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Survival of the Human in the Flux of Language

(Transcript of a lecture given as part of the School of Materialist Research - Intensive Study Program)

Bionote: Miglena Nikolchina is a Bulgarian poet, writer, and theoretician whose research interests involve the interactions of literature and philosophy. In English, her publications include numerous articles as well as the books *Matricide in Language: Writing Theory in Kristeva and Woolf* (2004) and *Lost Unicorns of the Velvet Revolutions: Heterotopias of the Seminar* (2013). She guest-edited a special issue of *differences* (2021, 32.1) on "The Undead of Literary Theory." Her most recent books (in Bulgarian) are *God with Machine: Subtracting the Human* (2022) and the collective volume *Video Games: the Dangeorus Muse* (2023).

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Abstract: The lecture examines aspects of the political, intellectual, and artistic contexts which triggered Julia Kristeva's lifelong theoretical exploration of the "psychic revolution of matter" and which led to the formation of some of Kristeva's major concepts.

Miglena Nikolchina: Greetings. It is early evening in Sofia, Bulgaria, so I was thinking that, in this new world of ours, we should devise new ways to greet each other, not connected to time. For some of you it may be morning, and for others, evening etc., so maybe we should wish each other good place instead.

The idea of this course is that Kristeva will present to you her most recent work, which is on Dostoevsky. She actually published two books on him: one, which has already been translated into English, and a much longer one, which is still available only in French. She will tell you more about this, when she meets you. What I will try to do now is start things from the beginning and follow the genealogy of some of Kristeva's major concepts.

I promised in my syllabus that we would begin with the semiotic and the *chora*, why we have these two terms, what they mean, why two of them, etc. However, we will get to this only at the end of today's talk. Before we speak about these terms, how they came about and what happened to them, with the unfolding of Kristeva's work, we will have to speak about two other important terms, *signifiance* (I will tell you later why I prefer to use the term in French instead of the English translation), and "semanalysis." The first term in this pair, *signifiance*, persists in the entirety of Kristeva's work, while the second one was later abandoned by her. First and foremost, however, we are going to speak today about changing artistic, political, and intellectual contexts, beginning with the exceptionally productive decade of the 1960s in France, but not only in France. It was a very interesting decade, and this is where we begin.

Kristeva arrived in Paris from Sofia, from then communist Bulgaria. Perhaps you know the story. It was December 1965, she had 5 dollars in her pocket, and she was on a scholarship that she would begin to receive one month later. So, she practically had nothing. It is a sort of fairytale what then happened at the airport and how she was rescued. Although pretty young (she was born in 1941, so she was about 24 at this point), she was already the author of quite a few publications in Bulgarian, including a short but solid book on tendencies in contemporary west-European literature. The book would appear in 1966 in her absence – Kristeva would never go back. On her arrival, Kristeva had her own ideas as to whom she wanted to meet and what topic she wanted to tackle. She was also helped in getting her bearings by another recent Bulgarian expat, Tzvetan Todorov. Perhaps you have heard his name, he was a literary scholar, and author of a great number of books, in French. Six months later, Kristeva was on her way to become part of the major intellectual trends in France. I will not go further in the biographical aspects of this story, you can find it in Alice Jardine's beautiful book: *At the Risk of Thinking: An Intellectual Biography of Julia Kristeva* as well as in Kristeva's conversations with Samuel Dock, in *Je me voyage*, which is published as a separate book in French and, in English, has been included in a fantastic volume edited by Sara G. Beardsworth, *The Philosophy of Julia Kristeva*.

Looking in retrospect, we may try to summarize the tasks that Kristeva, in her passion for thinking, faced as a young woman arriving in Paris from a communist country. There were, firstly, the tasks evolving out of her experience in

a communist country. Simply put, these tasks amounted to the question, 'how do we fight dogma and repression?' Intellectually fight is what I mean, of course. And secondly, there were tasks connected to what has been called the French philosophical moment, especially in the context of the 1960s. According to Alain Badiou, for example, this period in French intellectual history, culminating in the 1960s, is the third greatest period in philosophy ever – the previous two being Classical Greek Philosophy and German Idealism. So, it was really an amazing time. But it was also a time of political turmoil in Paris in the 1960s. In fact, not only in Paris, not only in France. A lot of things happened during this time in many places in the world. You should check them. Once again, simply put, the tasks which emanated from Kristeva's earliest French experience could be formulated as "how do we dismantle ideology and stagnation." Ideology should be understood here in the sense of false consciousness and what Marx would call 'inverted forms'.

So, dogma and repression on the one hand; ideology and stagnation on the other. Dogma and repression are easy to see and dangerous to oppose, ideology and stagnation are hard to perceive and even harder to resist. Of course, any ideology can cross the line and make itself visible by trying to become dogma. We have seen a lot of this lately. The overlapping of these two perspectives was crucial to the formation of Kristeva's early concepts, and for the direction of her thinking. They both foregrounded the problem of change. Julia Kristeva is a thinker of process and change. The conceptual apparatus she developed throughout the years, and the areas in which she has applied it, have sys-

tematically been concerned with detecting, challenging, and fighting repression and stagnation. She would do it on the level of the individual but she would always also think on the level of society. Before going into some detail, I would like to emphasize the fecundity of this meeting of perspectives. Kristeva did not play the exotic card, "I'm this communist girl from Bulgaria," this type of thing, but she did not simply adapt either. She did not forget, and was perhaps never allowed to forget, that she was a foreigner. Moreover, in her book *Strangers to Ourselves*, but also elsewhere in interviews, again and again she conceptualized foreignness as the foundation of universality but also as a heuristic position; a position that allows a broader and more nuanced, more complex point of view.

From the beginning, Kristeva played the two perspectives, the two sets of questions I mentioned above, against each other, and produced a critical distance to each, which resulted in her unique combination of passionate involvement and detachment, of commitment and intellectual sobriety.

I will first address the questions and priorities pertaining to the situation that Kristeva left behind. These questions included the east European experience of revolutions metamorphosing into dictatorships. They also included the conviction that literature and the arts, and especially the artistic avant-garde, could be an antidote to this deadly transformation of revolutions. It should also be noted that the years prior to Kristeva's arrival were quite hopeful for Eastern Europe. The death of Stalin - the Soviet Union dictatorial leader who was also leading during World War

II, and became more and more paranoid as time went by - was followed by a decade or so of relative liberalization of the communist regimes. Young Kristeva benefited from the intellectual flourishing, which this liberalization allowed, and which would stagnate again after the suppression of the Prague Spring in 1968.

So, as already mentioned regarding the 1960s, it was a time of great political upheaval in many places, including what was then Czechoslovakia. Under the slogan for 'socialism with a human face,' there was an attempt to soften the communist regime in Czechoslovakia. This attempt was suppressed after the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet Union and other East European countries. The invasion was more or less bloodless, but the attempt at softening the regime was repressed totally.

It should be noted that the ideological repression, on which East European communist regimes rested, was underpinned by scientific and theoretical claims. I am opening up a little bracket here in view of recent invocations of The Science. The regimes in Eastern Europe claimed that they rested on science, a science called historical materialism. It was claimed that this science was the solid ground on which the future could be planned and foreseen, and so on and so forth. This was the ideology. It claimed it was *the science*, and the science shouldn't be contested, there could be no debate, no arguing about it.

In fact, there was contesting, a lot of it, but with great risks for those who would try to do this.

The result was, paradoxically, that there were many people who challenged what was supposed not to be challenged. However, challenging needed special strategies, because, as I have said, doing it directly would be dangerous. So, specific theoretical approaches, and currents of thoughts, emerged that proved effective in dismantling dogma in the long run. It took time, but it worked.

The ensuing conflicts and struggles gave rise to, in fact, a very vibrant academic scene. I will quote what Kristeva says about the Bulgarian educational and intellectual scene in her autobiographical book, *Je me voyage*. She says there was the “solidity of school and university education, which across the totalitarian structure, and in spite of it, with all its flaws, cultivated a sense of effort, endurance, solidarity, and communal interest, while also valorizing the role of culture, initiative and creativity.” A standard of scholarship was thus achieved, which made the life of bureaucratic overseers difficult, and ultimately disempowered them. The decisive factor in this process consisted in the elaboration of modes of thinking, theoretical tools, and stances that would be resilient to discursive control, and demonstrate their superiority to dogma. Kristeva had this schooling in opposing dogma and finding the tools to fight dogma.

A number of figures emerge in this context, whose sheer quantity of encyclopedic knowledge was stunning. They had to be different from the commissars, from the official proponents who claimed they were the science. If you wanted to oppose them, you had to be able, to have the knowledge and brains to oppose them. By way of an

example of such figures, I will refer again to Kristeva herself, and to her character Dan in her novel *The Samurai*. Dan’s prototype is Tzvetan Stoyanov (not to be confused with Tzvetan Todorov whom I mentioned before). Tzvetan Stoyanov was Kristeva’s boyfriend before she left for France. She has referred multiple times to him in her books - among other things, Stoyanov is the author of a remarkable book on Dostoyevsky. Kristeva describes in *The Samurai*, what she calls cultural gluttony. Dan is a glutton for culture. Stoyanov is this glutton. However, this was typical for Stoyanov’s generation. He was very notable, significant, remarkable in this respect, but he was not the only one. So, the protagonist of *The Samurai* is described by Kristeva as someone that

knew practically every language and had read all the important works ever written in English, German, French, Russian, Spanish and Italian, from the dim distant past, up to the present. He was a glutton for culture, and had absorbed all the great writers, philosophers and poets, like some representative of the Age of Enlightenment strayed into an obscure country and another age, he bestowed his erudition on the ignoramuses around him in the form of skeptical parables.

This phenomenon of cultural gluttony goes far beyond the use of interdisciplinarity. It evokes utopias of the totality of knowledge and language. Condemned to isolation by the communist regime, the friends and university colleagues, whom Kristeva left behind, assumed the stance which might be described as vertical catastrophism. Since

you cannot go anywhere horizontally you build a vertical world, an imaginary world. As contemporary Bulgarian philosopher Boyan Manchev notes, the impossibility for Bulgarian thinkers to participate in the horizontal international debates, sought resolution in an attempt to assume a meta-position and integrate vertically the summa of theoretical thought, everything. Why am I emphasizing this? We can see the mark of this utopia in Kristeva's early work, from the *Séméiôtiké* which appeared in 1969 up until *Polylogue* (1977). Between these two books (they both consist of essays, some of which have been translated into English), Kristeva's early magnum opus was published: *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974). Only the first part of this book has been translated in English. The French subtitle explains what the rest of the book is about. It is about modernist poets.

In keeping with the claim that philosophy is the art of fabricating concepts, as Deleuze would later put it, Kristeva's early work is marked by a profusion of newly formed or re-functionalized terms, some of which acquired wide circulation, some of which she would continue to pursue, and some of which she would abandon. We will discuss some of them. At this point I would like to emphasize Kristeva's tough terminological machinery, addressing multiple literary and cultural issues through a multiplicity of schools and disciplines. While typical of the French, but also of the international intellectual scene at the time, this feature of Kristeva's early work is nevertheless marked by excessiveness, whose lineage, I think, leads back to the intellectual scene she left behind.

And so, to go back to my earlier claim, Kristeva is a thinker of change, but, it needs to be added, literature always played a central part in Kristeva's thinking of change. The visual arts and music figure in important ways in her work, but by far it is literature which is at the center of her thought, and language which is the tool of literature. As you can see, she, through Dostoevsky, is back to this crossroad.

Two major questions emerged in Kristeva's work from the task to think literature and change. First, how is language, as the material aspect of literature, transformed in literature and through literature, into an instrument of change? If change, pulverizing stagnation, is the task, then how does literature contribute to this? And second, how do we study this? How is this transformation through literature to be studied and understood? Addressing these questions, in her early works, in *Séméiôtiké* and in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva elaborates the concepts of *signifiance* and *semanalysis*.

Now, as promised, a note about the translation of *signifiance*. It has sometimes been rendered in a different way in English, but I think we should keep its French form. It is sufficiently clear in English; it conveys both the novelty of the term but also its relatedness to signifying practice; to signifying as process, which is going to concern Kristeva from these early works until the present.

Now, let's attempt a quick definition of *signifiance*. With this term, we are already talking in psychoanalytic terms. *Signifiance* is the operation of the drives towards, in and

through language. That is to say, it is the process, she would insist, of constituting and dissolving meaning and the subject.

There is, Kristeva insists, this process which involves the drives and in which meaning is constantly produced and dissolved. The same is true about the subject, which Kristeva calls "subject-in-process." This dynamic, this process of incessant constitution and dissolution, is something which relates to any subject, but we can see its operation most clearly exemplified in literature and in the arts. In one of Kristeva's lectures, which you are going to hear, she refers to a striking phrase used by Freud. Freud speaks of "psychic revolution of matter," in "Formulations on the Two principles of Mental Functioning." There is matter and then suddenly, there are those beings possessing psyche. Freud calls this a psychic revolution of matter.

It should be noted that the concepts of revolution and later revolt, play a significant role in Kristeva's work, and that these concepts evolve throughout her works. And yet, whatever the changes that occur between her earlier emphasis on revolution and her later emphasis on revolt, I think that they both could be referred to this leap described by Freud as the psychic revolution of matter. In multiple ways, Kristeva's work focuses on this mysterious leap; this gap; this transmutation and transformation. How this leap comes to pass is a philosophical question, a question to which philosophy in the course of millennia has provided various answers, but it is also a question, which today we are facing, rather literally, in having to decide at what point AI might be considered sentient. I will not go

into this; I just want to emphasize that Kristeva's work is, from a certain point of view, entirely concerned with this question of how to describe the emergence of sentience in humans.

And now what about semanalysis in Kristeva's early work? The term semanalysis is used to describe the theoretical method for approaching the process of *signifiance*. Signifiance is the process of making and unmaking the subject and meaning, and semanalysis is the method to study this. The goal of semanalysis, Kristeva says in her preface to *Desire in language*, is to "describe the signifying phenomenon or signifying phenomena while analyzing, criticizing and dissolving phenomenon, meaning and signifier." Both terms bear the mark of, among other things, Kristeva's interest in the linguistics of Émile Benveniste, a very important figure and very interesting person. She knew him; she wrote about him. But even at this early stage, she combines the linguistic perspective with psychoanalysis. In her later writing, the concepts themselves are subjected to modification and developments. Semanalysis, which appears in the subtitle of *Séméiôtiké*, practically (and, some believe, regretfully) vanishes at the end of the 1970s. It is replaced, at least as a designation, by a different approach. By Kristeva herself and by her commentators this change has been widely discussed as Kristeva's turn from linguistics to psychoanalysis. This turn is succeeded and accompanied by a turn from revolution to revolt. What persists throughout these turns is the nexus of art and change. Art and literature, they are about change, they are about rebirth, they are about our capacity to transform and not stagnate.

To these two turns, which have been the subject of many studies, there is, I believe, a third turn. It becomes apparent in Kristeva's study of Proust, and also in her study of Colette, to whom Kristeva dedicates a book in her series on the female genius. Both Proust and Colette are novelists. We can speak, therefore, of a turn from poetic language to fiction, from poets to novelists, a tendency continued in Kristeva's latest books on Dostoevsky, on what she calls Dostoyevsky's "flood of language." This turn foregrounds another concept: transubstantiation. Before I continue with these turns and terms, however, let me go back to my sketch of Kristeva's communist intellectual inheritance. It is in this connection that I will raise the question as to why the avant-garde is so important to her. We need to emphasize the pivotal importance of modernism and the avant-garde in Kristeva's work.

Kristeva's interest in the avant-garde is connected to her interest in the transformative power of literature. The belief in this power was especially vigorous, with the Russian avant-garde, with Futurism and poets like Mayakovski and Khlebnikov, who preceded, and were contemporaneous with, the Bolshevik Revolution. They believed that social change demands new art, new poetry, and perhaps a totally new language, as in the case of Khlebnikov's radical experiments with language. Poets and artists believed that artistic innovation would form a necessary part of revolution and social renovation. However, with the consolidation of the Soviet state in the late 1920s, such beliefs and artists who were still alive and shared them (Khlebnikov was not but others were, many of them not for long) – such beliefs and artists were swiftly and mercilessly crushed. Modern-

ism and the avant-garde were declared incompatible with the interest of the proletariat. They were repressed. When Eastern European countries, including Kristeva's native Bulgaria, became part of the Soviet bloc after World War II, the publication of modernist authors, be they from East or West, was put under a ban.

This ban was constantly contested, but we cannot go into this story. We just need to emphasize that Kristeva's thinking was to a large extent shaped by the paradox of the prohibition of modernism. The paradox was that the prohibition reinforced ideas of modernism's revolutionary potential— in Eastern Europe, I mean— a potential against the revolution that had betrayed both itself and its radical artistic proponents; with East European communist regimes so obviously not fulfilling their promises. The repressed avant-garde turned into a synonym of what went wrong from the very beginning and into a promise for the possibility of setting things right.

This paradox explains the extreme importance that the avant-garde continued to have in Eastern Europe. Prohibiting it made it more important and more effective. Furthermore, the avant-garde was accompanied, and in many ways it inspired, the theoretical developments related to Russian formalism, the Prague linguistic circle, and other tendencies indebted to phenomenology, on the one hand, and linguistics on the other. The encounter between the avant-garde and such theoretical developments is exemplified by scholars like Roman Jakobson, who played a key role in the inception and the international spread of these ideas. Jakobson coined the term structuralism, in order

to name them, and emphasized the connection of structuralism to avant-garde practices. He was actually part of avant-garde artistic circles himself. Kristeva foregrounds this connection of avant-garde and theory in her essay, "The Ethics of Linguistics," which you can find in *Desire and Language*, where she brings together Jakobson, Mayakovsky and Khlebnikov, while elaborating her own thesis, the same one that animates *Revolution in Poetic Language*, that the stakes of poetry are to implement the fact that "language and thus so sociability, are defined by boundaries, admitting of upheaval, dissolution, and transformation." I would like to repeat this: boundaries, admitting of upheaval, dissolution, and transformation. This phenomenon always concerned Kristeva, both with its destructive (she never forgets this) and its renovating aspects, and she would always trace it back to Freud's psychic revolution of matter.

In a way, to be rebels is the human birthmark. Kristeva rephrases a famous quote by Albert Camus. Camus says: I rebel, therefore I am. She says, "I rebel therefore we are going to be." The rebellion that takes place in each of us, is the basis for our common future. Like avant-garde practices, structuralism had its share of trouble in the communist countries. The same goes for the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, the ban on which was finally lifted at the beginning of the 1960s. While perceived as opposed to Russian formalism, and by extension to structuralism, especially in the Eastern European context, Bakhtin's position is defined by Kristeva, "As one of the movements' most remarkable accomplishments, as well as one of the most powerful attempts to transcend its limitations" (in an essay in

Séméiôtiké, which has not, insofar as I know, been translated in English). So, she sees Bakhtin as both belonging and transcending structuralism. (Bakhtin, to go back to what Kristeva will present here, is the author of a very important book on Dostoevsky.) What Kristeva did in her early work was to bring together Russian formalism and Bakhtin in a more comprehensive approach. But there are differences. Kristeva's interest in the avant-garde initially focused on poetry, and structuralism was more prominent in this sphere; her study of Bakhtin, however, took her to the study of the novel. She will tell you more about this and about her encounters with Dostoevsky. Bakhtin's analysis of Dostoevsky's polyphony contributed to the elaboration of her early influential concept of intertextuality.

And so, Russian formalism, Bakhtin with Dostoevsky, and the fascination with the utopian extremism of the avant-garde, were the point of departure for Kristeva's understanding of literature as a transformative force. She knew that the avant-garde's artistic and philosophical utopia had been thwarted in Russia and Eastern Europe. Her investment in the social and political efficacy of literature was and is both ardent and skeptical. She always keeps an analytical distance and is mindful of the pitfalls and limitations, but also of the inescapability of these illusions. She will take into consideration the suicidal, destructive and self-destructive lures; the risks of the subject-in-process which are also apparent in the case with Dostoevsky.

Now Paris gave Kristeva the chance to turn openly to the avant-garde literature and its theoretical implications, something which she could have done only at the price of

excruciating strategizing in communist Bulgaria. Yet, with the 1960s being what they were, Paris was more than a zone of comfort for artistic and academic freedom. In an atmosphere of political turmoil, other major intellectual developments reinforced the blend of poetic and theoretical radicalism, that subtended Kristeva's thinking.

In a comparatively late text, entitled "Thinking about Literary Thought" (it is based on reflections in her books from the 1990s), Kristeva traces the genealogy of literary theory, which plays an important role in the formation of her concepts. Here are the stages she outlines: first, there are the processes that begin with a metamorphosis of philosophy at the end of the 19th century. This is the first important moment, passing via the pivotal work of Husserl and Saussure, as well as Hjelmslev as a linguist close to phenomenology. These processes underpin literary theory and literary structuralism as an investigation of form as thought. Form as thought means form itself is thought. This is a very good way to describe what is going on in the encounter between avant-garde art and structuralism. Russian formalism and, later on, structuralism and semiotics participate in this trend, which, as already noted, is informed by the avant-garde's utopia of poetry as a material force in social and even cosmic transformation. For a recent discussion of these processes, you can see Galin Tihanov's book, *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory*, and the special issue of *Differences* dedicated to his book.

So firstly, there is a joining of avant-garde and literary theory via the relay of philosophy (phenomenology) and linguistics. To this Kristeva adds a second perspective bring-

ing avant-garde writing and literary theory into another fusion. The second fusion is accomplished by psychoanalysis, and Freud. So far as Kristeva's own intellectual biography is concerned, this is something that came from her experience in France. So here we are, finally in France. The second perspective concerns, and I quote Kristeva here, "changes in how the imaginary is perceived, a change, contemporaneous with the transformation of philosophy and aesthetics." So, these are parallel processes, but they concern the imaginary; the imagination. The first change is the one that welds philosophy and linguistics in structuralism. It is simultaneous with and contemporaneous, she says, "with unprecedented readjustment of the imaginary experience in modernity." This new regime of the imaginary amounts, I am quoting again, "to a meeting of literature and the impossible." It "appears as a rival to the inner experience, while, at the same time, trying to change social structures by modifying the relationship between the speaking being and meaning, in as much as this relationship deeply codifies the social contract."

So, from the innermost processes to modifying the social contract, this is what interests Kristeva and this is what she finds, in this meeting of literature and psychoanalysis, ensured by the impact of the Freudian revolution.

While structuralism is the study of form as thought, however, the Freudian revolution allows for uncovering literature as thought of the impossible, or perhaps literature, and I quote "as a-thought," in the sense of lack of something, something missing, which Kristeva addresses through the writing of French surrealism. I am quoting, "there is

a thought of the boundary of that which is thinkable, an experience of language liberated from the shackles of judgmental conscience, which gives access to this thought and gives evidence of its existence." More concretely, this type of literary experience gives evidence of the existence of the boundary of the thinkable. "It is perhaps a matter of another world of thought," she says, "that modifies the real world."

So here we come back to Paris and to the role of the French avant-garde. In the social and intellectual turmoil of the 1960s, Paris immediately enhanced the thrust for coming to terms with modernism, which was part of Kristeva's pre-Parisian motivation. Kristeva divides the history of the French avant-garde in three stages. She explores the first one in the French edition of the *Revolution in Poetic Language*, but also in her later writing, through the figures of Mallarmé, Lautréamont, and Rimbaud. The second stage is surrealism, Breton and Aragon, which is the focus of *The Sense and Nonsense of Revolt*. And the third stage of the French avant-garde, she points out, is the era of *Tel Quel*, the journal, a very important journal, where major intellectuals like Derrida, or Kristeva's husband Philippe Sollers and Kristeva herself and many others contributed.

Tel Quel thus appears to Kristeva as the latest reincarnation of literature's confrontation with the impossible, of the unprecedented changes in imaginary experience. In fact, the incredible intellectual hub that *Tel Quel* was in the 1960s, when Kristeva joined it, not only presents a crossing of the two developments that Kristeva discusses in "Thinking about Literary Thought"—structuralism as the

study of form as thought and psychoanalysis as uncovering literature is a-thought—it also comprises, one might say, a higher degree of lucidity. Kristeva describes this lucidity as literature faced with a classical and ultimately classicist philosophical plan. I really love this, because classicism is this great period, especially in French literature, where all literature was based on a philosophy of literature, on philosophical views on what literature should be, something which is sometimes called prescriptive aesthetics. Kristeva says we have the same situation with the French avant-garde in the 1960s, the *Tel Quel* period. The philosophical plan in this epoch refers to the theoretical self-awareness (to which, we might add, Kristeva contributed) of the *Tel Quel* literary production. Hence, while the first two stages of the avant-garde provoke theoretical reflections that could render them comprehensible—i.e. structuralism explains the early stages of the avant-garde—the third stage is intrinsically and self-consciously philosophical. It knowingly blends its artistic madness, its risky destabilization of meaning and the subject, with a philosophical plan. Later on, Kristeva will claim that her shift from linguistics to psychoanalysis was prompted by the desire to understand better what avant-garde poets were doing. Yet, as we already pointed out, the linguistic approach, was already a project born of the desire to understand the avant-garde. By way of an example, when Jakobson and Claude Lévi-Strauss enter with a sort of manifesto of structuralism, on the French scene, they do it with a text on Charles Baudelaire, who is, of course, the father of poetic modernism.

The turn to psychoanalysis was, therefore, both a continuation and a critique of the structuralist approach.

Many of Kristeva's early texts follow the structuralist interest in modernist poetry, as well as the structuralist sensitivity to the work of sheer sound. Her insistence in these explorations, which will ultimately take her on a different path, is on problematizing the methodological standing of the Saussurean sign. In fact, her very first publication in *Tel Quel* a year after her arrival in Paris, purports to demonstrate how Saussure's own work cannot be reduced to the concept of the sign which is attributed to him.

The critique of the matrix of the sign underlies her reading of Bakhtin, whom, by the way, she introduces to the West. It should be noted that in Bulgaria, to go one last time to this pre-history of her thinking, Kristeva was closely connected to anti-structuralists, to Bakhtin oriented circles, Bulgaria being probably the first country outside of the Soviet Union where Bakhtin became popular. In any case, for Kristeva, the understanding of the avant-garde and modernism would be impossible without considering productivity, and, consequently, without dismantling the static and closed character of the Saussurean sign. In her early essays, this involves turning to the phonic and visual materiality peering the sign; to translinguistic ingredients be they gestural, or paragrammatic; to an unsettling verticality co-present with the linear unfurling of signification; to a figurability as opposed to the stable figure; to the infinity of a "genotext" "insisting" in the articulation of the "phenotext"; the mystery of "engendering the formula." Kristeva summons a plethora of schools, perspectives, and sciences in order to capture this seething which she calls *signifiance*, a major term which has kept its centrality in her thought.¹ Translinguistic in its operations, the work

of *signifiance* is eventually flattened in a signifying chain which is communicative, grammatically structured, and squeezed on the "line of the speaking subject". Yet it is not reducible to this chain and this line; it traverses and exceeds them. Avant-garde practices find a way to speak about and represent the revolutionary productivity of *signifiance* on condition they find an equivalent on the stage of social reality. Like mathematics, *signifiance* engenders formulas which may or may not apply to (social) reality as they have their own logic without exteriority. The accumulation of heterogeneous perspectives characteristic of *Semeiotike* will continue in *The Revolution in Poetic Language*. Linguistics – as the model of all semiotics – is still the major reference point. Yet already in *Semeiotike* there is the assertion that the production and the transformation of meaning is the "place in semiotic theoretization where the science of psychoanalysis intervenes in order to provide conceptualization capable of grasping the figurability in language across the figured."

Out of this crossing of linguistics and psychoanalysis two of Kristeva's major concepts will emerge – the semiotic as opposed to the symbolic. They are conceived as two dimensions of *signifiance*, the translinguistic process producing meaning and the subject. One is never without the other, although to a different degree depending on the type of discourse: the symbolic is the realm of syntax, logic, and the law; the semiotic "accounts for this archaic pressure, which is pre-symbolic and anterior to the constitution of signs and syntax in speech and which bears the trace of the intense relation of the child to its mother." The semiotic manifests itself as rhythm, echolalia, gesture,

coloratura, abstract pattern, music, dance... in short, as ordering irreducible to meaning. Its job is to shake, traverse, shatter and in all possible ways annoy the smooth work of the symbolic, which, being logically and chronologically posterior to it, and in fact supported by it, can never quite get rid of it. The semiotic thus unfurls abstract sensorial articulations preceding signification: it encompasses "functions and energy discharges that connect and orient the body to the mother." It was in order to conceptualize this archaic orientation Kristeva introduced the semiotic as a term redoubled by her re-conceptualization of a Platonic term, the *chora*.

Ednotes:

¹ I deal in greater detail with *signifiance* in Nikolchina 2020.