

Kristeva: Thresholds
by S. K. Keltner

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A comprehensible introduction to the work of Julia Kristeva, which caters for the student or scholar wanting to establish a first contact with the Bulgarian-born theorist, is long overdue. *Kristeva: Thresholds*, published in the series 'Key Contemporary Thinkers', aims to be an introduction for both researchers unfamiliar with Kristeva and more experienced scholars who would like to gain further insight.

The book's subtitle, 'Thresholds', is characterized as the centre of Kristeva's work: 'Kristeva invokes the term "threshold" (Fr. *le seuil*) to indicate "the common point" at which her major concepts converge' (p.6). From this, it quickly becomes evident that a clear-cut distinction and categorization of her theoretical concepts and research projects is, indeed, impossible: key theoretical notions in Kristeva's work can never be regarded as separate entities but are, rather, always entangled with one another. Keltner acknowledges that a distinction of concepts, as applied in her book, only works in abstraction and can therefore only ever remain 'an attempt' to explain Kristeva's work, as all notions and theories are eventually interlinked.

The chapters are structured around the main phases of Kristeva's working life, beginning with a rough definition of a major term in her theoretical framework, *the signifying process*. Here, Kristeva takes Lacan's notions of the semiotic phase and the symbolic

phase to define the signifying process as stepping from one phase to the next — a transgression of one sphere into the next — which eventually leads to the creation of meaning (of words). Keltner also introduces the influence of phenomenology, particularly Edmund Husserl's 'theory of intentionality' (p.12). Intentionality, in Husserl's terms, designates the action of the consciousness as always being directed towards something which then forms part of it. There is an interaction rather than mere contemplation. Husserl's subject as a *subject of enunciation* who engages with the object, who means and is simultaneously structured by its surrounding, exemplifies Kristeva's signifying process and the involvement of the individual in this process of meaning creation: meaning is created through transgression and interaction, both directed by the individual and by his/her environment. While the importance of phenomenology becomes evident in Keltner's description, the explanation of her theoretical framework and terminology remains obscured and difficult to follow. A glossary, explaining the basic terms (*signifying process, chora,thetic phase, subject-in-process/on-trial*) would have made the first chapters much more accessible.

Another point of criticism is a lack of focus: chapters one and two are said to discuss 'Kristeva's theory of meaning and subjectivity and her analysis of the pre-oedipal phase' (p.11). Chapter three looks at a 'genealogy of the term "intimacy"' (p.14), and chapter four engages with Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* as an influence on Kristeva, whereas chapter five returns to a more classical Kristeva topic, Oedipal theory. After a list of theoretical works, chapter six then analyses Kristeva's detective novels. Dealing with so many topics in the space of 189 pages burdens this introductory book with an overwhelming theoretical density. In addition, a lot of contextual

knowledge is asked of a reader interested in gaining a first access to Kristeva: chapter one jumps from phenomenology to G. W. F. Hegel to Husserl, Emile Benveniste and Sigmund Freud to Lacan, back to Husserl, briefly to Plato, back to Hegel and then to Freud again. While Kristeva is doubtlessly a key contemporary thinker, she is certainly difficult to categorize and the breadth of her work would probably ask for a longer study, or a series of introductions, rather than one short book in a series.

Keltner seems to be fully aware of this, mentioning Kristeva's 'complexity' throughout the book, but still deciding to try and summarise it. While chapter one – 'Kristeva's Theory of Meaning and Subjectivity' – is trying to find its voice and settle on a structure, chapter two – 'Kristeva's Psychoanalytic – Abjection, Love, and Loss' – is much better structured. It links each term to a particular book, thus making use of a chronological coherence, explains the difficulties of a categorization, and attempts an explanation of key terms in detail.

The strength of the book lies in its analysis of more recent works. The concept of the revolt is, as Keltner argues convincingly, what connects Kristeva's theories about abjection, love, and loss, while the idea of intimacy and marginality is where they come together. Kristeva offers revolt as the concept to overturn dichotomies, rather than the idea of a third way which can neither be equated with one position or its polar opposite. It is within this context that she 'maintains a commitment to seemingly marginal social and cultural activities, like psychoanalysis, detective fiction, and biography' (p.81), as margins are often a place of friction and a hotbed for revolt. In a similar way, Kristeva's reliance on Freud and her return to the Freudian Oedipus (although she is aware of and

partially agrees with the feminist criticism of Freudian theory) is thus explained by a perception of Oedipus 'not as a figure of power or of submission to power, but as a figure in revolt' (p.107), a figure who questions and challenges dichotomies.

The final chapter discussing Kristeva's detective novels, then, does not sit as uncomfortably in the book as the table of contents might suggest. Freudian themes recur, as does the analysis of the Husserlian phenomenological object and Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*. Her novelistic practice ties in with her theoretical approach (Kristeva herself calls her novels 'a way of continuing analysis', p.141).

Kristeva: Thresholds is not a book for beginners as it is too dense and full of specific terms and contextual references. The first point of reference for readers interested in her work therefore remains Toril Moi's *The Kristeva Reader* (1986), complemented by Kelly Oliver's *The Portable Kristeva* (2002), two works which offer commentaries on Kristeva's texts. It is, however, a book for those who would like to gain an insight into further Kristeva studies, especially into her more recent work and its context. Although it does not offer a comprehensive study of Kristeva's recent work – and, indeed, does not aim to do so – the book gives a first insight and offers a very helpful list of further reading material which leads on from each chapter's focus.

Bibliography

Debord, Guy. 1983. *Society of the Spectacle*. Trans. Ken Knabb. London: Rebel Press.

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