

**The Labyrinth of Kristeva’s Modernisms: A Review of
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Darin Tenev

Sofia University ‘St. Kliment Ohridski’
E-mail: darin.tenev@gmail.com

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Abstract

This is a review article of Maria Margaroni’s edited collection *Understanding Kristeva, Understanding Modernism* which engages critically with the contributors’ main ideas and connects this book with other contemporary scholarship in the field and discusses the ‘Understanding Philosophy, Understanding Modernism’ Series of Bloomsbury Academic.

Keywords: *psychoanalysis, modernism, avant-garde, Kristeva, Margaroni*

There is perhaps no other of the great contemporary French thinkers, the thinkers that radically transformed the field of the human sciences in the second half of the 20th century, who has dedicated as much attention to the avant-garde, its logic and practice, as has Julia Kristeva. From her earliest critical writings, already before she left Bulgaria for France, up to her most recent texts, she has continuously engaged with avant-garde writers and works, up to the point where the avant-garde was no longer just a theme, an object for analysis, but an intricate part of the very way theory is built and of the way Kristeva wrote her own novels. Modernism and avant-garde may very well be the focus points where all aspects of her work – literary criticism and theory, psychoanalysis, art critique, philosophy – converge. In this sense, the publication of the volume, edited by Maria Margaroni, *Understanding Kristeva, Understanding Modernism* as part of the ‘Understanding Philosophy, Understanding Modernism’ Series of Bloomsbury Academic, is most fortunate. Such a volume was not only desirable but I would say much needed. Needed in order to provide, on the one hand, a critical reflection on the various manners in which Kristeva engaged with modernism and the avant-garde, and on the other, to produce a basis for re-thinking the phenomena of modernism from a Kristevian perspective for all those who are interested in the topic of modernism and avant-garde but are not specialists on Kristeva. Finally, it was needed in order to put into perspective the way in which all key concepts of the French thinker defining her contribution both to psychoanalysis and philosophy, such as ‘subject-in-process’, ‘signifiante’, ‘abjection’, ‘matricide’, ‘chora’,

the ‘semiotic’, etc., are in fact directly related to her analyses and interpretations of modernist and avant-garde authors.

The book is composed of three parts, titled respectively ‘Conceptualizing Kristeva’, ‘Kristeva and aesthetics’ and ‘Glossary’. The contributors offer in-depth analyses and interpretations of the multifaceted work of Kristeva taking into account its aesthetic, cultural, political, social, psychoanalytic, and scientific stakes. The chapters in the first part of the volume develop critical reconstructions of Kristeva’s theoretical positions. The second part focuses on some of her singular readings of modernist and avant-garde authors and uses her theoretical tools for the interpretation of writers and artists she does not discuss. The third and final part is dedicated to key terms she has introduced that are directly related to the discussion on modernism and the avant-garde.

I will focus first on the final part, the ‘Glossary’. There are eight entries listed in alphabetical order, each of which is about ten pages long: ‘abjection’ (Dawid Kołoszyc), ‘avant-garde’ (Christos Hadjiyiannis), ‘female genius’ (Elisabetta Convento), ‘intertextuality’ (Gertrude Postl), ‘intimate revolt’ (Gertrude Postl), ‘spirituality’ (Alison Jasper), ‘subject in process/ on trial’ (Esther Hutfless and Elisabeth Schäfer), ‘the semiotic’ and ‘the symbolic’ (Dawid Kołoszyc). As anyone familiar with Kristeva’s work will notice, these terms traverse texts written over the course of half a century, from *Semeiotikè* (1969) to *Passions of Our Time* (2013), *The Enchanted Clock* (2015) and *Je me voyage* (2016).¹ In one form or another, explicitly or implicitly the terms not only have been determinant for Kristeva’s thinking but also have transitioned from book to book, and from one period to another. In this sense, they offer a sort of a map for the several axes along which the thought of Kristeva moved and developed. The list is not – and for essential reasons – exhaustive; one might argue that other important notions should have also been introduced in separate articles. These would include, for example, ‘signifiante’, ‘negativity’, ‘chora’, ‘matricide’, and Kristeva’s take on ‘melancholy’ and ‘depression’, among others. The glossary, however, is only a part of the volume, a volume which is not and does not want to be a Kristeva dictionary but rather a critical engagement in ongoing debates. What is more, it is doubtful whether a complete and exhaustive list of all of the important terms is even possible. And not for the empirical profusion of her texts (which is hardly deniable) but because of the very logic underlying the development of the concepts which contests the thetical aspect and accentuates the constitutive form of the rejected, the denied, the non-given, etc.

There is another issue with the ‘Glossary’ however. One of the terms is not quite like the others, and it is the term ‘Avant-garde’. Unlike ‘abjection’ or ‘intertextuality’, it is not a term introduced by Kristeva but the problem is not there (‘spirituality’ is also not a concept invented by her). The article on the avant-garde, eloquently written by Christos Hadjiyiannis, is on what Kristeva has said on the topic of the avant-garde. It begins with a general discussion on the use of the term and then continues with a reconstruction of the main points in Kristeva’s understanding, stressing the ambiguity of the avant-garde’s negativity that challenges and shatters conventions and at the same time actually fails to impact the political. In the reconstruction Hadjiyiannis traces the way in which other important concepts such as ‘the semiotic’, ‘chora’, ‘genotext’ and ‘the subject-in-process’ play a crucial role in the reconceptualization of the avant-garde that Kristeva offers. The

¹ See Julia Kristeva, *Semeiotikè* (Paris: Seuil, 1969); Julia Kristeva, *Passions of Our Time*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019); Julia Kristeva, *The Enchanted Clock*, trans. Armine Kotin Mortimer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); Julia Kristeva, *Je me voyage* (Paris: Fayard, 2016).

problem is that the gloss on 'avant-garde' is part of a volume where many of the chapters discuss precisely the polyvalence of the place the avant-garde holds in Kristeva's thought. In this sense, unlike the case with the other key terms in the glossary, the book may be read as a constant contestation of the attempt to propose an easy gloss of Kristeva's understanding of the avant-garde. To give but one example, Hadjiyiannis explains Kristeva's critical gesture toward the avant-garde at one point with the semiotic and the *chora*, associating the two, whereas the chapter by Miglena Nikolchina (included in the first part of the volume) thematically problematizes the relation between the two in their relation to avant-garde phenomena and poses the question about the possible transition from the one to the other. In other words, it may seem as if this gloss tends to conceal some of the tensions inherent to Kristeva's argument that other chapters focus on. On the other hand, however, the gloss can be read on its own and can also be helpful as a sort of introduction to the other texts. In general, the glossary is well written and very useful for both specialists on Kristeva and the general public.

The first part of the book, 'Conceptualizing Kristeva', consists of seven chapters dealing with the theories developed by Kristeva and the problems these theories pose, problems not only theoretical but also ethical and political. The first chapter, 'Kristeva Telle Quelle: A Seductive Encounter' by Danielle Marx-Scouras contextualizes the theoretical thinking of Kristeva reconstructing her relation with the Tel Quel group. Attentive to easy-to-miss details in the history of Tel Quel Marx-Scouras' text reveals the complex situation during the 1960s and the 1970s and traces how the ambivalence in the relationship between Tel Quel and the French Communist Party impacted Kristeva's stance back at the day and then later, when she was confronted with the accusation of being a Cold War spy.

'Indifferent Feminine: Kristeva and the Avant-garde' by Miglena Nikolchina, which is the third chapter, is much more theoretically oriented but it supplements the historical context reconstructed by Marx-Scouras in several important aspects. For example, it sheds light on a fact, little known in the West, that in Bulgaria Kristeva was connected to Bakhtin-oriented circles that were virulently opposing structuralism, and Bakhtin was later used by some of them for the promotion of quite conservative cultural politics. The main interest of Nikolchina's article however is the relationship between *chora*, the semiotic, and the feminine. With a stress on Kristeva's early work on Sollers and the avant-garde,² the text follows the zig zag movement of theorization that opened up the possibility for distinguishing between the maternal and the feminine. In Nikolchina's reading the semiotic designates the material and tangible aspect of pre-linguistic ordering as it appears in the symbolic, while *chora* is the – semiotizable yet not necessarily semiotized – 'maternal container' positioning the semiotic, and thus the term which makes possible the association of the semiotic with the feminine. Nikolchina traces the genealogy of the semiotic back to Kristeva's discussions on numbers, and the concept of *chora* back to early notion of *nombrant*, claiming that the later shift from the numbers to the semiotic in the early introduced 'filters of humanization' for what was initially on the border between the human and the inhuman.

The second chapter, John Lechte's '*Chora*, Infinity, Modernism', also focuses on Kristeva's early use of mathematics. Lechte discusses the chances and risks of thinking

² See Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984). There are parts abridged in the English translation. For the full text, see: Julia Kristeva, *La Révolution du langage poétique* (Paris : Seuil, 1974).

chora as a set in the sense of set theory and shows the limitations of Kristeva's speculative utilization of Cantor, limitations determined by the fact that while *chora* remains tied to the material, with Cantor's free mathematics the mathematical is discontinuous with the material world. At the same time, the speculative approach is seen as very productive. Lechte revisits in particular Kristeva's reading of Mallarmé and claims that the idea of infinitization proposed there is actually part of a poetic practice before being mathematical but still offers insight into how the modernist writing works. He contrasts Kristeva's interpretation with Quentin Meillassoux's reading and shows how while Meillassoux tries to decipher in a semantic manner what is the actual number that the poem would have had hinted, Kristeva's approach allows her to not fall prey to the semantic trap and to reveal pluralization produced by the semiotic before and beyond any concrete communicative aspect and therefore before and beyond any particular meaning.

The next two chapters, written by Carol Mastrangelo Bové and Maryha J. Reineke, turn to two of Kristeva's more recent novels, *The Enchanted Clock* and *Teresa, My Love*.³ Both chapters deal with the literary works not separating them from her critical and theoretical texts but rather as their heterogeneous continuation. Bové reads *The Enchanted Clock* as a criticism against what she defines as American pragmatism, namely the modes of psychic formation that subject the psychic life to economic interests enhancing capitalism and consumerism. In her analysis the way in which the novel 'mobilizes modernism and its sense of time and subjectivity' (81) can be interpreted as both an attack against this form of pragmatism and an outline of an alternative to it. She puts a stress on the manner such an alternative makes possible anew the dialogue between the hard sciences and the humanities. I find this stress particularly relevant in the present-day context where what can be seen as an ongoing attack against the humanities often uses forms of opposing 'the two cultures' as an argument against one of them. In fact, the chapters by Lechte, Nikolchina and Bové with the attention directed at the role of mathematics and the hard sciences, can all be seen as pointing to the need for a renegotiation between the different fields of knowledge, but Bové articulates this most clearly among them within the volume.

Martha J. Reineke's take on *Teresa, My Love* is quite deconstructive and critical to Kristeva. She sees Kristeva's view on Islam as it is depicted in the novel not only as unfounded but more importantly as an effect of the same modernist tendencies Kristeva herself discovers and criticizes in Diderot. Reineke compares the novel with Hubert Wolf's *The Nuns of Sant'Ambrogio* and discusses how difficult the line between a true and a false mysticism is and how Enlightenment was not as disenchanting as people usually believe it is. Then she points to a possible answer to the conundrum of *Teresa, My Love* that can be found in other works by Kristeva. This answer is the following: 'Instead of perceiving the subject to be in possession of truth proffered by modernism – the tidy outcome of a life shaped by fanaticism or scepticism – analysis invites the subject to entertain a strangeness before the truth.' (104) Reineke's interpretation is thought-provoking and insightful but the manner in which she puts Enlightenment, modernism, and modernity in a synonymic chain is very problematic. Modernism has many faces and some are overtly turned against the ideas and the ideology of the Enlightenment. As Reineke herself has shown, Kristeva's own work testifies to that.

³ See Kristeva, *The Enchanted Clock*; and Julia Kristeva, *Teresa, My Love*, trans. Lorna Scott Fox (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

The next chapter, written by Tina Chanter, can be read as a direct continuation of the debate opened by Reineke. Chanter focuses on political aspects of Kristeva's work she finds problematic and in particular on the discussion of the Islamic veil. For her, Kristeva is 'at fault for othering non-Western cultures' and she claims that 'the foundational fantasies that govern Eurocentric provincialism too often fuel her own reflections' (111). Following Falguni Sheth's, Sara Ahmed's, and Meyda Yegeneglu's analyses of metonymization and metaphorization of the veil, she demonstrates how the same cultural mechanisms for the perception of the veil that contribute to the Eurocentric mythology are at work in Kristeva's *The Severed Head*. She interprets this as a performance of castration anxiety with regard to those who practice veiling. In the final part of the essay Chanter, just like Reineke, turns to other texts by Kristeva for an alternative answer to the problem and finds it in the notion of the semiotic: the impossibility to reduce the semiotic to any particular politics constitutes its productivity because it allows for a different interpretation and use of the veil as a sign of cultural strangeness. It is noteworthy however, that focusing on the Western perception of the veil Chanter does not discuss the ambivalent status of the veil in the Arab world, nor the possible difference of the role the Islamic veil plays in France and in the Arab countries.

The final chapter of the first part, Robin Truth Goodman's 'Kristeva on Arendt: Politics and the Subject' offers a comparative analysis of the two thinkers that takes into account Kristeva's book on Arendt in the context of her trilogy on the female genius. Goodman points out the different meaning of some of the basic terms both thinkers use, such as 'subject' and sees this phenomenon as resulting from the different way the two of them describe 'the political retrenchments of modernity' (129). She focuses in particular on the role played by the notions of singularity and plurality and argues that 'Kristeva's modernist subject cannot find a home within Arendt's pluralism just as Arendt's pluralism is unrooted from the subject that Kristeva so meticulously describes' (144). In Kristeva's case, according to Goodman, it remains unclear how the heterogeneous sense of the subject she develops 'might – empirically – reactivate political practices against domination' (137). It seems that the discussion on Kristeva and the political would have benefited if Goodman had used or at least referred to the influential book by Cecilia Sjöholm from 2005 titled precisely *Kristeva and the Political*.⁴

The second part of the book, 'Kristeva and Aesthetics', does not leave aside the theoretical questions introduced in the first part but rather develops them further. It comprises six chapters dedicated to different writers and artists either read by Kristeva or read with the help of her conceptual framework. Already the first of these chapters, 'Modernism Unleashed and Restrained: Joyce, Céline and Arendt in Kristeva's Tale of the Century' by Marios Constantinou, takes up several of the topics discussed in the previous part, including the Eurocentric stance and the complicated relation to Arendt. Constantinou's text reads Arendt, Céline and Joyce with and against Kristeva tracing some of the key trajectories of modernism and their impact on Kristeva's thinking. He focuses especially on the ambivalence of the imperialist nostalgia in the context of modernism and poses the question whether Kristeva's 'retailing of modernism' is not 'a transposed romance with the imperial Middle Ages' (175).

The stress Constantinou put on the concept of abjection in his reconstructions is shared by the next two chapters. Nicholas Chare offers a case study on one of the ghost stories by M. R. James, representative of the so-called Gothic modernism. He contrasts

⁴ See Cecilia Sjöholm, *Kristeva and the Political* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005).

James with the avant-garde authors Kristeva usually chooses to work on, such as Céline, and demonstrates in what sense James's story with its use of drapery embodies an arrested sublimation of the abject which allows the reader 'to observe the abject from a safe distance' (184), whereas in the case of Céline the readers are inevitably involved in the abjection they read about and therefore experience themselves the collapse of meaning.

In the third chapter, 'The Impact of Kristeva's Theory of Abjection on Modernist Art', Rina Arya turns her attention to the role of the fragment as a symbol of the modern condition, and analyses it in terms of abjection. She takes the example of three painters, namely Hans Bellmer, Francis Bacon, and Maria Lassnig, and the way they represent the body and its fragmentation, arguing that their paintings conveying abjection affect the viewers so that the viewing becomes a wounding experience and not just a neutral perception. As interesting as her interpretations are, one cannot but notice that Arya's text uses and discusses very little Kristeva, limiting the references to *Powers of Horror*.⁵ Even the argument of that book is quite simplified in comparison with the other chapters in the volume.

The fourth chapter, written by Christina Kkona, offers an analysis of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* in terms of plural singularity resulting from the relation between the androgynous and the foreign. The text begins with a careful discussion on Kristeva's ambiguous homophobia and its relation to her understanding of the feminine as a disruptive force working from within the symbolic. Kkona notes that the later Kristeva with her insistence on the notion of *haecceitas*, or singularity, acknowledges the plurality of sexualities and homosexualities and opens a path leading beyond her homophobic affirmations.⁶ On the basis of this discussion Kkona moves on to Woolf's work arguing that the protagonist of the novel demonstrates how the subject can incessantly invent herself without ceding on her singularity. Orlando's singularity is plural and her/ his plasticity is what saves her/ him from any firm identification and rigid definition.

Rositsa Terzieva-Artemis takes up another female writer, Jean Rhys, and interprets her Parisian novels in the light – or under the shadow – of Kristeva's theory of melancholia. I want to note that this is one of the very few texts in the volume that thematically poses the question of what 'modernism' means. Terzieva-Artemis deals with novels written in the interwar period and still finds it necessary to make clear in what sense she talks of modernism. In her analysis she compares and combines Walter Benjamin's understanding of melancholia with that of Kristeva and uses this theoretical tool to reach a surprising result finding in Rhys' novels that the collapse of meaning can still have a transformative value and that the becoming of the subject can be 'possible not despite, but *in* melancholia' (232).

In the last chapter of the second part Robert R. Shane addresses modern dance, and Martha Graham's *Hérodiade* in particular, as a way of breaking the symbolic conventions of ballet and giving form to the semiotic, and thus outlines the possibility for a new way of associating art and psychoanalysis. He interprets the role of the mirror in Graham's

⁵ See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, trans. Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

⁶ Kkona points to homophobic passages in works like *About Chinese Women* and *Tales of Love*. See Julia Kristeva, *About Chinese Women*, trans. Anita Barrows (New York: Urizen Books, 1977), 29; Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 81. Kkona refers to the influential reading on Kristeva proposed by Judith Butler in: Judith Butler, 'The Body Politics of Julia Kristeva', in *Revaluing French Feminism*, eds. Nancy Fraser, Sandra Lee Bartky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992): 162-76.

dance, represented by an abstract sculpture made by Noguchi Isamu, in terms of Kristeva's revision of Lacan's mirror stage and her discovery of an even more archaic mirror, the corporeal mirroring between the infant and the mother. This mirror before the mirror disrupts the linear representation of time and opens up the revolutionary potential of dance as art.

All the essays in the volume offer valuable insights to Kristeva's work and to the conundrums of modernism and the avant-garde. There is a common understanding – or rather misunderstanding – that only the early Kristeva (that is the works written until the mid-1970s, including *Revolution in Poetic Language*, the works before her psychoanalytic turn) deals thematically with modernism and the avant-garde. The books written after the psychoanalytic turn, on the other hand, are rarely discussed in relation to the problems of modernism and the avant-garde implying a waning of that thematic. The essays included in *Understanding Kristeva*, *Understanding Modernism* however show how this thematic can be traced throughout her oeuvre up to her most recent texts and how it is inherently tied to her developments of psychoanalysis. But what is more, they reveal the multiple aspects of this thematic in Kristeva well beyond the topics usually discussed. In this sense, it would have been perhaps better if there were more discussions on the sense and uses of 'modernism' and 'avant-garde'. In most of the book chapters the two words are employed as synonyms despite the ongoing debates regarding their relation.⁷ One should add that the two terms function differently in French and in English, not to speak of other traditions yet hardly anyone addresses this issue. This can lead to some confusion. For example, some of the contributors, like Reineke, Chanter, and Constantinou link modernism to the Enlightenment but it should be obvious that the avant-garde cannot be linked to the Enlightenment in the same manner (and, as noted above, even for what is called 'modernism' this is problematic). The editor of the volume, Maria Margaroni, in a way comments on this, when in her Introduction she speaks of 'the many faces of modernism' recognizable in Kristeva: revolutionary modernism, transubstantiating modernism, abject modernism, melancholic modernism, etc. The Introduction thus gathers the dispersing threads of the different texts and offers a conceptualized picture of the whole volume while simultaneously outlining a perspective not to be found in any of the other chapters. This perspective is best epitomized by what Margaroni calls '*the bleeding edge of modernism*':

This does not refer simply to the forefront of the movement, the cutting edge of formal, linguistic and ideological innovation. It also invokes the high stakes, the trials and errors, the controversial ends and precarious beginnings that have marked the history of modernism, for the bleeding edge is the liminal space where dreams are fleshed out and sometimes turn into totalitarian, murderous nightmares. (4)

⁷ The debates on the relation between modernism and avant-gardism have ostensibly intensified after the publication of Peter Bürger's seminal *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). See also Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987). For some recent developments in these debates, I would refer to the volumes in De Gruyter's series 'European Avant-Garde and Modernism Studies'. See, for example: *Regarding the Popular: Modernism, the Avant-Garde and High and Low Culture*, ed. Sascha Bru, Laurence van Nuijs, Benedikt Hjartarson, Peter Nicholls, Tania Ørum and Hubert van den Berg (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2012) and *Crisis: The Avant-Garde and Modernism in Critical Modes*, ed. Sascha Bru, Kate Kangaslahti, Li Lin, Iveta Slavkova and David Ayers (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2022).

The term ‘bleeding edge of modernism’ allows therefore the combination of the experimental aspect of the avant-garde works with the experimental innovations of the hard sciences, with the political stakes of artistic and social change, with the transformations in the psychic dynamics and economy, with the process of theorization; while at the same time, and precisely as a bleeding edge, pointing to the internal disruption and dispersal incessantly turning modernism into various modernisms. The Introduction in this sense not only gives the key to the whole volume but also provides one of the best interpretations of what would have been Kristeva’s modernisms.

I began these lines saying that such a volume was needed. Allow me to end noting that the book edited by Margaroni is also timely. The discussions on Kristeva and modernism can help us address multiple questions of the present-day situation such as the growing conformism, the rise of conservatism, the new forms of discrimination, the attack on the human sciences, the Anthropocene, the neglect of theory and theoretical thinking and so on and so forth. We are already lost in their labyrinth and this volume has the merit of showing us not one but several ways out.

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