algorithmic "interpretation" of "data." We are told that this is an unavoidable tradeoff: one must choose between depth and breadth. It is, after all, impossible for a single social media analyst to read through millions of tweets. Kristeva's diagnosis of the digital demonstrates that what is lost in the process of quantification is not just the contextual richness of every individual "document" within the "corpus" of social media posts – the terms of computational linguistics. Also irretrievably sacrificed is what Kristeva calls "the subject in process/on trial" (Kristeva 1984, 37). The continuous (re)formation of identity that defies stasis is, in the hands of AI analytics, reduced to (recurring) patterns of naïve behavioral signs. Beyond the semantic articulations of the psyche the subject posts online, there is no room for Internet users' inner lives in the analysis produced by computational research. Could it be otherwise? Could a different form of relationality be imagined between scholars of the digital and manifestations of humanity?

"Post-theory science" as the sole purveyor of truth and reality is dangerous not only because its grandiose claims are false, but also because it prescribes an all-knowing subject – a privileged position that is untenable, given the complexity of psychic life. In Barthes, and "writers from Diderot to Baudelaire or Georges Bataille," Kristeva discovers that "it is possible to speak *of* literature if and only if we speak *to* literature" (Kristeva 2019, 23; emphasis in original). This allows the experience of the multitude of meanings as "traces of an immense 'operative' tendency" (Barthes 2004, 29; qtd. in Kristeva 2019, 25), which creates a "new model of meaning" (Kristeva 2019, 27), a new analytical tool, rather than uncovering some mythical "correct" meaning. If we employ this dialogic comportment toward literature to consider online content, it is easy to see that the AI models used to curate our online news feeds, recommend "friends" and digital

content, and analyze how we react to our digital reality are incapable of "seeing" us as anything more than fixed datapoints in a set of partial observations. Nothing of the interior language of the psyche can survive this rehearsed, pseudo-random transformation of digital writing – however shallow, brief, and haphazard – into unidimensional binary code. Our translinguistic intersubjectivity has been smothered into nonexistence by the computational study of online discourse whose approaches, even at the purely semantic level, are problematic from a Kristevan standpoint.

The computational turn in social science is replete with references to natural *language* processing: *data*, *information*, and *speech*, such as hate speech. Something is evidently missing from these names, something that would indicate the transferred character of the speech we see typed on the screen. This is what Kristeva refers to as *writing* – the creative act of commemorating words and experience that cannot be reduced to either language or speech (Kristeva 2019, 25). Writing can restore the relationship between the written word and the psyche by "estranging" the author from the written text. It creates that sense of foreignness, estrangement, or self-exile that one experiences when attempting to bare the strangeness of one's inner life, and this could very well be our best bet in the fight against becoming automated talking points.

4. Conclusion

"Are we all foreigners?" This is Kristeva's rhetorical challenge to humanity – both an invitation to explore the mystery of psychic life through self-estrangement, and a warning not to assume the position of an all-knowing subject with regard to ourselves or the world. This double invitation to (self-)analysis can offer a fruitful path for negotiating the human condition in the regime of the digital. It is an invitation that begins and ends with a question. A "post-scientific" approach tethered to the capitalist imperative seeks easy answers, answers that can be optimized, replicated, commodified, scaled, and monetized. But easy answers to complex social questions can do little beyond identifying obvious patterns and making uninformed predictions. We have not yet learned to live with complexity, with unease, with difference. We must learn to *think*, to *analyze*.

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