REVIEW OF SYLVIE GAMBAUDO, *KRISTEVA, PSYCHOANALYSIS AND CULTURE: SUBJECTIVITY IN CRISIS*

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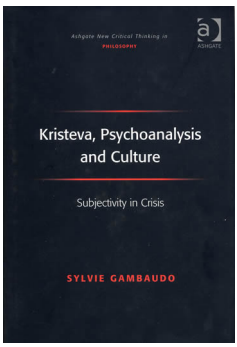

After more than a decade of exposure to Slavoj Žižek and a Slovenian school of psychoanalytic cultural analysis, it is sometimes easy to forget that there are many competing streams of this theoretical movement. Žižek 's translation of Jacques Lacan's obscure tomes into the language of popular culture has done much service to both psychoanalysis and cultural theory. Yet the lineage from Lacan to Žižek is but one variation on the interpretation of Sigmund Freud. Sylvie Gambaudo's *Kristeva, Psychoanalysis and Culture: Subjectivity in Crisis* is a remarkable volume in returning to another interpretation, that of the practitioner and writer Julia Kristeva. The maternal and narcissistic dimension of Freud is here used to construct a coherent and compelling account of modern subjectivity. Gambaudo's sophisticated account of Kristeva's part in debates within both psychoanalytic and feminist milieu's constructs a model of psychic subject formation that is deeply tied to the conditions of modern life. The earlier chapters of the book describe Kristeva's theorisation of a maternal repression that dates from childhood. Such repression operates not only on an individual level, but also on a widespread, cultural one. Kristeva differs from the more radical linguists of her generation in arguing that the maternal and paternal are inevitable psychic functions, a position that has been upsetting for her feminist and poststructural comrades. Yet Kristeva's conservatism on the make-up of the human subject is also well positioned today to think critically about the return of the patriarchy in the West since the 1960s. Žižek makes an interesting comparison here, for although Gambaudo does not refer to his work, her return to Kristeva critiques the way that contemporary theory is so interested in the law and its formation. Such emphasis is a sign of the repressed maternal, and it is to this maternal that we can turn to better think through the pathologies, effects, trans-subjectivities and plain old emotions that permeate the life of this law. Such qualities at least offer a less tired rhetoric for the apprehension of contemporary times, and that their neglect is symptomatic of a general neglect of the

maternal by society and theory alike is the disturbing implication for cultural theory, although Gambaudo would never be so didactic as to say so.

Gambaudo's attention to the detail of Kristeva's engagement with psychoanalytic debates offers a series of mediations on the transition from maternal to paternal function, or the pre-symbolic to symbolic, and the formation of the subject. That such subject formation is simplified by Lacan and even Freud himself becomes a part of an argument about the place of affect and emotion that lie pathologically within the subject's repressive apparatus. For Gambaudo it has been one the American misreadings of Kristeva to neglect this pre-symbolic phase of the subject, the significance of childhood for diagnosing social maladies. Yet it is the inner nature of this pre-subjective space that best accounts for affect and emotion. Turning to the pre-symbolic is even more necessary today, as communication technologies empty out the meaning of the symbolic and leave us floundering between Oedipal identification and its preceding, maternal dissolution. The identification or misidentification of the infant plays a central role in subsequent socialisation of the person to come, and social problems in general, as the intimacy of personhood turns into the field of cultural theory. The crisis of the paternal function is the crisis of modern society itself, as the father figure is replaced by the state and science. These are both ill equipped to facilitate their symbolic significance. That the solution to such a misidentification is not a return to the family but the analysis of the individual should come as no surprise to readers of psychoanalytic theory, positioning this critical movement as a master discourse that holds one utopian key to historical problems. For readers that are not so immersed in this tradition, such a solution may seem unrealistic and obscure. Yet this argument for analysis betrays one of Kristeva's most pressing claims, that understanding social problems is tied to understanding individual subject formation, and cannot be resolved with the kinds of systematic thought typical of the state or its medical and other institutional apparatuses. It follows that Kristeva's work is itself interested in empowering the reader, that psychoanalytic cultural criticism enables its everyday practitioner with mechanisms for undoing the patriarchal mythographies within which its reader is mired.

Among the virtues of Gambaudo's book is this clear passage from personal to political in a survey of Kristeva's corpus, outlining a comprehensive notion of modernism through the formation of the personalities that inhabit it. In the process, the book clarifies the interpretive histories of both French and Anglo-American uses of Kristeva; points to a succinct theory of the maternal and its potential for cultural criticism; and concludes by pointing to the performativity of patriarchy in a society characterised by crisis. Significantly, Gambaudo does the groundwork by which contemporary presumptions about psychoanalysis and its place in cultural criticism might be rethought. The return to Kristeva is a return to a maternal that critiques the presumed authority of the symbolic economy. For this reader, this economy has been exhausted by cultural criticism, the symbolic having played its potential out in recent years as its politics and culture remain determinedly pathological. Gambaudo reveals that the performativity of symbolic practices betrays a more fundamental misidentification of the modern subject. Žižek 's comic critical practice demonstrates such misidentification as it plays the truth of patriarchal power against its performativity, showing off the powerlesness of symbolic criticism against a patriarchy pathologically oriented around signs. Kristeva's maternal, with its attention to the affective dimensions of human experience, resembles Deleuze and Guattari's anti-psychological tome *Anti-Oedipus* (1983) more than it does Lacan and Žižek, as it refashions the intersubjective away from the patriarchal model of critical knowledge.

As a part of this argument, Gambaudo touches on the notions of the abject and narcissism for which Kristeva is best known. Describing the abject as that boundary between the symbolic and pre-symbolic, Gambaudo points out how it undoes the kinds of transitions that have characterised other streams of psychoanalytic criticism. Žižek 's version of subject formation is a convenient example. Taken from the late work of Lacan, its triangulation of a Real, Symbolic and Imaginary describes a subject oscillating in a series of psychotic category mistakes, as one substitutes for the other and substitutes once again, ad infinitum. For Kristeva such substitutions are complicated by a desire for the maternal with all its transpersonal qualities, a desire that is disguised by this image of selfish narcissism. It is not only the twentieth century, but all too often cultural criticism's presumptions about the twentieth century that are at fault here. The reproduction of the paternal function in theory makes abstract the lucid border between the symbolic and pre-symbolic, the passage from natural to cultural. Gambaudo introduces this different account of contemporary narcissism with a view to elaborating the pre-Oedipal stage of infancy, and to make problematic the transition to subjecthood in psychoanalytic theory. This is what readers of Kristeva will know as the semiotic, a term that Gambaudo avoids, perhaps to prevent confusion with so many other semiotic theories. Indeed, such confusion may well have contributed to Kristeva's increasing obscurity from the main traditions of critical theory, with some exceptions.

As an introduction to Kristeva and as an argument for the place of her ideas in cultural criticism, Gambaudo's book is excellent. If it is dense with historical and theoretical detail this is because her account of the complexity and originality of Kristeva's intervention is comprehensive. Here I have reviewed Gambaudo with a view to rethinking the place of the symbolic and paternal in contemporary criticism, but I am certain that someone better versed in the debates internal to psychoanalysis would also find her material as stimulating. For cultural criticism at least, this return to Kristeva offers a way to revitalise processes of interpretation that are currently being exhausted and revitalised by other encounters, with such notions as the affective, or in the case of this journal, the theological. However such discourses are restaged, questions of subject formation will remain central to repositioning theory amidst shifting regimes of what is now a global regime of power. Gambaudo, while dwelling in psychoanalytic and feminist debates, gestures toward Kristeva's place in a renewed critical apparatus, and it is my regret that she has not elaborated this apparatus far beyond these discourses. Indeed, Gambaudo only turns to one set of cultural artefacts to demonstrate Kristeva's relevance to cultural theory. Cindy Sherman's later photographs illuminate the well known notion of the abject, in a reading all too obvious to make persuasive account of the interpretive priority of the maternal. Yet this book does lay the groundwork by which such critical practice and its historical engagement might be mobilised, in its lineage from subject formation to modern culture. Her argument for the maternal as a means for understanding the narcissistic personality remains pertinent to anyone interested in understanding the modern subject.

REFERENCES

Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. 1984. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane, translators. London: Althone.