



The Semiotic in Kristeva's Thought: The Place of Resistance Against Contemporary Totalitarianism

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Abstract: Through a critical reading of Julia Kristeva's major works – especially in relation to phenomenology – this article argues that meaning and identity do not emerge from a fixed point or transcendental position, but arise within the dynamic dialectic of the semiotic and the symbolic, and in the moments of thetic break. Through the process of signification, the “subject-in-process” is understood as a linguistic–corporeal construct that appears through the rhythmic tensions and intertwining of the pre-linguistic (maternal) with the law and norms of the symbolic (paternal). The article then explores the epistemological and political implications of this view: both the critiques raised against linking the chora/semiotic to the maternal body – and the consequent risk of falling back into essentialism – and the emancipatory potential of foregrounding lived experience and linguistic–corporeal practices of resistance. Kristeva's thought entails a return to the authenticity of maternal space as a way out of the totalitarian tendencies of contemporary thought. On this basis, we argue that one may draw upon Kristeva's theoretical resources – while preserving phenomenological sensitivity to experience and remaining alert to the discursive mechanisms of power – to reinterpret contemporary cultural processes in a way that both facilitates analyses of the formation of the living subject within historical contexts and avoids reproducing patriarchal totalitarianism, including binary oppositions and symbolic exclusion.

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Introduction:

Julia Kristeva, a Bulgarian-born philosopher and poststructuralist theorist active in the French intellectual milieu, stands as one of the distinctive figures of contemporary thought. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, through what she termed a “psycho-linguistic revolution,” she transformed the purely semiotic and linguistic reading of literature into an approach grounded in psychoanalytic and phenomenological experience. This shift made it possible to address the unstable and

multifaceted layers of meaning, and subsequently reworked the Lacanian distinction between the Imaginary and the Symbolic by adding the semiotic as a foundational and mediating dimension. For Kristeva, the semiotic is the missing link that secures recognition of a pre-predicative truth and releases thought from the structural dominance of the thetic, whether in the linguistic sphere of the Imaginary or the objective sphere of the Symbolic. Through the introduction of the concept of *chora*¹, she situates the body – understood in a maternal-poetic sense, and in contrast to

Chora: In Greek, the word “χώρα”¹ (*Chora*), and in English, *chora*, was translated as “place”. Plato initially introduced this term within a philosophical context. Plato employed this term in his work, *Timaeus*, assigning it to the recipient and suggesting its association with every form of becoming and development. In *Timaeus*, Plato uses the word *chora* (χώρα) to describe the process of the world's emergence. Plato describes *Chora* as “a receptacle and, in a sense, the nurse of all becoming” (Plato, *Timaeus*, 52 a–b), playing a fundamental role in the creation of the universe. Plato uses this term to signify something closely related to place, or more precisely, the environment in which forms come into existence—a place that can be both receptive and nurturing, even maternal. According to his philosophy, *chora*

serves as a “receptacle,” responsible for providing a space or vessel for existence and beings to manifest. *Chora* never disappears and maintains a permanent presence in the background of the symbolic realm. When the symbolic order disrupts and a gap appears on the surface, the purity of infancy reemerges. Grief-stricken mothers' commotion and lullabies reveal this non-speech, tumultuous and enigmatic. Kristeva is after the acquisition of inexhaustible and disruptive energy because, in her view, lifting the suppression from it is the only possibility for genuine and authentic political action. This is why Kristeva places significant emphasis on art and literature, as she sees them as the means to uncover and harness this untamed energy.

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological approach – at the foundation of her philosophical project.

From the outset, Kristeva placed psychoanalysis and phenomenology as the two main directions of her intellectual project. Although her works are most frequently associated with psychoanalytic approaches, the phenomenological aspect, especially the Husserlian one, has an irrefutable influence on the evolution of her theory. While she criticizes Husserl's idealist orientation, she draws on the notion of intentionality – the directedness of consciousness toward meaning – to construct her own semiotic apparatus. The result is a dialectical framework that, by drawing upon both the Lacanian symbolic order and Husserlian intentionality, forges a link between semiotics and psychoanalysis. For Kristeva, meaning is the product of the ongoing interplay between the semiotic and the symbolic.

The dialectical logic of the relationship between the semiotic and the symbolic exceeds the logic of noncontradiction (which would reify the semiotic and

symbolic), but also the Hegelian logic of reconciliation (which would assume the semiotic and the symbolic in a third term) (Keltner, 2011: 12).

The significance of this theory lies in its claim that meaning and identity arise from the tension between the stability of form and the instability of material forces. In an era shaped by structuralist linguistic, cultural, and philosophical shifts, Kristeva treats language not as an objective system but as a site of resistance, reconstruction, and emancipation of subject. Nevertheless, her thought has also attracted criticism; most notably the risk of reproducing essentialism, insofar as linking the semiotic to pre-linguistic drives and the maternal body may inadvertently reinforce patriarchal binaries, even though Kristeva's aim is to disrupt them.

Numerous studies have examined this revolutionary idea. Nejad Mohammad et-al. (2017) describe the *chora* as a psycho-corporeal space in which drives and energies are organized prior to entry into the symbolic, shaping the process of subject formation. Oliver

(1993) connects Kristeva's work to "feminist revolutions", demonstrating how concepts such as difference and motherhood create possibilities for reconfiguring the identities of women. Block (1983), in examining *Desire in Language*, highlights the importance of restoring historical and psychic layers to literature, while warning that excessive emphasis on cultural forces can diminish individual agency. Singh and Kumar (2016), applying Kristeva's semiotic-psychoanalytic approach to multicultural identities, explore strategies such as linguistic code-switching and cultural representation. In recent years, feminist phenomenology has increasingly converged with Kristeva's thought. This tradition, emphasizing the lived body, vulnerability, and difference, seeks to represent women's experiences within their historical and political contexts (Ziarek & Calle, 2014; Larsen, 2023). Scholars such as Weiss et-al. (2019) and Guenther (2021) have transformed critical phenomenology into a tool for unveiling racism, heteronormativity, and subtle

forms of domination. Yet the direct link between feminist phenomenology and Kristeva's semiotic theory is not fully explored.

This gap leads to the central question of the present article: How does Kristeva reconstruct Husserlian phenomenology, while moving beyond its idealist limitations, in order to account for the interaction between consciousness and the process of abjection in the formation of meaning and identity? Drawing on a hermeneutic-psychoanalytic approach, this article re-examines Kristeva's major works, including *Revolution in Poetic Language* and *Powers of Horror*, to show how meaning and identity emerge not within fixed forms but within a dynamic, conflictual process which, critically, is beyond the reach of the Logos. This process is crucial for understanding the formation of contemporary identities, cultural resistances, and lived experiences in the modern world. For Kristeva, the origin of radical action, and of any shift in the dominant philosophical paradigm, must

be sought in the pre-Oedipal¹ *chora*. Thus, Kristeva's thought implies a return to the authenticity of the maternal space as a way out of the totalitarianism of contemporary thought.

The Dialectic of the Semiotic and the Symbolic

In the opening sections of *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984), Kristeva rigorously challenges modern philosophies of language and their conceptions of the subject. She criticizes these schools for neglecting the body as the fundamental basis of meaning, relying instead solely on linguistic, social, or politico-economic dimensions. According to Kristeva, such perspectives reduce language to a lifeless container: a complex but static system detached from the body, ultimately yielding to formulaic structures that transform language into an instrument of control and repression. She labels these approaches "the thoughts of archivists, archaeologists, and necrophiliacs", for they replace

the living flow of meaning-creation with abstract concepts (Kristeva, 1984: 15). This critique reveals Kristeva's profound concern about the separation of the superstructural linguistic system from its pre-predicative and non-thetic foundations – an alienation that can lead to the manipulation and suppression of the subject.

Kristeva focuses on a linguistic and cultural subject born of expression, yet whose expressive foundations return to the pre-Oedipal. She conceives language as a dynamic process arising from the interaction between the semiotic and the symbolic. The semiotic is rooted in corporeality and pulsating drives, the realm Kristeva names the "maternal", which instigates a kind of revolution within the symbolic realm. She refers to this process as significance and states, "what is referred to as significance is a continuous process of drives to language and through it, including the subject and institutions" (Kristeva, 1984: 17). This is an endless process; it has no *arche*, and therefore it

Pre-Oedipal: In psychoanalysis, 'pertaining to the period of psychosexual development before the development of

the Oedipus complex, attachment to the mother predominates in both sexes.

is not submissive to the totality of form. Emphasizing the role of the body in the emergence of provides another direction for the interpretation of the interaction between nature and culture. Signification, driven by instinctual forces yet constrained by the symbolic, renders language both generative and fragile and frees the subject from a purely cognitive framework. Kristeva underscores the inseparable connection between body, language, and subject, arguing that meaning-creation requires not only speech but also the intentionality underlying it, embedded in material and social contexts. She considers language as a living organism oriented toward identity, rather than a passive structure. Consequently, Kristeva rejects traditional conceptions of language and the subject, analyzing the material and historical conditions of meaning by distinguishing the semiotic and the symbolic.

The semiotic and the symbolic, which are traditionally discussed as two different spheres, are mutually dependent in the process of signification; the former, the

semiotic, it does not yet refer to a thetic object for awareness (as in young children), nor does it no longer refer to a thetic object (as in psychotic discourses) (Kristeva, 1980: 133).

To articulate this dimension, Kristeva adapts the Platonic *chora* from the *Timaeus*, a notion associated with womb or receptacle, while stressing the difficulty of defining it as a pre-linguistic space:

Although our theoretical description of the *chora* is itself part of the discourse of representation that offers it as evidence, the *chora* as rupture and articulations (rhythm), precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality, and temporality. Our discourse – all discourse – moves with and against the *chora* in the sense that it simultaneously depends upon and refuses it. Although the *chora* can be designated and regulated, it can never be definitively posited: as a result, one can situate the *chora* and, if necessary, lend it a topology, but one can never give it axiomatic form (Kristeva, 1998: 453).

Language in the pre-Oedipal stage remains entwined with corporeality. Through bodily rhythms, especially those associated with the maternal body, the *chora* brings the semiotic to discourse, bringing what is concealed into the symbolic realm through the mediation of the body. Kristeva

links the interruption of corporeal rhythms into signifying practice with the emergence of human consciousness through the thetic phase, which posits the subject as a rupture involving the interplay of bodily drives, linguistic structures, and material reference. She asks, "How are these strata linked? What is their interrelation within signifying practice?" (Kristeva, 1998: 249); the depth of her theory is shown by the question of how these layers connect. The meaning is not static, and the speaking subject is born from within, from the Other inside the self. This mechanism, which corrupts the purity of meaning, recalls Lacan's notion of the *extimate*. Kristeva argues that the heterogeneous function of language effects a substitution in the signifying process, thereby transforming significance and significance, by disrupting the symbolic order, utilizes it to express itself: "The heterogeneous functioning of language triggers a substitutive process of significance" (Kristeva, 1980: 18). "Significance as an act, while disrupting the symbolic,

uses it to express itself in the structure of meaning" (Kristeva, 1982: 38). For Kristeva, the central problem of traditional linguistics is its archaic totality: a totality reminiscent of Hegelian parousia, which dissolves temporality into presence, rendering the metaphysics of presence incapable of explaining temporality. In contrast, Kristeva posits a process anterior to paternal absolutism, one that engages in the very constitution of language and time. This process situates the subject within a spatiotemporal field capable of shaping the future. "Linguistic positions define the subject as "I" or "self," placing it within a "bodily" process that can never be intrinsic. Meaning is subject to a spatial and temporal arrangement of significance, the being of the speaker. As a result, the subject-in-process can contribute to the future" (Kristeva, 1984: 215).

In avant-garde literature, poetic language reveals how the semiotic can challenge the logic of the symbolic and make resistance possible within the turbulent space between them. Kristeva locates resistance in

aesthetic rupture, where one moves beyond sentimental fantasies and the self-indulgent pleasures of wordplay toward socially and politically emancipatory action. This rupture is the very possibility of resistance. In this way, the maternal *chora* opens a space of resistance against contemporary patriarchal totalitarianism, a *chora* that has been repeatedly suppressed and marginalized within the history of philosophy.

Phenomenological Theory of Meaning

Drawing upon modern philosophies of language and subjectivity, Kristeva constructs a framework for meaning and intersubjective thought. Although deeply shaped by phenomenology and psychoanalysis, her project ultimately exceeds both. In her view, neither phenomenology nor psychoanalysis sufficiently

accounts for the foundations of signification and the basis of meaning. Phenomenology fails to explain the psychophysical and physiological processes that give rise to meaning and to the transcendental self. On the other hand, psychoanalysis overlooks the primordial dependence of meaning on the pre-Oedipal maternal space, instead reading it primarily through the prism of the "Name-of-the-Father"¹. We start here to explore the very essence of the thought of Kristeva by looking at her reconstruction of the phenomenological theory of meaning.

The concept of affirmative language is one of the most important concepts in this field, which was proposed by thinkers like Edmund Husserl and Émile Benveniste. The speaking subject is made up of structural, logical, and historical connections, and it is on these platforms that a space of

The Lacanian term "Name-of-the-Father" (Nom-du-Pere) refers to the symbolic role in which the paternal authority, language, and the law control desire. It is not the real father, but the structural law of prohibition, above all, the incest taboo that initiates the child into the Symbolic Order. By prohibiting the direct consolidation to the mother, the "Name-of-the-Father" sets regulations of

kinship and meaning so that the desire can be diverted into culturally approved channels. In feminist and film theory, this concept has been criticized since it tends to romanticize patriarchal power as the state of subjectivity where the positioning of women is only in terms of the legal, kinship, and marriage.

interpretation is created. According to Kristeva, the phenomenological subject is always the subject of enunciation, i.e., the transcendental subject in the phenomenology of Husserl, which is the meaning in the weave of phenomena. The subject of enunciation, Kristeva says, "always proves to be the phenomenological subject" (Kristeva, 1984: 23), the transcendental subject of Husserlian phenomenology. She highlights two main concepts in her discussion of the phenomenological theory of meaning by Husserl:

1. The Thetic Phase: Husserl situates the stream of phenomenological being within two distinct contexts: the "material context" and the "perceptual context" (Husserl, 2006: 251). To grasp the thetic phase, one must first consider the "natural attitude" in Husserl's thinking and its role in this phase. In the natural attitude, the person lives within an infinite and permanent world in which consciousness is a direct and unmediated experience. The subject feels intimately connected to the world through representation.

This world includes not merely empirical realities and events but moral principles, values, and social facts as well.

For Husserl, however, this attitude must be suspended through a radical transformation: the experienced world should not be seen as a copy or sign of reality, but as a world of objective realities. The thetic phase is thus a crucial step in making possible a phenomenological description of the nature of meaning. Here, the separation between subject and object is acknowledged, even though, subsequently, this separation is dissolved within the transcendental ego. In this process, existence is suspended (*epoché*), and consciousness, through phenomenological constitution, becomes self-grounding and world-constituting. Kristeva draws upon this concept to articulate the semiotic, arguing that subjectivity arises from a dialectical tension between the semiotic and the symbolic.

2. Intentionality and Noesis: Kristeva maintains that meaning arises through active production, not through passive reception. She explains this based on the phenomenological

distinction between noesis (the act of consciousness) and noema (the intended content). In her view, Husserl's perspective, in linking the position of the subject with the meaningful object, constitutes the primary foundation for the theory of meaning. Husserl demonstrates the necessity of "positing an ego as the single, unique constraint" (Kristeva, 1984: 32). Husserl divides data into two categories: hyletic and intentional. Hyletic data are parts of the organism that provide no information to consciousness and are devoid of meaning. In contrast, intentional elements impose meaning upon hyletic data through the attribution of form (*morphe*). Therefore, Husserl's theory of meaning is fundamentally based on the concept of intentionality: the intrinsic directedness of consciousness towards its objects. Every consciousness is consciousness of something.

These terms are crucial; "noesis" is the act of consciousness, and "noema" is the content of consciousness or mental states. The noema discloses aspects of reality that were hidden in the natural attitude but made available to consciousness following the

epoché, while the noesis encompasses acts such as perceiving in a specific manner, intending, imagining, judging, and remembering. The intentionality, and the separation of noesis (the act of consciousness) and noema (the object as intended by consciousness), gives a frame of reference to the theorization of meaning by Kristeva. All consciousnesses are consciousnesses of something, and this intentional structure makes the subject develop the world in its horizon of givenness. In Husserl's later work, especially *Cartesian Meditations*, intentionality is placed at a more radical level and becomes anchored in the transcendental ego, an eidetic center that secures the unity of experience across time. Through the *epoché*, Husserl seeks to bracket empirical assumptions so that this transcendental self, the ultimate ground of meaning, may be disclosed.

It is at this point that Kristeva breaks with Husserl. For her, the transcendental ego is overly idealistic as an enclosure, what she calls the "specular closure of projection"

(Kristeva, 1984: 26). In contrast to Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, which throws meaning into a subdued environment towards the object, Kristeva describes the subject-object relation of meaning as one in which "'I' am distinct from the object, but also as a relation of desiring attachment in which I tend toward and am thereby 'homologous' to an object" (Kristeva, 1982: 31); unlike "the object, the abject does not serve as a proper correlative to the I" (Ibid). Although the act of *epoché* is useful in its ability to suspend the assumptions of everyday life, it is always at risk of obscuring the bodily and affective strata of subjectivity, the maternal body, desires, and the power of abjection. While phenomenology seeks a field purified of empirical elements, Kristeva emphasizes the subject-in-process, a subject whose identity can never be fixed but continually re-articulated through semiotic-symbolic ruptures. She reconceives intentionality not as a guarantee of unity but as a force of displacement and instability. Consciousness, for her, is not only oriented toward

objects but is always confronted by something disruptive, something that must be abjected so that the subject can emerge.

Thus, while Kristeva employs the phenomenological tools of noesis/noema, she abandons the idealist burden of the transcendental ego, turning intentionality into an open-ended, corporeal process. Through critical appropriation of these conceptual instruments, Kristeva modifies and extends the theory of meaning of the phenomenology of Husserl and at the same time criticizes its idealism. The thetic phase becomes not the stabilization of a transcendental subject but the "deepest structure of signification" (Kristeva, 1984: 44). She argues that prior to any subject/object distinction within intentionality lies a material and pre-linguistic (semiotic) dynamic rooted in the pre-thetic *chora*. In contrast to Husserl, who derives meaning from the intentional acts of a subject, Kristeva locates the conditions of possibility for meaning in a subject continually produced and undone by the semiotic, only to be produced anew.

Ultimately, by critically engaging with the

phenomenology of Husserl, Kristeva shows that meaning emerges not merely from a transcendental ego but from the dialectical interplay between the semiotic and the symbolic, and from the tension of pre-Oedipal bodily rhythms and maternal *chora*. The subject comes into existence only at the moment Kristeva calls the thetic break. Every act of expression, spoken or written, involves a dialectical relationship between the semiotic *chora* and the symbolic. The body will gain a “voice” out of the depths of the *chora*, and in the instant of the thetic rupture it pierces the symbolic. The subject is never torn out of the maternal womb; everything later inscribed by the paternal plough remains rooted in this soil. The *chora* is the irreducible origin of the symbolic.

Abjection: The Dialectic of the Semiotic and the Symbolic

This dialectical interplay within language unfolds through the notion of negativity, which Kristeva borrows from Hegel. She explicitly distances her use of the term from Lacan’s rigid, patriarchal “No,” which suppresses transformative

discourses and subordinates the *chora* to the symbolic. For Kristeva, negativity is a gradual process of transgression and the loosening of laws, moments in which the body, aided by the semiotic *chora*, revives itself at the brink of symbolic collapse in the thetic break. Acting as a primary organizing principle prior to the emergence of language and playing a fundamental role in the pre-Oedipal stage, the *chora* distinguishes itself from a discordant and chaotic body, thereby preventing the formation of a uniform rule for the semiotic (Kristeva, 1984: 48).

This semiotic displacement becomes the ground for confronting the symbolic order. The symbolic derives its power from its continual effort to mask and control the semiotic, producing the illusion of unity and presence. By reintroducing the semiotic into discourse, Kristeva instigates a revolution in language, revealing the instability of this unity. Even when a sense of unity appears, the symbolic re-engages with the semiotic, utilizing it as a generative force, yet simultaneously undermining its

own foundations. The semiotic is both the origin and the destroyer of the symbolic; it defines it and ultimately brings it to an end, thus preventing language from closing in on itself. The relationship between the symbolic and the signified is always on the verge of collapse. On the other hand, "'intentional experience" allows Kristeva to expand his analysis of "symbolic matter" to the realm of signification, which deals with the relationship between the subject, others, and objects" (Keltner, 2011: 27).

In Kristeva's thought, the woman deconstructs the masculine structure. For her, the thetic phase constitutes a rupture in the process of signification, establishing the separation between subject and object as a condition for meaning: This stage, on the one hand, cleaves subject and object apart, and on the other, establishes a meaningful connection between the now-separated subject and object. In this phase, Kristeva's expressive subject distances itself from the "transcendental ego." Kristeva thus points to a divergence between phenomenological experience, otherwise, "the

material dynamics that "precede" the subject/object distinction of intentionality" (Kristeva, 1984: 34). The *epoché* suspends the objective world and reveals a transcendental self that perceives the world as it is intended or constituted. This process demands a transcendental understanding of "self" and consciousness, rather than an empirical one. However, it is here that the subject, which Kristeva terms the *subject-in-process*, apprehends the world from a pre-thetic perspective and through the semiotic *chora*. The subject enters the semiotic realm through an emancipatory process, a process of signification that interprets the symbolic from an idealistic yet bodily, historical, and political perspective. This departure from Husserl is what allows meaning to arise.

The semiotic, as the pre-thetic, encompasses bodily processes, whereas the thetic organizes signification as a dynamic structure of subject, language, and the subject's structural relations to language, self, body, others, and objects. In Kristeva's theory of

signification, at the stage of entering the symbolic realm within a phenomenological framework, meaning detaches from the semiotic and moves towards the symbolic realm. Nevertheless, the concept of "intentional experience" allows Kristeva to continue pursuing symbolic analysis within the domain of signification, a domain focused on the subject's relationships with others and objects. Keltner also notes that intentional experience draws the analysis of symbolic elements into the realm of signification, a space where the subject's interactions with others and objects are explored (Keltner, 2011: 27).

Thus, the subject enters language and the symbolic order through abjection, the process by which the individual separates from the other, as it enables independence from the other and the formation of identity. This separation is indispensable for the emergence of subjectivity. The child must first distinguish itself from the

maternal body to become a subject. A distance between self and other therefore always persists. Sjöholm remarks: "Kristeva views abjection as a quest for a fresh consciousness, thereby proposing it as a social stimulus" (Sjöholm, 2005: 79). Abjection¹ is an aspect of identity that allows the individual to overcome the continuous tension between subjectivity and the *chora*, and to step into the sphere of subjectivity and identity. It emerges from a dialectic between the semiotic (fluidity) and the symbolic (structure), producing an identity that is always in motion (McAfee, 2000). Beardsworth (2004) imagines abjection as a destabilizing power that interferes with identity, social systems, and cultural order. The abjection appears at the very point where the boundaries are violated, and the traditional division between the subject and the object, interior and exterior, is undermined. The phenomenon challenges the

Abjection of boundaries through this ¹ process serves as a means for defending the integrity of subjective borders. In essence, it becomes a mechanism for

pushing away others. Abjection is essential for subjectivity because it leads to the advancement and autonomy of the mind (e.g. McAfee, 2005).

subject on the most personal level, penetrating all layers of subjective experience and destabilizing the frameworks on which symbolic meaning is based. Based on this, the disruptive power of abjection is no longer separable from the opposition to the symbolic order, and intentionality guides and shapes the nature of this disruption.

Kristeva, in her phenomenological inquiry, proceeds with the concept of abjection by creating a connection between subject and object, thus leading it to the expression of meaning. The intentionality, which is the intentional experience, therefore, helps in the realization of the symbolic and at the same time overcomes it. According to Margaroni (2007), intentionality-driven abjection can cross the boundaries and rebuff the object, thus creating new symbolic spaces. The dialectic between the semiotic and the symbolic, which Kristeva calls the process of signification, the only objective world, is the basis of her theory of meaning and the subject, as well as provides new tools of psychoanalytic and sociological

description. She highlights the importance of the semiotic in all systems of signification as the impetus of the historical proliferation of meaning. The subjectivity will always have a fissure, which has a hidden matrix of pre-symbolic forces that can move history along its brief and discontinuous histories (Romanyshyn, 2002: 9).

Kristeva's commitment to the unconscious aspect of language draws her toward the semiotic, which is reflected in *pre-Oedipal* language. "The symbolic matter reciprocally creates the semiotic, a bio-social element of language that also drives its emergence, even when it defies the symbolic" (Oliver, 1993: 96). Prior to the subject being constituted, the child occupies the semiotic *chora*, a place where meaning-making (the process of signification) occurs. The child learns about rhythms and vocal expressions through interaction with certain symbols, using language to designate objects whose names it has not yet learned. The origins of language must thus be sought in this pre-linguistic realm. Chaos remains embedded within the

foundations of cosmos. Plato describes the *chora* as “the receptacle of all things that come to be, whether visible or intelligible.” The *chora* is a place where subjects achieve self-consciousness.

Kristeva does not regard the semiotic *chora* as wholly unknowable but as a matrix that supplies the conditions for subject formation. It operates prior to the constitution of the self and contributes to the differentiation between subject and object. Understanding the *chora* is essential for explaining the primordial sense of subjectivity. Her emphasis on its rhythmic nature highlights its mediating function between semiotic and symbolic. Plato’s portrayal of the *chora* as the “midwife of the world” resonates with Kristeva’s emphasis on its dynamic movement, a display or ability to move spontaneously (McAfee, 2005: 40). Rather than focusing solely on the self as the center of meaning, she understands the thetic phase as a stage in the process of signification, asking what in the thetic phase produces the legislating agent? Is the subject already born? This perspective

surpasses cultural-linguistic accounts of signs and symbols and centers pre-natal and pre-signifying experience. “Kristeva’s approach entails interrogating the semiotic conditions that give rise to meaning but ultimately remain separate from meaning and subjectivity” (Keltner, 2011: 27). During the primordial stage, biological drives determine how the body of the mother conveys qualities that are not symbolic and persist throughout the life of the individual in the interactions between the body and other people; Initially, “biological instincts influence the ways in which the mother’s body communicates, creating characteristics that are not symbolic and continue to exist in the relationships between the body and others throughout the individual’s lifetime” (Barrette, 2011: 90). Unlike Husserl’s *hylē*, the material is, for Kristeva, the foundation of signification; it indicates that the subject’s position generates meaning. Signification arises simultaneously through signifiers and through pre-signifying and imagistic elements.

It is a dynamic process that causes linguistic changes, changes in the subject's state, and changes in the subject's relationships with the body, others, and objects (Kristeva, 1984: 15).

The phenomenological interpretation of meaning is thus a “pre-signifying” phase that bridges the imagistic and symbolic systems and constitutes the core of Kristeva's theory of signification.

The Thetic Break: The Revolutionary Roots of Language and Identity

The thetic break is the critical point in the process of signification: the point at which the subject is constituted as a cultural and social being through language. Kristeva describes this stage as the transition between the semiotic and the symbolic, whereby pre-linguistic rhythms are transformed into organized linguistic systems and the subject is both accepting and transgressing the symbolic law (Kristeva, 1984: 48). She argues that the subject of a new political practice can only be the subject of a new discursive practice (Kristeva, 1977: 20),

indicating that revolution arises not from a singular, conscious subject but from discursive formations such as poetry, art, or religion. Poetic language, with its capacity to foreground semiotic drives, plays a central role in this transformation. Referring to poets such as Mallarmé, Lautréamont, and Joyce, Kristeva contends that their works create semantic crises within the symbolic order, prompting the subject to reconstruct its identity (Kristeva, 1984: 15). These crises, particularly in modern capitalist societies, provide possibilities for rethinking identity through transgressing linguistic and cultural norms (Rickert, 2007: 260).

This revolutionary signification has two principal consequences. First, it renders the subject a product of linguistic processes in which semiotic drives and symbolic structures interact. This perspective dismantles the illusion of a unified subject, showing that identity is always in flux and perpetually reconstructed (Kristeva, 1984: 30), thus enabling the subject to challenge cultural systems. Second, discourses such as

poetic or religious language, by foregrounding semiotic drives, destabilize the symbolic order. Kristeva argues that such discourses allow the subject both to ward off madness and to avoid complete submission to the symbolic law (Kristeva, 1977), steering the fragile balance between the semiotic and the symbolic toward creative and revolutionary praxis. She identifies poetic language, especially in Mallarmé's works, as a paradigmatic example of this process, due to its free play with linguistic rules and its emphasis on semiotic rhythms. Rickert (2007) also argues that Kristeva's poetic language is a space in which the subject disrupts oppressive systems and generates new possibilities for meaning. Power is exercised through totalizing structures, and totalization is rooted in the rigid, form-fixated discourse of patriarchy. The subject, separated from the maternal *chora*, is passed from one signifier to another within a signifying chain that is aimed at totality, losing both grounding and points of resistance within this symbolic suspension. The foundations of oppressive

structures lie precisely in this paternal, formal totalization. The pre-Oedipal *chora* grants the subject – within symbolic forms – a certain gravity and a unique locus that enables resistance, and thereby the exertion of force, within the symbolic field. The semiotic is the fissure within the iron order of the symbolic; and it is precisely through this fissure that meaning emerges.

Kristeva regards poetic language as a site of linguistic and political resistance, standing against the rigid structures of everyday language that reinforce dominant ideologies. She claims that

by combining sound, rhythm, and syntax, poetic language utilizes semiotic features, creating a new space for expression and resistance” (Kristeva, 1984: 15).

The subversive role of poetry becomes even more salient in capitalist societies where language is turned into an ideological commodity. Culture and literature are commodified, and they are produced and reproduced in the cycle of capital, but, as Roudiez (1984) observes, authentic poetic discourse can refute this process of commodification and keep up

the processes of signification. The concept of the *chora* – a pre-symbolic, rhythmic space linked to the maternal body and primal drives – introduces a rupture within the symbolic order, demonstrating that this order is merely provisional. Although Kristeva acknowledges that poetry cannot replace political action, it deepens political agency by providing a grammatical critique of ideology. Some critics, such as Benhabib (1995), argue that an exclusive focus on linguistic resistance may diminish the significance of social movements and direct action, but Kristeva does not dismiss political praxis; she instead emphasizes the necessity of a profound transformation in thought, speech, and imaginations of the future.

Agency holds a special place in Kristeva's theory. She understands it not as a fixed, rational, or volitional entity – as often assumed in Marxist and feminist theories – but as the result of the tension between the semiotic and the symbolic. She explains that “it is a dynamic process that causes linguistic changes, changes in the

subject's state, and changes in the subject's relationships with the body, others, and objects” (Kristeva, 1984: 15). She critiques the realm of identity politics, as “it often reinforces fixed categories of gender and identity, potentially perpetuating the very structures it seeks to challenge” (Kristeva, 1982: 38). Instead, she advocates for a more heterogeneous and dynamic understanding of agency that accounts for the instability of “identity and the potential of poetic and artistic expression to transform agency itself” (Moi, 1985). The thetic break does not only reconfigure meaning but, by emphasizing poetic language as a site of resistance and a ground for rethinking subjectivity and social transformation, also enriches our understanding of identity and cultural politics.

Conclusion

Revisiting Kristeva's thought through the lens of Husserlian phenomenology, particularly the concept of intentionality, opens new possibilities for understanding the dynamics of meaning, subjectivity, and resistance. By

exposing the boundary between language, body, and the unconscious, Kristeva reframes meaning not as something fixed within the symbolic order but as an emergent, ever-becoming process forged through the ongoing tension between quasi-corporeal semiotic forces and rational symbolic structures. In this sense, the “subject-in-process” constructs its identity through continual ruptures, rejections, and returns, finding in poetic language and creative discourses the capacity to redefine itself.

This reading not only brings intentionality down from a purely transcendental level into the realm of lived, embodied experience, but also reinterprets language as a field of resistance in which meaning and emancipation arise in an inseparable relationship with the body and the Other. Form supremacy has culminated in the era of artificial intelligence and formal models of vast signifying networks, whose foundations were already established by positivism. With the body having been cast out of the realm of meaning and reduced to a nature that passively serves as the locus

where meaning is inscribed – thus the site of consumption – the integrity of form eliminates its own most important force of resistance. In this world, the dialectic of antagonistic forces born of a theoretical incompleteness organize a counterfeit resistance: a play without play, without an opponent; and therefore, without spectators, it merely persists. The semiotic, the product of the pre-Oedipal *chora* only, represents a refusal to submit to this contemporary mock-battle, and an opening toward the possibility of an authentic and real resistance.

Nevertheless, Kristeva’s theory requires critical interpretation to avoid reproducing gender essentialism or overlooking structural dimensions of power. Feminist phenomenology influenced by Kristeva may thus serve as a tool for analyzing the complex relations among language, body, and culture in the contemporary world, relations in which meaning is always born from the struggle between forces of fixation and transformation. The semiotic is the substratum that allows the imaginary and symbolic realms

to intermingle, thereby
preventing the sterility of
symbolic struggle.

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