

Kristeva and *The Idiots*

Cecilia Sjöholm

The thematic obsessions of filmmaker Lars von Trier are as dubious as they are relevant to contemporary thought: unconditional love, feminine sacrifice, childish gestural provocations and victimization are contrasted with the neurotic fears of normality and authoritarian abuses of power. It has been said by various film critics that the issues raised in his latest movie *Dogville* could be read as a continuation of questions evoked in and by *The Idiots*, a film from 1997, and that it shows a new maturity in terms of political and social engagement. But one wonders if the term 'maturity' ought ever to have a place in the writing that continues to emerge around the films of von Trier. Engagement, maybe; but even then there is little reason to pretend that the interest of his films should lie in a conscious enactment of a political standpoint.

So where should it lie? Perhaps in its politicization of an 'elsewhere' in relation to political discourse, an 'elsewhere' which has also been the focal point of French philosophy since the 1960s. (Julia Kristeva, Gilles Deleuze, Alain Badiou, Michel Foucault and others have all evoked a politics of transformative practices, challenging and transgressive perhaps in relation to a normative order of discourse.) In fact, the case of *The Idiots* is interesting not least because it stages a return to the ideas of the revolt of the 1960s, and in a way that becomes a sort of travesty. Rather than being situated in the feverish excitement of the Paris of 1968 it is set in the sleepy Danish suburbia of the 1990s. But the staged revolt is very much a return to the gestures of a pleasurable transgression that was integral to the alternative ways of thinking the political in the 1960s and 1970s. Von Trier has himself described the film as an expression of his own hatred of the living experiments of that epoch: alternative communities and families only cover the pathetic side of dogmatism in suburbia.

Julia Kristeva's idea of revolt as return offers a certain commutability with the regression staged in the film, and allows us also to consider the highly ambiguous effects of that return. Whereas the politicization of another scene has been a concern for most

of the radical philosophers coming out of the Parisian context, few have emphasized, as Kristeva has, the neurotic and perverted pleasures of that revolt and the ambivalences that are already inherent in it. In doing so, Kristeva is not just endorsing a politics of pleasure but also bringing it to its impossible end-point. Kristeva's thought on the political dimensions of expression become relevant too, in relation to the language of von Trier's film. The rules of 'dogme' filmmaking require technical minimalism: no artificial lights, no make-up, hand-held camera, among other strictures. The result is a cinematic language in which the technical devices are no longer made invisible, but rather allowed to dominate the screen. The graininess and shakiness of the image are features that could perhaps be called a cinematic language dominated by the semiotic. It creates an uncertainty of viewpoint which makes perceptual space uncertain and fleeting, and the borders between perceived object and point of view become compromised and ambiguous. In *The Idiots*, furthermore, the semiotic language of the film is impossible to detach from its theme: a group of people deciding to live together and to act out 'the idiot' within, both in the bourgeois neighbourhood in which they live and with each other. In acting out the idiot, they regress both in public and with each other. Replacing speech with sounds, experimenting in touching each other without inhibitions, they are looking for the moment of 'spassing', the moment when mimicry has transposed into a genuine state of regression beyond normative limits of behaviour.

The reason for the experiment is not, however, obvious. There is no aim in the provocative gesture except provocation itself and the pleasure taken in the 'revolt'. The group goes to restaurants, to job interviews, to a home for the mentally handicapped, on field trips, acting out the gestures and sounds of idiocy only to be received with a mixture of consideration and condescension. The provocation lies in not just the challenge to social norms in behaviour. The characters played in *The Idiots*, inept at communicating or acting in conformity with linguistic and social norms, clearly

threaten not society so much as the identity and sense of self of the people they encounter. Their enjoyment is the embarrassment of others. Consequently, the first half of the film is quite funny, lampooning the fear of bourgeois suburbia in the face of the boundless pleasure to be taken in transgression. The mood changes, however, when the group inverts its efforts to transgress inwards, towards its own members: the much-talked-about group sex scene depicts a half-rape and the atmosphere is increasingly menacing. This becomes obvious in the gradual disintegration of the group itself. One young woman, who has fled from her home, is unexpectedly collected by her father and it is suggested that her problems are not just enacted, but real. The main female character – who, it is revealed, has been attracted to the group in a state of vulnerability after the death of her child, slowly disintegrates to the point of ‘idiocy’ and continues to ‘spass’ after the group has been dissolved. The subversive gesture of *The Idiots* is revealed as a blind alley, undoing not just the repressive norms of a society trying to rid itself of those who are ‘different’. The subversion also undoes those norms that serve to tie the bonds of love and protection. *The Idiots*, with their provocative ‘spassing’, become unbearable not only to the representatives of Danish suburbia but also to the cinema-goers and even, more importantly, to each other. The leader of the group reveals himself as a fanatic with no consideration for weakness, embodying the kind of dogmatism which Kristeva early on diagnosed as political perversion, a symptom of denial rather than intellectual force.

The fascination which attaches an individual to a political idea is, Kristeva argues, the same kind of fascination which attaches an individual to a perverse fixation. But what is lacking in the idiots’ experiment, as in perverse fixation, is the moment of sacrifice in which pleasure is given up: there is no decapitation of the revolt. Instead, the experiment escalates to the point at which a harsh doctrine of enjoyment replaces the pleasure taken in the transgression of phobic social norms. The failure of the experiment indicates that it is not possible to ‘tame’ pleasure and avoid its escalation into the perversity of enjoyment. In this regard, there is in fact not that much difference between the compromised position of the fascist and the subversive gestures of the ‘idiots’. Political perversions are all structured by an ideal which refuses reality in favour of a libidinal or sublimated form of gratification. As Kristeva’s work recognized early on, there is a direct link between the refusal to give up on gratification and the persistence of the abject, shooting through the

demarcation line between subject and object, fascination and horror, heroic subversion and disintegration. At the same time, any politics of pleasure evokes Roland Barthes in his attempt to demythologize pleasure as a simple and rightist concept: the Left has all too often been led to believe that pleasure is a simple residue, at best the price to be gained at the end of a rationalist and concerned emancipatory project.¹

Transgression, pleasure, sacrifice

The gestural provocation of the ‘idiots’ is allied to the aesthetic of Kristeva herself. The idea of an invisible symbolic order, comprising primarily linguistic and social norms, against which art ‘revolts’ is not far from von Trier’s vision of the ‘idiots’ upsetting sleepy Danish suburbia. And von Trier’s vision could perhaps be said to recall the criticism directed against Kristeva’s valorization of the semiotic: it is precisely in its own efficiency that semiotic transgression may appear politically useless and self-destructive in the end. Most of the ‘idiots’, safely lodged in the house of a well-to-do uncle, are not really putting anything at risk; they are merely enjoying their transgression. But for the subjects who really are exposed to the disintegration of the invisible limits between ‘normality’ and psychosis, the experience is a disaster. In the end, the transgressive gesture does not disrupt social norms, only those who are already crushed by them. The question then would be: in promoting a politics of pleasure – another word for politicizing those other spaces of corporeality and art promoted not only by Kristeva but also by Deleuze and Foucault, for example – are we really putting social norms in question or are we merely enforcing other kinds of divides? Do we respond to the upset with new fetishistic fixations, or are we capable of accepting the ambiguity that any politics of pleasure must be prepared to sustain?

Many critics on the Left (Terry Eagleton, Nancy Fraser, Toril Moi, Jacqueline Rose, to name only a few) have complained about the emphasis on and romanticization of transgression in Kristeva’s work. But it could be argued that what these critics regard as transgression is in fact the negativity at work in subjectivity itself. Overall, there is no conformist, well-adapted subject to contrast with a transgressive mode. Given the inherent pathologies in any society, a politics of negativity will always open towards experiences that are neither ethical nor particularly constructive. As is well known, the figures of focus in Kristeva’s work all tend to be marginal in one way or another; whether they be homosexuals, women, displeasing intellectuals or dandyish poets. Kristeva’s theory of

marginality is often evoked as a revolutionary idea of subversion, or postmodern ethics. Marginal existents, however, are not necessarily political in a recognizable way. The objects of Kristeva's studies are neither particularly revolutionary nor particularly ethical. At best, they tend rather to be unheroic (like Proust and Baudelaire), tragic (like Duras) or unsympathetic (like Rimbaud). At worst, they are fascist and misogynist (like Céline).

Many feminist theoreticians, such as Toril Moi, Seyla Benhabib and Nancy Fraser, have noted the progressive potential in Kristeva's theory of a destabilizing and displacing element in subjectivity whilst at the same time protesting against its lack of social and political definition: how are we to find new forms of solidarity out of a theory that celebrates destabilization and transgression? However, those who have criticized Kristeva for not specifying possibilities for identification and solidarity tend to forego, in their turn, the question of the body and of sexuality. The 'revolt' of marginal practices such as literature, which Kristeva is eager to proclaim, is to a large extent dependent on the involvement of the body. Even so, Kristeva's actual theory of the body is, despite its apparent transparency, rather difficult to assess. It is not obvious what kind of body, precisely, we are dealing with. Is it a vehicle of flesh which is merely lived and felt? A body defined by archaic and infantile qualities, naive vessels of impulsive affects preceding the context of discursive and cultural practices? If so, it would be difficult to argue for the theoretical interest of this naturalized concept of the body. Judith Butler, for instance, considers Kristeva's 'body politic' to be a dead end. According to Butler, Kristeva's whole notion of subversion relies on there being a sphere beyond the paternal law against which the subject reacts. At the same time, however, the very idea of this supposedly corporeal subversive sphere is dependent on the law against which it reacts. We have to cure ourselves, says Butler,

of the illusion of a true body beyond the law. If subversion is possible, it will be a subversion from within the terms of the law, through the possibilities that emerge when the law turns against itself and spawns unexpected permutations of itself. The culturally constructed body will then be liberated, not to its 'natural past' nor to its original pleasures, but to an open future of cultural possibilities.²

Although Kristeva's body politic is indeed open to such criticisms, perhaps one could argue that the body in Kristeva is a model rather than affectation, a condition or situation rather than a specific disposition:

the model, that is, of the *chora*, which makes the subject a site of all those processes of displacement and transposition which Freud calls the primary processes. It is those processes that tend to overshoot the sacrificial logic instituted by the models of political representation. Moira Gatens has shown the need to probe deeper into the relation between the body politic, as it emerged in the modern discourse of the social contract, and the singular body:

Discourses on the body and discourses on the body politic each borrow terms from each other. This mutual cross-referencing appears in their shared vocabularies, for example, 'constitution', 'regime' and 'diet'. A philosophically common metaphor for the appropriate relation between the mind and the body is to posit a *political* relation, where one (the mind) should dominate, subjugate or govern the other (the body).³

According to Gatens, this order implies, for example, the rule of men over women. Women were not considered capable of rational thought, or to be autonomous in relation to their bodies, as opposed to men. The problem for Gatens, then, is to find a way to *embody* the modern notion of a body politic, a notion that has paradoxically been constructed around the notion of disembodiment and rationality. Feminist theory often argues that Western thought is governed by dualisms: for instance those between nature and culture, body and mind, passion and reason, but also the dualism between family and state, and most importantly, Gatens adds, the dualism between body and body politic. Political modernity, in the guise of the social contract, has submitted the singular body to the body politic. This means, as well, that the singular body is submitted to a contract, which is secondary to the social contract forming the body politic, submitted to it and not represented by it. The social contract, in fact, is quite restricted and restrictive, exclusionary in its application to a certain kind of body, which is usually male, white, employed, and so on.⁴

Kristeva had already noted in 'Women's Time' the deeply embedded problem of gender in the social contract. The problem of the body, she says, plays itself out in a sacrificial notion of identity. European ideology promotes a logic of identification which is consistent with rationality.⁵ This calls for a consistent, irreducible and unquestionable kind of identity, which in turn rests on a sacrificial logic: part of the subject must, in this way, be foreclosed and made inaccessible. The body in which Kristeva is interested is not a body with a sexual or other identity – Kristeva's politics is in fact a challenge to the notion of a body

which is submitted, constructed and domesticated. The interest of the model of the body as *chora* is rather that it challenges culturally and politically formed bodies. Accordingly, she argues against the ‘sacrificial universality’ of the French republic, incorporating the unity of thought as invisible activity, able to master the ‘universe’ as well as the human beings ‘unified’. Whether it is explicitly One paternal God or One abstract principle, the universal is sacrificial, in the sense that ‘every mental representation (sign, idea, thought) abandons, loses or sacrifices matter: the thing or the object to which the representation refers’.⁶

Kristeva’s revolution is not an event, or a vision, but a process, which takes place in and through the subject, rather than in the organization of social and political institutions. The question, however, must be how this ‘semiotic revolution’ can be brought into the service of a politics. At this point we should note that, for Kristeva, although the semiotic revolution is an ongoing process in our cultures, it must also be supplanted by another: that of sacrifice. The semiotic revolution, or intimate revolt, waivers *between pleasure and sacrifice*. Pleasure, because all transgression involves a return to corporeal processes of symbolization; sacrifice, because all revolutions must end with decapitation, which in this case involves a temporary stasis or halt in the movement of destabilization. The body is recuperated only to be lost again. The oscillation between surge, challenge, revolt and subversion, on the one hand, and, on the other, the necessary loss or sacrifice that any revolution will necessarily claim recuperates new possibilities into the moral and political life of the subject. But there are two forms of sacrifice, of which only one is constructive. The first form is imposed by what Kristeva calls the socio-symbolic contract, which is close to what Slavoj Žižek identifies as the sacrifice instituting enjoyment: ‘the subject does not offer his sacrifice to profit from it for himself, but to fill in the lack in the Other, to sustain the appearance of the other’s omnipotence or, at least, consistency’.⁷ The second form is necessitated by symbol formation and motivated by the drive itself. Sacrifice, to the kind of contract which Kristeva calls an internalized symbolic one, or a Freudian contract, is a condition for symbolization and signification: ‘Sacrifice sets up the symbol and the symbolic order at the same time, and the this “first” symbol, the victim of a murder, merely represents the structural violence of language’s irruption as the murder of soma, the transformation of the body, the captation of drives’.⁸ This means that the Freudian internalized contract, rather than defining gender in a socially given form, or

as limitation to sexual forms of identity, will institute a limit of pleasure beyond which one finds *jouissance*. The possibility of transgression is at play in every form of symbolization, but the pleasure of transgression is lost with the erection of sacrificial identities. There are two sides to the sacred and the sacrifice: on the one hand they install social norms and bonds through ritual; on the other, they evoke those uncertain spaces where identity and norms are not yet in place.

This explains why, for Kristeva, there is one more social event which accompanies sacrifice at the institutionalization of the symbol. Art represents this flowing of *jouissance* into language. Poetry confronts the sacrifice of *jouissance*; it brings it back. It transgresses the sacrifice of the body that has to take place in the social order: ‘We thus find sacrifice and art, face to face, representing the two aspects of the thetic function: the prohibition of *jouissance* by language and the introduction of *jouissance* into and through language’.⁹ In other words, poetry and art are generated at those very limits where the very sacrifice instituting the possibility of symbolization has been institutionalized. In attaching ritualistic sacrifice to the working of poetry, Kristeva is attempting to show that there will always be practices of enjoyment present at the limits of the dominant social order, practices which will both threaten and challenge the origins of its own institution.

The abjectal drive

It is for this reason that immature gestures such as the one presented to us by *The Idiots* – a film enacting the ritual returns to such origins – becomes truly challenging. And such gestures are not new; they are, as Kristeva herself has shown in *Strangers to Ourselves*, datable to the origins of sacrificial notions of political representability itself. Hegel already had a reading of Diderot’s *Rameau’s Nephew*, published in 1805 in Germany, and in 1821 in France. The novel is a dialogue between a self who is a philosopher and the awkward *He*, an ebullient body acting out everything that is being said in a distorted fashion:

He was prostrate at my feet, his face on the ground, and seemed to be clutching in both his hands the tip of my slipper. He was crying and sobbing out words.... He jumbled together thirty different airs, French, Italian, comic, tragic – in every style. Now in a baritone voice he sank to the pit; then straining in falsetto he tore to shreds the upper notes of some air, imitating the while the stance, walk and gestures of several characters; being in succession furious, mollified, lordly, sneering. First a damsel weeps and reproduces her kittenish ways; next he is a priest, a

king, a tyrant; he threatens, commands, rages. Now he is a slave, he obeys.¹⁰

For Hegel, the text shows that individuality is unstable until it becomes 'universal'. The nephew is the incarnation of the perversity of court culture or 'pure culture', where consciousness is estranged to itself and split, beyond possibility of being reconciled through universality.¹¹ For Kristeva, Diderot's text insists on the specific pleasures associated with the split subjectivity of the foreign: 'Being alienated from myself, as painful as that may be, provides me with that exquisite distance with which perverse pleasure begins, as well as the possibility of my imagining and thinking, the impetus of my culture.'¹² Living between cultures, between tongues, like an orphan without parents, the foreigner exposes modern 'man' to the contingency of his own identity. In Kristeva's reading, it is not by chance that the nephew's cosmopolitan idiocy is contrasted with universalist demands. The nephew, in fact, tries very hard *not* to be a citizen, *not* to be subjected to sovereignty or indeed to the sacrificial logic of any contract. He is from many disparate places, and origins; a cosmopolite, not through travels, but through the dispersal of his many positions as a subject. Such a strange man, spasmodic to the point of idiocy, she argues, is in fact a reaction against the shortcomings of political institutions and their incapacity to embody symbolic power. In fact, the worse the symbolic institutions seem to function, the more the idiocies seem to multiply.¹³ But, ultimately, the political stance incorporated by such a strange personality is, of course, the rejection of the sacrificial logic instituted by the new universalism. There is, in line with this argument, no project of emancipation properly speaking in Kristeva's work: through its very definition the subject-in-process, or what she later calls the subject of intimate revolt, is rejecting freedom and autonomy in the name of universalizable models. It is, rather, aiming to release forces of negativity that emphasize the complexity and heterogeneity of the subject. The poet finds his voice in the inhumanity of 'horror, death, madness, orgy, outlaws, war, the feminine threat, the horrendous delights of love, disgust, and fright'.¹⁴ In fact, all literature is abyssal in one sense or another, written at the limits of a discourse between subject and object: 'double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject'.¹⁵ But, rather than regarding this as a symptom of, for

instance, xenophobia, abjectal art in this vein could be seen as a challenge to the ideologies of completeness and totality, which in turn foster racism and misogyny. The abjectal drive is a drive of contamination, breaking down distinctions between inside and outside, the known and the unknown, self and 'other'. Given that logic, we may perhaps look at Kristeva's politics of pleasure, such as it has been enacted by idiots in Hegel's time as well as our own, with new eyes: the return of pleasure is, perhaps, not a bad principle to be upheld against much darker ones.

Notes

1. Barthes describes this polarization in terms of intellectuality against pleasure, reason against sensation, cold abstraction against life. This polarization, according to Barthes, leads the Left to emphasize method, reason, commitment, to the detriment of a pleasure that has become close to immoral. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller, Hill & Wang, New York, 1975, pp. 22–3.
2. Judith Butler: *Gender Trouble*, Routledge, London, 1992, p. 93.
3. Moira Gatens: *Imaginary Bodies*, Routledge, London, 1996, p. 53.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
5. Julia Kristeva: 'Women's Time', in Toril Moi, ed., *The Kristeva Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1986, p. 194.
6. Julia Kristeva: *Crisis of the European Subject*, trans. Susan Fairfield, The Other Press, New York, 2000, p. 101.
7. Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief*, Routledge, London, 2001, p. 70.
8. Julia Kristeva: *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. M. Waller, Columbia University Press, New York, 1984, p. 75.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
10. Quoted in Julia Kristeva: *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Léon Roudiez, Columbia University Press, New York, 1991, p. 136.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 145–6.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
13. The English translation reads: 'The strange man, spasmodic and pantomimic, would be the inhabitant of a country without power, the sociological symptom of a political transition. If he claimed strangeness to the point of idiosyncrasy ("the older the institution the more the idioms; the worse the times become, the more the idioms multiply"), would it not also be because political institutions that are undergoing a crisis no longer assure the symbolic identity of the power and the persons?' *Ibid.*, p. 140.
14. Julia Kristeva: *Powers of Horror*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia University Press, New York, 1982, p. 137.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 207.