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It can hardly have escaped Julia Kristeva that her 2011 study *The Severed Head: Capital Visions* enacts its contents, so to speak, at the level of its literary form. I mean by this that the book – a short study of artistic, cultural and political uses of severed heads – evokes the notion of a "severed text" on (at least) three distinct levels of association. First, there is the metaphorical sense in which all texts are severed objects, lopped off from the bodies of thought that produce them[1]; second, there is the banal sense in which one places the book, repository of knowledge, on a shelf like a trophy; and finally – most interesting of all – there is the sense in which Kristeva's text is an instance of the very "decapitation-representation" that it explores. More precisely, it can be read without difficulty as an enactment of the human psychological/philosophical drama of skull and face worship that, for Kristeva, indicates certain "significant anthropological constants" (11).

To say as much is to believe that *The Severed Head* does what it describes, which is to say, mitigates melancholy and death. This it does through hiving off a piece of (over-determined) reality, the human head and face, as representation. But this speaks to what I believe is the text's central, substantive and most interesting claim – that representations of severed heads, paradoxically, emerge from an overcoming of death through representation, and are therefore – though in some ways remaining profoundly ambivalent – more life-affirming than not. Kristeva notes that in the period before the very young child acquires language, she goes through a transitory period of profound melancholy (5). This feeling develops alongside the realization of the gratuity and impermanence of the mother, i.e. the loss of maternal dependence. The child begins to represent the lost mother through language; begins to imagine/dream/represent her face and skull, "primary targets of the gaze", thus "privileged stations in the loss of maternal dependence" (16). For Kristeva, "most of us replace the absent face, as loved as it is feared, source of joy and terror with … a representation" (5). As she eloquently puts it, "… grieving is dependent on sublimation. Have we really fathomed how grief and melancholy line the underside of our languages, our so-called mother tongues?" (6). Thus *The Severed Head* begs an engagement with Kristeva's earlier and more substantial *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (1989). Her brief clinical sketch explaining the

historically pervasive fixation on heads and faces opens fascinating lines of inquiry; for example, the rooting of grieving in sublimation also lends itself to a language-based typology of developmental pathologies. By way of example, Kristeva briefly explores the case of the autistic child, who "eludes language" (16).

Kristeva's "clinical" thesis thus grounds a text which otherwise suffers, at points, from being ill-adapted from its original purpose, which was to curate a gallery showing (we are told unhelpfully at times to refer to unspecified video loops). It is, precisely, the wonderful levity with which Kristeva moves from topic to topic – certainly fitting for a commentary on a gallery showing – that does not do justice to this substantive, philosophical core of the work. Her meditations on capital visions bring us from pre-historical evidence of cranial manipulations and skull worship through Medusa representations and the logic of the religious icon, to decapitations and figures of biblical women, the spectacle of the guillotine, modern televisual representations of decapitations and finally, the push for "acephalous" thought in the Twentieth Century. Throughout, Kristeva maintains her central thesis: that human obsession with the severed head in representations and in ritual stems not only from the anthropological, pre-historical "cradle of humanity" (to evoke Bataille, who appears late in the text), but also from the early development of the individual ego. The way that Kristeva moves through the history of capital representations evokes the expansiveness of a textual introduction by Hegel. This is its virtue and its flaw; just as the joints of Hegel's system often seem a little too tidy, Kristeva's text gives the impression of moving effortlessly precisely where one would expect more friction.

Indeed, Kristeva's text is profoundly Hegelian (naturally, one might argue, since it is Freudian). This could indicate an interpretation of its silence with respect to the post-Lacanian philosophy of desire which had its moment during what she calls the "Belle Epoque" (89) of the French 1970s. Though she gives precursors Bataille and *Acéphale* their due in the final chapter, there is no discussion of the genuine (though genuinely paradoxical) attempt of some of Kristeva's then-contemporaries to launch a truly "headless" thought, denying the critical distance implied by the Hegelian labour of the negative (I am thinking here of Deleuze and Guattari, Lyotard). Such attempts should have been doubly interesting to Kristeva, to the extent that they drew considerable inspiration from both Bataille and from Freud's pulsional theory. This silence – but also her designation of this "Belle Epoque", this wistful irony – might be read symptomatically. Is *The Severed Head* a triumphalist text? A recuperation of the death of the king, the structure absorbing the thinking which strains to escape it? A working-through, or perhaps, in spite of Kristeva's best intentions, at points a fetishistic disavowal? Like any good Hegelian text, *The Severed Head* draws us into a search for the other members of the corpus. Taken on its own it is

monstrous, an image of the abjected head in search of a body; but for this reason it speaks to the philosophy of recuperation, the tough optimism that is always detectable at the bottom of Kristeva's meditations on the darkest of subjects.

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[1] The connection of the written work to excrement may also be made according to a Freudian symbolic economy. See Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 182-183 for a discussion of the excremental character of the work, in connection with Freud and Artaud (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978).