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Taking Sides on *Severed Heads*: Kristeva at the Louvre

ABSTRACT

The theorist and philosopher Julia Kristeva is invited to curate an exhibition at the Louvre in Paris as part of a series—*Parti Pris (Taking Sides)*—and to turn this into a book, *The Severed Head: Capital Visions*. The organiser, Régis Michel, wants something partisan, that will challenge people to think, and Kristeva delivers in response a collection of severed heads neatly summarising her critique of the whole of western culture! Three figures dominate, providing a key to making sense of the exhibition: Freud, Bataille, and the maternal body. Using these figures, familiar from across the breadth of her work over the last half a century, she produces a witty analysis of western culture’s persistent privileging of disembodied masculine rationality; the head, ironically phallic, ironically and yet necessarily severed; the maternal body continually arousing a “jubilant anxiety” (Kristeva, *Severed Head* 34), expressed through violence. Points of critique are raised in relation to Kristeva’s normative tendencies—could we not tell a different story about women, for example? The cultural context of the exhibition is also addressed: who are the intended viewers/readers and whose interests are being served here? Ultimately, however, this is a celebration of Kristeva’s tribute to psychic survivors.

ABSTRACT

During the 1990s, the French writer and art historian Régis Michel organized a series of exhibitions at the Louvre in Paris, called *Parti Pris* (*Taking Sides*), inviting some notable intellectual figures like philosopher Jacques Derrida (1993), filmmaker Peter Greenaway (1994), literary critic Jean Starobinski (1997) and Julia Kristeva (2012), to be guest curators.

In his introduction to Kristeva's short book/exhibition catalogue—published in 2012, nearly twenty years after Derrida's opening contribution to the series—Michel provides us with some insight into his reasons for initiating this project. For example, he clearly wanted them as critical thinkers—cannibalistically from his own perspective!—to critique “[t]he panoptic control of the museum—its voracious appetency for easy ingestion,” and the big spectacular exhibitions favoured by the media that he dismisses as belonging to a world “ruled exclusively by the law of the same” (Michel, in Kristeva, *Severed Head*, xix). He says that, in this way, he wanted to capture the imagination of an educated, museum-going public and to challenge people to think. He wanted to unsettle or upset the “moribund” art historical world that had shown no recent signs of life aside from the “senseless quarrel over contemporary art” (Michel, in Kristeva, *Severed Head*, xx). Beginning his introduction with Horkheimer and Adorno, key architects of modern critical thinking about culture and cultural representations/reproductions, Michel explains that the purpose of the *Parti Pris* project as a whole was to open up in the museum, “at the heart of the institution (which is the heart of the system)—a critical space. A zone of frankness. A place of rupture” (xvii).

At any rate, it looks as if he was happy with Kristeva's partisan choices and their theoretical articulation (Bal 530)—her “*ample* meditation” (Kristeva, *Severed Head* xxi). He suggests, helpfully, that it lies under the “double aegis” of two writers—Freud and Bataille—whose “frankness” in the sense of challenging the taboos of bourgeois European societies has certainly produced “ruptures” in the past. And of course, he is right that Freud is a hugely important figure in this book, as he has been for Kristeva since at least the 1960s. Freud has provided her over most of her writing career and the whole of her career as psychoanalyst, with a description of powerful human drives that cannot either be comfortably articulated, or “civilized” out of existence; a description of power that does not reveal itself at first glance or touch and is not written in the register of a purely scientific or rational discourse. Obviously, Bataille, as a literary artist of the *avant-garde*, appears here to represent its—for Kristeva, pre-eminent—capacity for facilitating the working out of these otherwise ineffable drives—in terms

of what she calls here, transubstantiations (127). Moreover, Bataille provides her with her title, *The Severed Head*, invoking his short-lived review, *Acéphale* (Headless/No head)¹— and of course, another object within her exhibition is a drawing of a headless man (Fig. 17) produced by André Masson for the same review. This headless human figure wittily recalls the anti-authoritarian, subversive, revolutionary tendencies of Bataille’s circle; its rejection of forms of “headship” from king or divinity to the ideal of the sovereignty of reason. Describing “the subtraction of the man from his head” (128), for example, Bataille has written:

Man escaped his head like a prisoner escapes prison. Beyond himself he found, not God who is the prohibition of crime, but a being who does not know prohibition. Beyond what I am, I encounter a being who makes me laugh because he is headless, who fills me with anguish because he is made up of innocence and crime: he holds an iron weapon in his left hand, flames like a Sacred Heart in his right hand. In a single refinement, he unites Birth and Death. He is not a man. Neither is he a god. He is not me but he is more than me: his belly is the maze in which he loses his way, loses me with him, and in which I find myself again being him, that is to say, a monster. (Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes*. 1: 445)

Michel is therefore right to see how important Bataille and Freud are for Kristeva’s work. For Kristeva, at a time when significant cultural idealizations like scientism or the theology of the Christian Churches are failing us, it is easy then to see why she values these two writers, for their “superb storytelling” (Kristeva, *Need to Believe* 59), or why they figure so strongly within her own curatorial storytelling, the “capital visions” of her subtitle. In sum, Kristeva’s fascination with dissecting the revolutionary momentum that calls all forms of authority into question can be aligned here in this book—or exhibition—with “the sacred slash” (Kristeva, *Severed Head* 87) that delivers us, after the devastating loss of our first blissful absorption in the maternal body. What we are delivered into of course, is the realm of symbol and language—a process in which the figure of the Father plays a pivotal role—that provides, especially in the case of the *avant-garde*, some compensation for this traumatizing loss that she suggests we have to undergo in order to speak and write and, crucially, to thrive. Transferentially, this “sacred slash” can also be aligned with the necessary devastation of failed idealizations that protect young people from all kinds of maladies, or whole societies from final, totalitarian solutions. Once this is understood, it becomes easier to understand the significance—and perhaps too, the wry humour—of a whole exhibition dedicated to severed or toppling heads.

¹ See Kristeva, *The Severed Head* 148, note 11.

But Michel misses a trick in his introduction—and it is curious (or maybe not so curious) that he does so. The book is dedicated to Kristeva’s mother and significantly, Kristeva does not open her exhibition with either Freud or Bataille but with a memory of her. Those who are already familiar with Kristeva’s work know that the role of the maternal body is absolutely crucial to her psychoanalytical and psycholinguistic theory, addressing the obvious shortfall in the work of Freud who privileges the symbolic role of the Father at the expense of the maternal. In this anecdotal reference to her childhood, Kristeva’s mother explains for her daughters the speed and power of the symbolic imagination—the birth of a thought—through a drawing; and, of course, it is the kind of intelligent domestic gesture that quite predictably goes unremarked in a discussion of literary and philosophical ideas such as *Parti Pris*. Coincidentally, the picture she draws shows the head of a snowman toppling off its body—the visual image conveying its melting momentum. And in this way as well, Kristeva hints from the very beginning that Freud and Bataille will be read with a certain inflection; she will return to the maternal body, to its role in bringing about the speaking subject, to the subject’s blissful absorption in the maternal body, and to the vital spaces created by the disruption or the severance of the bond; to this “happy infantile and amorous trauma” (Kristeva, *Need to Believe* vii) for both individuals and cultures. In other words, we will certainly see Freud and the headless body, but we are primed from the very beginning to see more than the divinely patriarchal father or the disembodied rationality of the Christian west. On then to the exhibition: What does she choose?

The chapters of the book detail objects and analyses and follow an approximately naturalistic chronology. Of course, as with everything Kristeva writes, we take as a given that it is addressed as much to the philosophical imagination as to a “head” for unproblematized rationality or scientism. Her choices are informed by the sciences of archaeology and anthropology embedded in the world of the museum, but she does not claim expertise in these areas nor does she scruple on a number of occasions, to move forwards and backwards in time, in order to draw on a critical and literary imagination spanning centuries and even millennia! *Pre-homo sapiens* makes an appropriately early appearance with the worship of skulls, but these ancient bodies appear for a philosophical purpose: to establish Kristeva’s premise that the head is the privileged object in human society. Decapitation of enemies and the dead, cannibalistic rituals involving human brains and other skull manipulations, decoration and post-mortem utilization further inscribe this as a phallic object (13). In Freudian terms—that concern themselves primarily with the male—this worship can be associated with the murder/decapitation of the Father who, according to his

familiar reading, has invoked the fear of castration and impotence in his sons (19) but whose strength and potency, as a result of this murder and cannibalism, is subsequently reabsorbed by them through a totemic ritual. Of course for Kristeva,

... the cannibalistic ritual is as much if not more an appropriation of the mother's power than a devouring of the father tyrant. Cannibalistic and later totemic meals can be interpreted as a conjuration of the original loss of the nurturing body that the subject hallucinates as a head that leaves it. I try to cry out in the face of this loss to name it, to envision it; I also appropriate it, consume it, I do not want to lose it. I rediscover the pleasure of the archaic orality that this breast, this mass, this head provided me. (16)

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So it is not entirely surprising to find that the next step/exhibit takes the reader into the world of Greek mythology and to Perseus who kills and decapitates the female Gorgon, Medusa, mother of Pegasus and the giant Chrysaor. Medusa has serpents for hair and even her severed head turns those who look at it to stone. The Freudian theme of castration re-emerges but in characteristically feminine colours; Medusa's curly snakes invoke the fear "that the supposedly castrated engulfing female organ arouses in man" (32). Here the privileged object—the severed head—is a thing of feminine horror and disgust to the male:

... her eye brings misfortune; an evil eye, it kills. Female vulva. Medusa's head is a slimy, swollen, sticky eye, a black hole, its immobile iris surrounded by ragged lips, folds, pubic hair. (29)

She next chooses the sixteenth-century Florentine artist, Benvenuto Cellini's bronze statue of Perseus. In this striking representation, the Greek hero stands in "jubilant anxiety" (34), sword in hand over the body of Medusa, still spurting blood, holding her head aloft whilst gazing down at the severed body at his feet. Cellini has rendered Perseus' action, this slaying of the vulvar monster, as one of triumphant possession and annihilation of the feminine/maternal body—his sword is a continuation of his penis (34). This can also be read as a powerful cultural representation of violence against the feminine and some feminist readers might want to see that kind of framing made even clearer. But rather than attempting to address this issue in contemporary terms, Kristeva moves back at this point to the idea of the feminine privilege of this capital vision. This abject maternal as Gorgonian head or face, she suggests, also, and at the same time, prefigures or points towards a whole aesthetic of incarnation (36) characteristic both of human psychic development and of the overall direction of Christian

culture and theology. Imagining/representing the divine in human form—the Christian doctrine of the incarnation—is a process that mirrors the ecstatic compensatory work of representation (of the mother/maternal face) that only becomes possible at the moment of anguish when that maternal presence—that loving gaze—is severed.

There are connections for Kristeva here to Orthodox Christian traditions of icon painting and veneration; specifically she chooses the floating, seemingly decapitated head of the *Holy Face* of Laon and of the legends of St Veronica that tell of how Christ's face is imprinted on her veil when she gives it to him to wipe his face as he carries his cross to Golgotha. These are objects that represent, or re-present—make real again—the divine, drawing the viewer into an encounter—eyes turning inward (37)—with the loving presence of God that compensates for the separation/severance of Christ's earthly crucifixion and bodily death. The icon in this way carries the medusa lineage (56), not as capitulation to the masculine, but in terms of its equivalence to the continual pressure of the feminine *maternal chora*; inchoate yet ever present continually pushing “back further, toward the carnal and passionate antecedents, of femininity and of *kenose*” (56). The iconic head with its Gorgonian heritage, thus becomes part of a whole “economy” determined as much in relation to the feminine as to the masculine.

In the biblical context of the Christian era there are further reminiscences of the masculine privilege of the head as well as of this masculine and feminine economy at work. In the beheadings of Goliath, of Holofernes and of John the Baptist, Kristeva suggests the anguished and the erotic jostle for attention in the work of Solario, Gentileschi and Caravaggio. Caravaggio figures himself as the severed head of Goliath whilst Gentileschi paints herself as Judith beheading the threatening other who wishes to seduce her (89). Freud is once again invoked to note how the doubling of drives that is “the slash of pain” executes and also establishes a defensive position and how it operates “against the fear of losing the mother and the fear of castration (male or female)” (90).

Nonetheless, the divinely masculine privilege of the cutting/severing remains clear in the biblical imaginary for Kristeva: “*the cut* is structural: . . . It was certainly God who, *in the beginning*, did nothing other than separate: *Bereshit*” (89, italics in original). And although she suggests that “imaginary intimacy with death” can also transform melancholy or desire into thought, graphic image and symbol—one means of psychic thriving—this is not to deny that there is actual physical violence in the world, something she is, of course, not keen to seem to promote. Though she was not born in France herself, Kristeva's francophone education makes her in one sense a child of the French revolution and her next object establishes

the clearest difference between the violence of—for example—a biblical image and

... the rational realization of the capital act. Vision and action are polar opposites here, and the revolutionary Terror confronts us with that revolting abjection practiced by humanity under the guides of an egalitarian institution of decapitation. (91)

However, once again Kristeva proposes that the way out of this horror could be to subject it to the minutest scrutiny from the literary and artistic imagination—to continue to observe it, not shrinking from abjection or from the realm of horror and sadomasochism represented in artistic terms from Grunewald to Picasso (103), but “reshap[ing] our vision so that we see it with new eyes” (108). And in this sense Artaud, Picasso, Bacon, Aragon, Flaubert and Fautrier in their fascination with severing heads, invoke for Kristeva the ever-present Medusa legacy (116). And there are women here too:

From Agatha Christie to Patricia Highsmith, or even more crudely with Patricia Cornwell, there are many passionate pilgrims to the high places of carnage who relate with extraordinary sangfroid, adventures of blades severing heads and states of the soul. (118)

Writing out a decapitation—like painting it—thus may be a meditation on depression and therefore a rebirth. So we can understand how the detective novel, like these capital visions, might be an *optimistic genre*. (120)

Appropriately enough the final capital visions are concerned with death masks and veils—though once again, some critical feminist scholars might think that Kristeva’s ambivalent account of the veiled woman under the sign of “the decapitated and immured” (123) subjects—in orientalist mode—the autonomy of the Muslim woman who chooses to veil to the necessarily violent intent of the “other” male.

At the end, Bataille’s *Acéphale* makes its appearance explicitly to support Kristeva’s conclusion that it is not any totemic sacrifice that founds the vitality of our individual—male and female—and political lives. Her coruscating collection of headless bodies, severed, bloody heads and floating faces ends with “the virtuosity, infinite and void, of representation itself” (130). Thus *Acéphale* is not the remnant of any real and bloody execution so much as

... a fertile dead end, whose open wound will never stop being examined by those who like to mediate on the dangers of being alive. ... [b]ecause

the sacred, or the nostalgia for it that remains, turns out to reside not in sacrifice after all, or in some aesthetic or religious tradition, but in that specifically human, unique and bitter experience that is the *capacity for representation*. (130)

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What then, in conclusion, is the reader/museum attendee to make of this? The point of this partisan performance is obviously—in one way—to illustrate Kristeva's already well established conviction that Freud and the *avant-garde* between them address our complex ecstatic/anguished human condition pretty well, except in so far as they fail to recognize a distinctive psychic economy that is dependent as much on the female/maternal as on the male/paternal. The book and the exhibition—we assume, years after it closed—encapsulate an insight that certainly ought to encourage us to resist the privilege of the phallic object—here, the head as the organ of unproblematized male rationality. The female/maternal is not simply ripped, slashed, crushed beneath masculine feet, but a continual unsettling, even in her Medusan forms an upsetting presence, necessary to the formation of new representations that make our lives as speaking subjects and psychic survivors possible. In other words, Kristeva provides the museum goer with an appropriate theoretical key or “relevant theoretical articulation” (Bal 530). She focuses on the importance of writing, reading, contemplating or otherwise investing in an intense, persistent and unflinching focus on the sacred slash (87)—metonymic reference like the severed head itself to a complex of psycholinguistic processes—as a way of avoiding the “maladies” of our souls to which contemporary life is so particularly prone. These are things we—readers, museum goers, casual, amateur, professional, educated or otherwise—ought to do for our own well-being:

I am afraid of [the sacred slash] or I take pleasure in it, I submit to its terror or I defy it. But if I decide to ignore it, it drops down on me, from within or from without; my organs begin to bleed: I am sick; my acts are put to death; I feel persecuted. (87)

What Kristeva keeps saying to us, in other words, is that we cannot afford not to use our imaginations, we cannot afford not to think, to find words for the desires within ourselves rather than submitting to nameless horrors or passions that find expression not in works of art or culture or words that communicate and ease the suffering, but in incoherence, silence, depression, melancholia at one extreme and violence and cruelty at the other.

Do Kristeva's—and Michel's—efforts succeed or convince? Is this a critical space, a zone of frankness, a place of rupture and is this what we want? Certainly, Kristeva's critique is aimed at our willingness to consume

easily available, ready-made images and reproductions rather than strive to speak or write or otherwise make our own. On the other hand, if frankness is a matter of openness, then the sheer range of reference across western history, literature and culture makes this essay a work for the intellectual, or the philosopher rather than the amateur museum-goer who wants to see something interesting. This is not to suggest that readers or visitors to the Louvre should not make any attempt to keep up, although since Michel expressly objects to “easy ingestion” it would seem, in this respect, Kristeva has come up with the goods! Nevertheless, the assumptions she makes are necessarily exclusive—partisan, biased?—leaving out of the count those who do not operate on the same western terms of reference to history and literature as she does. In the mode of the museum, too, the book does not show how problems associated with its relationship to forms of (gendered, western, colonial) exploitation or to an economy of objects and their “age-value” (Bann 39) are being addressed, if indeed they are. We do not understand this dynamic in the context of the book and even less how it played out the original exhibition on which, we assume (perhaps we should not?) the book has been based. In fact, the original exhibition is scarcely visible. We perhaps want to ask: When was it? How was it? Who funded it? Who came to it? How was it staged and presented? Exactly what was in it? How was it marketed and sold? Who was chosen to review it? These are questions that also ask for frankness and represent a kind of critique. We might say this book is presented as a single, coherent piece that for all that it “takes a side” does not contextualize its own project in socio-material terms, for example, that might have revealed a different set of biases having to do with how Kristeva’s work and her person—her “brand”?—relates to grant funding, publishing rights, and the national, social and gender positioning of particular public intellectuals who invite her to write or curate. Some feminists, for example, will no doubt continue to be suspicious of the way in which she has such access to important public spaces in the western world from Columbia University, New York² to Notre Dame de Paris³ or the University of Oxford,⁴ especially when, on one level, we could say she uses them as platforms for telling stories of violence against women (or mothers). Though they are not seemingly *celebrations* of that violence, they still might be said to accord in their fundamental structures, with dominant patterns within the western social

² Kristeva is visiting Professor at Columbia University, New York.

³ Kristeva gives Lenten Lectures in “the fabulous space of Notre Dame de Paris” (Kristeva, *Need to Believe* 77).

⁴ Kristeva gives the Zaharoff lectures in Oxford (Kristeva & Clément, *The Feminine and the Sacred* 42).

(heteropatriarchal) imagination which, from at least Aeschylus onwards it is argued against Kristeva, have been founded on the violent sacrifice of the female/maternal⁵; Perseus' execution of Medusa being a case in point. How, they will ask, does this help women seeking to find a different basis on which to imagine a new community or social order and why do the women need to die, over and over again?

Of course, Kristeva is taking sides in this book/exhibition as an analyst as well as a writer or intellectual. She is a therapist working with people who are profoundly distressed, and so neither the pain and horror of the cut (from the bliss of union with the maternal body) nor the healing power delivered through the cutting (into a paternal order of representation and the symbolic, that nevertheless remains troubled and renewed by periodic reconnections with the heterogeneous maternal), can be overestimated. This is the framework within which she continues to write and think, and against this background it makes sense to focus on the mythic, literary, ritual images of violence and death that colour and perhaps even haunt, this world. She argues that these images/representations/capital visions rather than being necessarily pathological—or misogynistic—represent our efforts, individually and culturally, to come to terms with psychic horror and contest the silence of depression and melancholia that creates more pain and leads to mindless/headless violence. This should be an inspiring book because it is imbued with hope for psychic survival and, for this reader at any rate, a certain feminist sensibility. But, in spite of Michel's best hopes, it seems unlikely to challenge the nature of museum or art historical practices very far since it is almost entirely silent about this side of the project. In the long term, its capacity for opening up discussions in terms that challenge our values and envision change might have better success. But in order to do this we perhaps first need to review the ways in which any such discussion might be set up—taking into account not simply the merits of the author and her partisan project, but also the capacities and contexts of potential viewers and readers.

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⁵ See this idea developed for example in Condren, "Suffering into Truth: Constructing the Patriarchal Sacred" 356–92.

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