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*Pleshette DeArmitt*

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# Julia Kristeva's *The Severed Head*

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Pleshette DeArmitt

University of Memphis

*The Severed Head: Capital Visions* was originally published in French as *Visions capitales* in 1998 in the *Parti pris* series, in which intellectuals were invited to curate exhibits at the Louvre Museum in Paris and to author theoretical texts to accompany the art works.<sup>1</sup> Kristeva's exhibit, which put numerous heads on display, described her work, *Visions capitales*, as a meditation on how "all vision is nothing other than [a] capital transubstantiation."<sup>2</sup> It is this transubstantiation through representation, she claims, that links us to the sacred and opens up a space of freedom.

## The Icon of the Mother

In Chapter 1 "On Drawing: Or, the Speed of Thought," Kristeva not only begins to make visible the thought that will take flight throughout this book but also renders an homage to the mother, *her* mother--"the lost head of the mother, [and] her multiple fleeting faces."<sup>3</sup> The book's seemingly curious dedication "to my mother," which opens this work that sketches out the cruel and macabre history of the representation of decapitation, begins to take on a new hue in the first chapter. Let us begin our reading of *The Severed Head* by focusing on a single image, a childhood memory, which invites the reader to rethink the history of our capital fascination with the head.

Kristeva recounts a story of a sketch that her mother, effortlessly talented at drawing and thus at bringing thoughts to life, made for the young Julia. In response to a children's radio contest that asked "What is the quickest means of transportation?" and that required both a written answer and an accompanying illustration, Kristeva's mother offered an answer: "It's thought."<sup>4</sup> Julia protested that a thought cannot be drawn. Yet, on a postcard and upon Kristeva's memory, her mother drew an image or, more accurately, an "icon" that calls for contemplation. The drawing, profound in its simplicity, was that of a snowman melting with his head falling off, as though a ray of sun had sliced right through it. In juxtaposition to the decapitated snowman, Kristeva's mother drew the planet earth, as if to

invite the viewer on imaginary travels. Like a Byzantine icon, this drawing does not represent an object—in this case a thought. Rather, it lets be seen how the perishable body transcends itself in the quickness of thought. For Kristeva, her mother's drawing, by evoking the power of thought rather than attempting to render it, brings us to the crossroads of the visible and invisible, which are translated one into the other in representation.

### Kristeva's Capital Captivation

"I can't take my eyes off of that severed head," Kristeva writes.<sup>5</sup> Symptom of obsession, depression, feminine distress. Perhaps? What interests Kristeva in this capital captivation for the head is what it has opened up in the history of the visible. She elaborates: "A moment when human beings were not content to copy the surrounding world, but when, through a new, intimate vision of their own visionary capacity, through an additional return on their ability to represent and to think, they wanted to make visible that subjective intimacy itself."<sup>6</sup> This negotiation with the invisible within one's self and the desire to represent it evokes, Kristeva suggests, a confrontation with "the fundamental invisible that is death."<sup>7</sup> Thus, any attempt to make visible this intimate, invisible space of thought would not only have to pass through an obsession with the head "as a symbol of the thinking living being,"<sup>8</sup> but also it would be with a head that keeps threatening to disappear and be lost to the invisible.

### A Capital Substitution

Kristeva returns to the lessons learned from analytic experience to make the case that it is not just any head that captivates us, but it is first and foremost the mother's head from which we can't avert our gaze. To clarify this point, we direct our attention to the second chapter of *The Severed Head*, entitled "The Skull: Cult and Art." There, Kristeva traces in great detail the desire for and worship of the head and skull in primitive civilizations. In different periods and across numerous cultures, she writes, "the ancestors of our species gave preferential treatment for the heads of their dead."<sup>9</sup> Skulls were worked—transformed by deformation, modeling, and decoration. These primitive works of art, according to a sacred logic, were addressed to the dead, intended for them, and thus served as a conduit to the world of the invisible. The decapitated heads were in a sense "sacrificed" to the dead and, in return, their powers would be transposed to the living. This is most dramatically and gruesomely seen in the practice of exocannibalism, in which victims' brains were consumed in order to appropriate their "vital substance."<sup>10</sup>

In this context, Kristeva recalls Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, in which he lays out the logic of the totemic meal. As we recall, Freud speculates that the social pact, culture, and interiority arose from a foundational act of violence—the murder and devouring of the primal father. By eating the father, "his

brain, head, and entire body," both a physical and symbolical assimilation of his power and the end of his tyrannical rule were accomplished. This original "'action' of cutting, devouring, murderous as it was, is gradually transformed into representation."<sup>11</sup> Then, through the totemic meal and skull cults, one finds an obsession with the capital organ--the head in its phallic rectitude.

Yet, if the lost head is the father's, why were women's heads more frequently employed in the ritual practices of manipulating, adorning, and displaying skulls? In order to suggest an answer, might we return, as Kristeva does, to the time in psychic life in which the "great-mother goddesses" still transfixed our gazes? Borrowing again from analytic insights, particularly those of Melanie Klein, Kristeva recalls the infant's early loss of the mother which causes a "precocious bereavement," in Kleinian language the "depressive position." "A body leaves me," Kristeva writes, "her tactile warmth, her music that delights my ear, the view that offers me her head and face, they are all lost."<sup>12</sup> This sadness and separation are, however, auspicious for the future speaking being. The disappearance of the maternal visage, a face both loved and feared, affords the infant the opportunity to represent her. "I have lost Mama?" Kristeva asks. "No, I hallucinate her: I see her image, then I name her."<sup>13</sup> As sexual autoeroticism is transformed into the autoeroticism of thought, the capital disappearance of the mother is substituted with a capital vision, one that remains riven with oral desires. Thus, Kristeva descriptively writes that "[t]o assimilate the head of the other, to absorb the mother's milk of the brain, to manipulate the roundness of the skull: the cannibalistic ritual is as much if not more an appropriation of the mother's power than a devouring of thee father-tyrant."<sup>14</sup> Kristeva thus concludes that "skull worship commemorated two events: the original loss of the *mother*, the source of *melancholy*, and the phallic trial, the threat of castration by the father."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented as part of a roundtable on Kristeva's *The Severed Head* at the inaugural meeting of the Kristeva Circle on October 13, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Julia Kristeva, *The Severed Head: Capital Visions*, trans. Jody Gladding (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 6.

<sup>4</sup> Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 4.

<sup>6</sup> Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 4.

- <sup>7</sup> Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 4.
- <sup>8</sup> Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 4.
- <sup>9</sup> Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 11.
- <sup>10</sup> Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 12.
- <sup>11</sup> Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 14.
- <sup>12</sup> Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 6.
- <sup>13</sup> Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 5.
- <sup>14</sup> Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 16.
- <sup>15</sup> Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 17.