

Book Review: Kristeva Reframed

by Blog Admin

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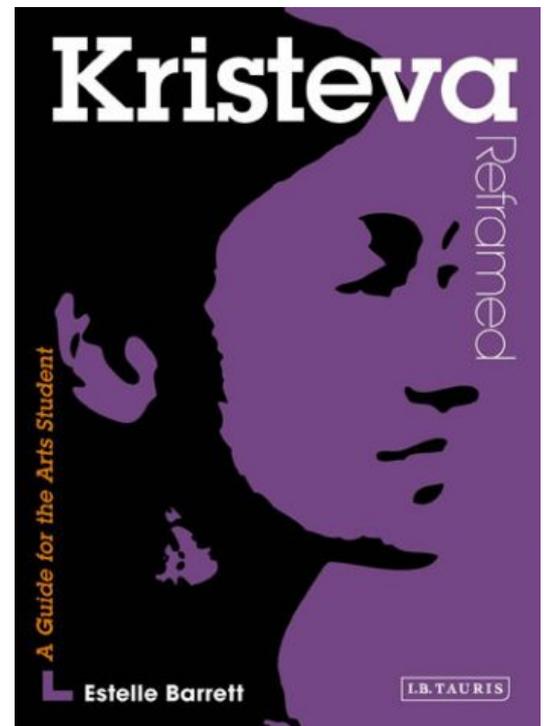
***Kristeva Reframed** examines key ideas in Julia Kristeva's work to show how they are most relevant to students and artists, and how they can be applied in interpreting artworks. With examples from the paintings of Van Gogh and Picasso, the work of contemporary feminist painters, the photography of Bill Henson and the film and animation work of Van Sowerine, **Estelle Barrett** demonstrates how Kristeva can illuminate the relationship between art and knowledge. **Alasia Nuti** finds most interesting the chapter on Kristeva's relationship with feminism and art.*



Kristeva Reframed. Estelle Barrett. IB Tauris. December 2010.

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In an era of economic crisis in which governments do not hesitate to make cuts in arts funding, a book series aimed at applying key contemporary thinkers to the arts might initially appear outdated and anachronistic. However, with regard to the series published by I.B. Tauris this preliminary judgement is too harsh and completely misses the scope of this editorial initiative, which shows how the arts are still, and especially, relevant in dark times. In particular, Estelle Barrett's volume *Kristeva Reframed* insists on "the role and function of art in contemporary society" (p. 3) as one of the few revolutionary spaces where changes in subjects and surrounding societies might happen. Barrett makes this claim by engaging with one of the most influential and yet controversial thinkers of the last 60 years: [Julia Kristeva](#). Merging the psychoanalysis of Kristeva with aesthetic experience has far-reaching consequences for the debate over the actual status of arts and, furthermore, sheds light on some of the complex concepts developed by Kristeva.



Focusing on a single notion of Kristeva's thought in each chapter, Barrett explains the relevance of some of the most well-known concepts put forward by Kristeva to artistic practice and directly applies her theory to the interpretation of artworks.

For example, in Chapter 4, Barrett shows how the notion of 'abjection' is fundamental to understanding the link between artistic production and transgression. As described by Kristeva, abjection is a psychoanalytic phenomenon whereby the subject attempts to preserve the boundary between herself and her innate and primordial fears by expelling them. What is abjected is, at the same time, what is able to connect the subject with her most profound drives and force her to rebel against the surrounding pre-established order. While different scholars have expanded on Kristeva's suggestion that abjection might explain sociological pathologies as racism, Barrett convincingly insists on the therapeutic function of arts by claiming that "only art can linger over abjection, and thus succeed in overcoming fear" (p. 102). Therefore, far from being a frivolous practice, artistic experience might prove to be an invaluable means not only to understand the complex processes from which intolerance and xenophobia stem, but also to effectively address their deep roots.

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Throughout the entire book, Barrett contends that, according to Kristeva, artistic language, along with psychoanalytic language, has the potential for transgressing conventions, rules, crystallised codes, and opening to new and revolutionary discourses. In other words, through creative practice, the subjects come into contact with an unconscious, embodied, material and emotional dimension of language, called the “semiotic”, that disrupts traditional meanings and established symbolic practices to generate radical changes. The outbreak of revolution, thus, does not occur as a mere result of economic and socio-political conditions. Revolutions are also the product of “dissenting subjectivities” (p. 22) that are formed through and driven by aesthetic experience.

The access to the semiotic nature of language that leads to revolutionary transformations is not exclusively opened to the artists, but it is offered also to those who passively enjoy artworks. As Barrett explains in Chapter 2, in Kristeva’s thought, “there is no essential separation between practice and theory” (p. 33) and an interpretative analysis of artworks that is able to go beyond traditional codified rules, such as the “semanalysis” developed by Kristeva herself, could capture transgressive meanings and enter into the semiotic realm.

Of particular interest is Barrett’s deployment of Kristeva’s theory to illuminate some feminist artistic productions, namely the paintings realised by [Alison Rowley](#) and Linda Banazis, and the nude photography of [Wendy Beatty](#). As it is known by avid readers of Kristeva, the relationship between feminism and Kristeva is anything but an easy one. Due to Kristeva’s outright rejection of feminism, feminists have either jettisoned her thought or strived to demonstrate how, *pace* Kristeva, the ideas of the contemporary psychoanalyst are feminist in character. Although Barrett avoids entering this heated debate, by showing how Kristeva’s theory unravels the exceeding meaning of the works of some feminist artists, she points to a yet unexplored connection between feminist scholarship and Kristeva’s theory. By dismantling the hegemonic and patriarchal discourses that dominate contemporary society and the artistic field, feminist arts represent a “site of contestation” (p. 47) that is apt to revolutionary transform the ordinary discourses or, in Kristeva’s terms, to move beyond the symbolic order towards the semiotic sphere.

In addition to offering a significant contribution to the extensive body of literature on Kristeva and aesthetics, and to the discussion over the space of the arts within contemporary societies, Barrett’s work aims to introduce Kristeva’s theory to new audiences. However, much as a useful glossary of the key notions elaborated by Kristeva is included at the end of the volume, Kristeva’s thought, let alone its application to artworks, remains puzzling for those who are completely strange to Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. For that reason, we might be tempted to provocatively ask the author whether the revolution that, according to Kristeva, the arts is supposed to start, is a privilege only for a restricted well-educated elite.

[Read more from the IB Tauris Reframed Series.](#)

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