

Review of Julia Kristeva, *The Severed Head: Capital Visions*. Columbia University Press: New York, 2012.

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In 1998, the *Louvre* invited Julia Kristeva to curate an exhibit as part of its *Parti pris* (biased views) project, an enterprise which placed the collections of the *Louvre* and the *Musée d'Orsay* at the disposal of a variety of thinkers, writers and artists, each of whom was tasked with developing a set of intellectual ideas through the museums' holdings. The project aimed to stage a space for critical reflection at the heart of the gallery, 'a place of rupture' as the *Louvre's* Régis Michel put it, intended to unsettle both the 'uniform logic of the culture industry' and its 'regrettable monopoly of a reductive language' (Michel, 'Foreword', pp. xvii-xviii). Kristeva's contribution to the venture took the title 'Capital Visions' and explored the complex and multifaceted role of the head, especially severed or bodiless, in religious art and artefact. *The Severed Head* is Kristeva's formal exploration of the ideas teased out by that exhibition, which has been diligently worked off the plinth and into a nattily compact 120 pages. The jury is perhaps still out on whether the doyenne of continental psychoanalytic theory is the best person to mount an attack on the reductive lexicon of industry-standard cleverspeak, but Kristeva certainly delivers on the promise of 'a rupture'. For while the head is obviously front and centre in the book, what quickly becomes clear is that the act of *severance* is equally important. Kristeva is as interested in the motion of disturbance that beheading represents as in the heads themselves, and apparently yet more intrigued by the contemporary cultural realities of which the fetish for artistic beheading might be suggestive. Through the image and motion of beheading, Kristeva seeks to sketch a theory of sacred representation. Destabilizing the authoritative power of the museum as a body of work and then re-appropriating its imageness is thus both the (Lacanian) backdrop for and the very substance of the volume, and readers would be well advised, I think, to bear that in mind.

After a couple of guest forewords, Régis's included, and an introductory chapter about a snowman—which I shall circle back to later—Kristeva sets off her argument proper with an unashamedly fleet reading of the history of the skull fetish, beginning with the cannibals of the Lower Paleolithic Period on page ten and ending seventeen pages later with Reformation-inspired memento mori. Along the way Kristeva takes in, at necessary speed, the Neolithic skull worshippers of Europe (p. 11); the skull artisans of 'biblical' (!) Jericho; the exocannibalism (read: the eating of brains as a mode of appropriating an alien's power) exhibited among the 'prehuman Australopithecus' (p. 12); Herodotus's remarks on Scythian endocannibalism (eating one's own dead to preserve the community's power); and Freud's predictably patriarchal ruminations on all of the above. Particularly interesting is Kristeva's Lacanian response to Freud's reading of these cannibalistic practices as a psychological desire to assimilate the phallic power of the father. Kristeva suggests instead that the ancients' consumption of the skull, while evoking the fear of the 'father' or law, can also be read as an attempt to appropriate the *visage* of the *mother*, the maternal skull being that first artwork that persuades the infant that it is not one with the world, that it can want and might be abandoned. The eating of the skull is not simply a phallic repost, then, but a reintegration of parent and child, an inverting of Lacan's 'mirror-stage' where separation first becomes conceptualized in the developing brain. The funerary feast of the head that Kristeva's artifacts describe represents a 'double celebration', she says: 'that of the rival phallic father and that of the mother who abandoned us'. Their assimilation in the cannibal's meal enacts a kind of totemic incest which has been 'displaced toward oral pleasure' (pp. 16-17) and which transmogrifies into visual pleasure in the modern cultural life of the West, where the visual consumption of heads abounds.

Before getting that far, however, Kristeva seeks to develop some of these ideas by turning to artistic renderings of Medusa, the serpent-haired gorgon whose gaze turns her victims to stone (except in Ovid, as the author duly notes). Medusa's story is an obvious starting point for such concerns insofar as it is about, first, the severed female capital *par excellence* and, second, the ways in which art can be used to protect us from our fears. (Readers will recall that Perseus survives by creating a reflected image of the deadly gorgon in his shield, an icon by means of which the monster can be dispatched.) Kristeva explores the malleability of Medusa's displaced and displacing femaleness—which the myth turns into a kind of phobic object: the head—looking particularly at Calandrucci's red chalk drawing, Zucchi's fountain in Firenze, Poussin's *Origin of Coral* (according to the myth, all coral is the product of Medusa's petrifying blood), and at Cellini's *Perseus* in the Loggia dei Lanzi. These Medusas play with the idea of the formation of the self, says Kristeva, usually by manipulating the impossibility of the audience's relationship with the gorgon, who can neither look at nor connect with the world except through reflection. In analysis, the icon thereby becomes for Kristeva the very substance of the Medusa myth, and the Medusa myth in turn becomes an icon for the artistic endeavor. Kristeva argues that all mediating images, and especially the religious image, supplants the dangerous Presence of the original in favour of the reflected, safe, and sanitized representation. The icon is the parent who can no longer kill or abandon—like the skull consumed in Neo-Paleolithic rite.

The Lacanian consumption of the skull and Medusa's iconic potential form an axis on which much of Kristeva's other material comes to be plotted. For biblically minded readers, the most important developments of this artistic critique are found in Chapters 6 and 7 of the book, which deal with a variety of decollated or decollating biblical figures: King David standing over the bloodied corpse of Goliath (given to us by the hands of Caravaggio and Martin van Heemskerck; pp. 75-76), Judith and Holofernes (Rembrandt working Judith into a kind of mimicry of David and of Salome); and Jezebel, who Kristeva sees as another kind of Medusa (p. 82). Depictions of John the Baptist's beheading take up a good deal of Kristeva's attention, and her artistic treatment is wide-ranging: the northern façade of the Rouen cathedral; the gilded Mosaic of Saint Mark's Basilica in Venice; the work of Pisano, Cranach, Vignon the Elder; Tiepolo's establishing of a 'theatrical pathos' in his depiction of John's death (tubes and tubes of crimson blood enacting the savagery of the Baroque); Hans Memling's beheading of John as a fairground spectacle; Albrecht Dürer's Salome, with 'her surprised almost amorous look'; Gaspar de Crayer's heavier treatment of the story, and so on (pp. 69-72).

These central chapters will probably be of most interest to the biblically interested reader and draw out some important connecting themes that run through these tales of beheadings, using certain stories to read against the grain of others. How the biblical text steers readers toward the necessity of Goliath's beheading while insisting on the vanity of John's is a case in point. The analysis of John's beheading is extremely ideologically complex, in fact, Kristeva seeing the episode as the 'theme *par excellence* on which that figurability specific to the fate of the West had to be built' (p. 65). John is understood as the precondition of the proliferation of the image as the language of choice in the West, as the fore-image of the Word, he is the flesh that points to the making of the word into flesh, an 'invitation to regard by reading', or else a 'condensation of the logic of the *Figure* as a way of seeing'; he embodies 'a representational stance' (p. 65). The foundational qualities of the Precursor myth rely, we are told, on the ways John's story 'reconciles incision and perspective, sacrifice and resurrection' (p. 66) and Kristeva draws out these themes to think about Jesus and John as figures through which the before illuminates the after, and the after gives meaning to the before (p. 67). What emerges is a kind of critical analysis of the sacrifice in conversation with the picture. In that sense, any critic of religious art would do well to take her analysis into account, dense and quick footed though it often tends to be.

Kristeva's brevity is a drawback. Her prose is, as ever, startling and ingenious, littered with casual allusions or modulations in meaning that send you back to earlier paragraphs, earlier chapters, with

new critical awareness of what she is driving at. But her intense style makes little room for detailed analysis or anything resembling close reading. Kristeva's approach to the biblical text and to the over-arching narrative of cultural history doubtless demand some ruthless snapshotting, and while the focus on the intellectual economy of the icon gives Kristeva some critical cover to treat august figures of the biblical tradition as mere types, the caricatures are really quite pronounced in places. The history used to contextualize John's demise is a good example. As is Kristeva's treatment of David, which relies too earnestly on the notion that we can know the characters and traditions sufficiently with a first glance at the text. Kristeva proceeds too with no reference to the enormous body of work that has been undertaken on both these specific narratives and the artistic traditions they sired, which is perhaps to be expected, but that the complexity of the reading of the Medusa myth is not recreated for the biblical texts is conspicuous. If Kristeva's theory of the icon amounts to the idea that the icon siphons off the danger of Presence to allow for psychic cohesion and maternal integration on the part of the reader, it is probably telling that her thesis itself relies on thumbnail portraits. These iconic renderings of biblical characters are self-consciously reductive sketches which themselves sanitize the true complexity of the texts to make the argument coherent and cohesive enough for self-integration. Kristeva's text does not always cut across the processes it narrates so much as re-enact them. That said, like the fabulously speedy trip from the Paleolithic Caves to the courts of the Eastern empire, Kristeva's brevity does allow her to scope for some important critical reflections that historical, critical or textual minutiae would most likely preclude.

Specifically, Kristeva's volume opens up a critical space not just in the middle of the *Louvre* but in the middle of Church history. Here she can interrogate the politics of the sacred icon, and in this respect the book is hugely valuable. Kristeva's icon is a tangle of mythological and psychological resonances that both protect the worshipper from the danger of holy presence and mediate a reconciliation between human and divine, and as such *The Severed Head* requires further thought and, dare I say, considerable reflection. The implications of the idea that the supplicant at the Mandyion and the Neolithic hunter are one, each 'consuming' the head as away of negotiating the threat of aggression and the fear of abandonment, is surely far reaching, as is her claim that these trans-historical superimpositions, and the gendered confusions they engender, helped forge the apocryphal melodrama between Jesus and Mary Magdalene (cum-Veronica). Similarly, when Kristeva suggests that in the religious icon the divine presence is no longer terrible but pacified ('as the Christian experience wants it', p. 45), she is posing questions for the notion of the post-secular, for cultural critics, for church historians, for biblical scholarship and for a whole host of other interested parties. And while there is not always sufficient detail in *The Severed Head's* analyses to challenge each intellectual landscape in turn, Kristeva manages, adeptly on the whole, to rethink the issues she addresses in some fascinating ways. The book is at base a glorious unfolding of the sign, in which the graphical arts are rendered into critical theoretical terms, but with all the traditional pomp of 'semiotics' held thankfully beyond the frame of the discussion. And some alacritous readings are surely worth that.

In her first chapter, Kristeva recalls a radio contest in which as a child she won first prize. The competition required a drawing of the fastest way to travel and the winning sketch, donated in fact by young Julia's mother, was of a snowman in the process of melting, 'his head falling off, as though severed by the invisible guillotine of the sun'. Beside the decapitated snowman was drawn the earth in its cosmic orbit, 'offering its imaginary expanses for armchair travels' (p. 2). The rationale for the drawing, and the reason for its competitive success, was that 'thought travels the fastest of all', exceeding the speed of all bodies, human or interplanetary. The sense of this simple drawing as a concretization of the problematic nature of thinking itself (always grand, always prone to melt, liable to expand without warning) is instructive, and sets up the book rather nicely. But as Kristeva herself observes, the drawing makes apparent the very function of her book: illuminating 'the border dividing the visible from the invisible' (p. 3). The snowman's body that rests delicately between form and formlessness, the thought that can descend into puddle or else transcend cosmic orbits, the

fragility of the sketch itself as a transportative medium, all combine in and as *The Severed Head*. Kristeva's text delineates between masculine and feminine principles in artistic discourse, between divine and human in theological discourse, and between presence and mediation in the church, pulpit, library and gallery, and Kristeva walks the lines betwixt and between—now composed of charcoal, now steel, now blood, now ink—with stunning aplomb. This rupture, 'the slash' as Kristeva terms it, is what Kristeva is really getting at and her volume, prone to melt though it sometimes might be, and though often travelling through time and space all too quickly, transcends the usual intellectual orbits neatly, and at times sublimely, to get to some genuinely new places. Namely, the central contention that 'the sacred', even when that word refers only to a kind of nostalgia, is contained not in the sacrifice at all but in the face, the face as a multiplicitous icon of singular and bitter experience, the face as a capacity for representation, the face as a mode of imaginative and liturgical transportation. And that is a truly exercising thought, an absence of bedeviled detail or no.



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