Copyright Statement

The digital copy of this thesis is protected by the Copyright Act 1994 (New Zealand). This thesis may be consulted by you, provided you comply with the provisions of the Act and the following conditions of use:

- Any use you make of these documents or images must be for research or private study purposes only, and you may not make them available to any other person.
- Authors control the copyright of their thesis. You will recognise the author's right to be identified as the author of this thesis, and due acknowledgement will be made to the author where appropriate.
- You will obtain the author's permission before publishing any material from their thesis.

To request permissions please use the Feedback form on our webpage. [http://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz/feedback](http://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz/feedback)

General copyright and disclaimer

In addition to the above conditions, authors give their consent for the digital copy of their work to be used subject to the conditions specified on the Library [Thesis Consent Form](http://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz/feedback)
Kristeva's Social Theory: A Lacanian Critique for Education

Lucille Anne Holmes

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education,
The University of Auckland
Abstract

This research aims to provide a symptomatic reading of the work of Julia Kristeva. A symptomatic reading is one that constructs the problematic or the unsaid of the text. As a symptomatic reader, I attempt to occupy a position within a theoretical discourse that interrogates the texts by Kristeva and those that surround her work. In doing so, my aim is to make visible the suppressed and excluded discourses within Kristevan theory and which have enabled that theory to make sense in particular ways.

The specific systems of meaning in Kristeva’s work that I will interrogate coalesce around her theory of the semiotic and the symbolic, which is presented as a revolutionary theory of subjectivity in relation to the social. Kristeva’s theory will be critically examined in terms of how it is formulated in relation to the theories of Althusser, Hegel and Lacan. Each chapter aims to displace an accepted or dominant interpretation by Kristeva and also by her readers.

In reconstructing the problematic that is concealed in Kristeva’s work, I will explore how her theory maintains an Althusserian approach to social theory, and how this underlies her critique of Hegel and Lacan. In the final chapters on Lacan, my argument is that Kristeva’s critique of Lacanian psychoanalysis is inherently flawed and that this, therefore, leads her psychoanalytic work into ethically difficult areas. In the last chapter, on education and transference, I will show how certain educational applications of Kristevan psychoanalysis culminate in the very same ethical problems. These ethical difficulties, I will argue, are avoided by Lacanian psychoanalysis and, therefore, by its application to education.
Acknowledgments

There is a vast distance between making the decision to undertake university study and actually arriving at my goal to write a doctoral thesis, and the journey across that distance can at times be difficult. I was only able to complete this journey thanks to a number of people who helped along the way. I wish to thank those people here.

Thanks to my supervisors, Stephen Appel and Michael Peters for their encouragement and support; to Matt Temple, Carolyn Alexander, Nazma Ahsan, Susan Crozier, Tina Engels-Schwarzpaul and Charl Hirschfeld for friendship, and to my colleagues and friends at Elam School of Fine Arts Lisa Crowley, Jim Speers, Peter Shand, and Carole Shepheard for unerring confidence.
# Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION Social Theory and Kristeva.........................................................1

CHAPTER I The Revolution in Kristeva's Theory of the Semiotic .......................10

1. Interpreting Absence.....................................................................................10

2. The Althusser Connection...........................................................................17

3. Althusser and Intertextuality........................................................................23

4. The Semiotic and the Symbolic in Kristeva's Social Theory.........................31

CHAPTER II The Use and Misuse of Hegelian Negativity.....................................39

1. Althusser’s Critique of Hegel......................................................................39

2. From Hegel's Negativity to Kristeva's Semiotic...........................................44

3. Reading Hegel Otherwise...........................................................................51

CHAPTER III Psychoanalytical Differences in Kristeva and Lacan.....................59

1. Theoretical Dispositions..............................................................................59

2. The Critical Divide: For and Against............................................................79


CHAPTER IV Psychoanalysis and Education Ethics............................................99

1. Transference ...............................................................................................99

2. Transference in Education.........................................................................113

CONCLUSION Social Theory, Subjectivity and the Imaginary............................131

Bibliography...................................................................................................143
Introduction

Social Theory and Kristeva

Every investigation begins when we cease to take something for granted (Copjec, 1994: 164).

Only a dogmatist "on the level of his task" can never be afraid of putting into question the previous results, turning them upside down without mercy if the new quests make it necessary, thus turning them into provisional stages of a search (Dolar, 1998: 37).

The aim of this thesis is to investigate certain key aspects of Kristeva’s work from a critical perspective, specifically with regard to its contribution to, firstly, social theory and, secondly, education. The general argument is that Kristeva, and many of her readers, have misunderstood Lacan largely on the basis of a limited reading of his work. These misconceptions undermine Kristeva’s project which is to improve upon Lacanian psychoanalysis and to provide a revolutionary theory of subjectivity.

The question that I begin with in this introduction is, what can Kristeva's work contribute to education? As a literary theorist and a practicing psychoanalyst, Kristeva’s writing has importance to social theory and therefore to education. Theorists who have emphasized this approach to such a literary and psychoanalytic theory are Philip Wexler and Anthony Elliot, who in different ways have examined the Kristevan theory of subjectivity. Wexler is a sociologist of education and author of numerous articles and books that are used in education syllabuses. His research addresses fundamental questions about what education is and what its role in society should be. Elliot is a social and political theorist who has published many books in the areas of social theory, cultural studies and psychoanalysis. His books and articles are texts in sociology, psychoanalytical and literary courses. The possibilities and the problems which Wexler and Elliot have found in Kristeva's work, serve as an introduction to the following chapters where I will address specific areas of a Kristevan social theory and its application to education.

In one of his major texts, the Social Analysis of Education (1987), Wexler proposes an alternative to the tendency in sociology to obscure and deny changes in culture and thus in social knowledge (1987: 10-11). Rather than the conception of social knowledge as distinct from the larger cultural changes, Wexler argues for a social analysis of education which takes 'seriously the current movement of society and culture' (11). The current movement, according to Wexler, includes the cultural theories of structuralism and poststructuralism,
Russian formalism, semiotics, postmodernism and deconstruction. These cultural theories are important for the social analysis of education in terms of their emphasis upon the production of knowledge and meaning.

Processes of significance, of making meaning, and the traditional locus of their study, become the focus of an interpretive social science. More and more of shared social meaning and the activity of social understanding is encompassed by the now auratic term: text (7).

A social analysis of education may be formulated by employing certain cultural theories of signification, since these theories enable an understanding as to how schooling - like all social practices - produces, distorts and transforms knowledge (13). Amongst the cultural theories to provide this understanding, Wexler includes Kristeva’s theory of the semiotic (11). The semiotic is a pre-verbal and corporeal condition of signification and, therefore, it is the productive and disruptive element of symbolic processes of meaning. Wexler finds Kristevan theory to be useful for a social analysis of education because it examines the interconnections of knowledge and meaning with the body and identity.

Other sociological theories of education, such as critical pedagogy (to which Wexler was once aligned), had already given attention to the relationship between knowledge and power, but those studies became distanced ‘from past, contemporary and emergent social movements; to replace with generality, the specific requirements of an educational politics’ (87). Rather than this disconnection of educational social theory from historical and cultural movements, Wexler encourages critical pedagogy to associate issues of knowledge with those of identity. Kristeva's poststructuralist theory of the transverbal belongs to the cultural movement Wexler calls "textualism", in which the social forces of production are analysed in language and discourse. Textualism determines its theory by the social practice of language and this approach will 'reconnect theory, research and practice in the new sociology of education to historical movements in society and education' (88). Although Wexler looks to poststructuralist theories to renew the sociology of education, he also underlines the Marxist and structuralist elements of textualism and this allows for a line of development from the previous sociology of education towards a critical sociology of education.

Sociology of education in the late 1970s had recognized the significant contribution of Althusserian structuralism in a critique of educational ideology. A key point in Wexler's critique of the sociology of education is that it was only 'an abstract appropriation of Marxist theory', where schooling is understood as a reflection or a reproduction of social ideologies (45). Although the sociology of education in the 1970s had not yet utilised the full potential of
Althusser's work, his theory of ideology as a material practice directed sociology away from the simplistic view of ideology as 'the imposition of ideas to an analysis of the discursive practices' (39). Wexler points to the theoretical use of Althusser when he explains that the demise of what is called the new sociology of education has been due to an awareness of how the reproduction model of ideology in schooling had been based on a principle of correspondence, rather than the more accurate principle of contradiction (40-41). In opposition to the reproduction model, Althusser's structuralist approach to the mode of production had explicitly criticized and transformed the orthodox Marxist theory of levels, by which the forces and relations of production are considered wholly determinative of the superstructural levels of culture, ideology, politics and law. Thus, in contrast to a simplistically determined conception of the social formation, Althusser's theory of practice requires each level of the social field to be considered as a distinct practice with its own knowledge and object, and therefore each practice is not only economically determined but is overdetermined in a complex relationship with other levels of the structure. As I discuss in Chapter 1, Althusser's conception of the social formation is a fundamental influence on Kristeva's theory in which the semiotic is the other scene of language and meaning. Significantly, for Wexler, the problems in the new sociology of education can be highlighted by Althusser's conception of society and may be alleviated by Kristeva's poststructuralist theory.

Althusser's contribution to an analysis of education is made evident in Wexler's explanation for the theoretical shift in the sociology of education with regard to the concept of the social structure.

The concept of totality was replaced by an awareness of relative institutional autonomy. Structural integration gave way to the description of internal contradictions. The reproduction of social domination was conceptually mitigated by the study of conflict. Sources of social change were found in an unfolding set of structural contradictions of the capitalist economy, and in the cultural autonomy and resistance of the working class. The reproduction theme fell into disrepute even among its original proponents (41).

In this passage Wexler explains how the new sociology of education is reconfigured in accordance with Althusser's social theory which attempts to maintain the differences, rather than the similarities, between the various social levels. My thesis begins by examining the Althusserian theory of overdetermination, where a social practice is at once determined and determining in relation to other practices in the social structure and, specifically, how this approach is developed in Kristeva's conception of the semiotic as that which is in
contradiction to the symbolic order of meaning. In Chapters 1 and 2 the Althusserian effect within Kristeva's work is explored, in order to analyse certain conceptual problems with regard to how the relations between the subject and society are theorized by Althusser and, therefore, by Kristeva.

Kristeva's theory of the semiotic is important for Wexler's social analysis of education in that it establishes connections between language and the subject, in which 'the process of movement from one discursive logic to another … is one of change and re-formation in the course of social action' (165). This approach helps to introduce my initial research question as to how Kristevan theory is relevant to education, for Wexler is concerned with how the study of signifying practices is a study of the production of knowledge, and how this is opposed to a static conception of meaning and value. Poststructuralism, or textualism, enables a 'socially de-sublimating reading' of educational knowledge (133).

[The poststructuralist] critique of liberalism is, however, not of the ideology of individualism, but rather of its discourse: of the means of producing its meaning. In choosing the discursive means of production, rather than the reified products which have been taken for 'things' or 'ideas', this more distanced form of critique anticipates a new politics in a society in which: the struggle over the means of producing discourse, over language and the practices of forming discourse, becomes the major locus of social life (134).

Wexler's approach to poststructuralism and education is implicitly addressed in the following chapters, where I critically examine Kristeva's theory of the production of meaning in terms of its theoretical configuration, its critical reception, and its educational application. My overall strategy in this investigation is informed by the emphasis, exampled here in Wexler, on the production of meaning for social analysis. Hence, the procedure I follow throughout is to question certain established readings of and by Kristeva in relation to her theory of signification. The interpretive strategy I employ is described by Wexler as a questioning of the process of constructing knowledge, and this requires us to consider the production of knowledge 'as a series of editings and recodings' (105).

In attempting to edit and recode the established interpretive field of and around Kristeva, a major area in my project is Kristevan psychoanalysis and its relationship with the work of Jacques Lacan. While Wexler does not refer to Lacan by name, he is explicitly critical of Lacan's theory that the unconscious is structured like a language. Wexler's criticism is that this conception of the unconscious has the 'individualized and universalized form … of capitalist ideology', in that it replaces the unconscious and the drives with signification (175).
For Wexler, Kristeva's work is a counteractive to the Lacanian determinism of the signifier, since in her theory, the 're-constitution of the subject of discourse takes place outside of Oedipal immediacy of even the institutional replications and reminders of familial, Oedipal relations' (165). From this perspective, Lacanian psychoanalysis conforms to a capitalist ideology because it aims to naturalise the symbolic process, while Kristeva's work is attentive to a logic that is heterogeneous to 'the discursive logic of the father and his symbolic order' (166). In Wexler's reading, Lacanian psychoanalysis cannot contribute to a social analysis of education because it does not allow for an account of identity production in educational relations (175). As a contrast to Lacan, Kristeva's theory of the semiotic shows how the subject and meaning are put into process by the corporeal, drive energies which, in regard to social theory, gives an understanding of the relation between 'discourse and individual formation and motivation in the emergent educational relation' (167, 174).

In Chapters 3 and 4, I am interested in certain areas of difference between Kristeva and Lacanian psychoanalysis, and these differences can be introduced here via Wexler's interpretation of these two theorists. By directing his critique at the Lacanian emphasis on the symbolic structure, Wexler conforms to a certain reading of Lacan which tends to neglect the important shifts in Lacan's theory. As I discuss in Chapter 3, such a selective reading of Lacan is a prevalent one, particularly amongst those critics who are attracted to Kristeva's work which, as I also demonstrate, contains this very same reading of Lacan. Chapter 3 therefore concerns important questions in my inquiry. If Kristeva's psychoanalytic work is generated in opposition to Lacan's, then as an oppositional interpretation of Lacan it requires analysis. How does Kristeva read Lacan? Is her critique valid? Does Kristeva provide an improvement to what are claimed to be the problems in Lacanian psychoanalysis?

Another social theorist, Anthony Elliot, has also recognized that social theory has much to gain from the contribution of cultural theories, such as psychoanalysis and critical theory. In *Social Theory and Psychoanalysis in Transition* (1992), Elliot examines how psychoanalysis provides 'new interpretive strategies for critical social theory in relation to self, self-identity, and subjectivity' (Elliott, 1992: 1). In order to understand the relations between self and society, social theory can benefit from psychoanalysis, which is concerned with unconscious desire in the constitution of the self and how this bears upon issues of power and domination in society. The work of Lacan, and of post-Lacanians such as Kristeva, is intended to address these very issues, yet Elliot finds that there are fundamental conceptual weaknesses in Lacanian psychoanalysis, which, according to Elliot, also diminishes the extent of Kristeva's advancement upon Lacan.

---

1 Elliot's book analyses two main theoretical approaches to the self and society: one is Lacanian psychoanalysis and its associations with poststructuralism, the other is the critical theory of the Frankfurt School (Elliott, 1992: 2).
The limitations that Elliot sees in Lacanian psychoanalysis repeat and extend upon Wexler's critique of Lacan's conception of the unconscious. Elliot's objections to Lacanian psychoanalysis are, like Wexler's, based on the complete determination of the subject by the symbolic order. Elliot provides a more extensive discussion of Lacan than Wexler with regard to a number of Lacanian concepts such as the imaginary, the mirror stage, the object (a), lack and desire. A key point in Elliot's critique concerns Lacan's apparent neglect of the drives and affective states that are incommensurable to the symbolic order: that is, 'since Lacan treats the libidinal drives as an incoherent fiction, his account of the nature of psychic representation is ... inadequate' (148). In Elliot's view, Lacanian psychoanalysis is not concerned with how dominant ideas and values can be resisted or challenged by the individual subject and, instead, 'his concept of the symbolic focuses on those mechanisms of the structural ordering of the self and self-identity' (155). Moreover, because Lacan's theory of subjectivity is founded on an ontological lack, any social action taken by the subject will only leave the subject fundamentally dissatisfied. The conclusion Elliot draws from this is that social critique is 'stripped of any ethical dimension' since any cultural or social activity is reduced to the same causal lack (261). The conceptual inadequacy of Lacan's work for a social theory is, therefore, that 'it fails to deal with the fundamental drive of the unconscious for pleasure, satisfaction, fulfilment' (261). Elliot examines important and, as I will show, frequently asked questions about Lacan's work which my thesis aims to address in terms of Lacan's approach to the drives and, also, the issue of a Lacanian ethics of psychoanalysis. In the following chapters I will re-examine the kind of questions, as typified here by Elliot, in relation to Kristeva's psychoanalysis, which is perceived as an advancement upon, albeit one that remains limited by, Lacanian psychoanalysis.

As with Wexler, Elliot finds that Kristeva's theory of the semiotic as the other side of language is promising for social theory, in that it offers the possibility for resistance to the subject's domination by the Lacanian symbolic (220-22). For Elliot, Lacan's subject is utterly determined by symbolic discourses, while Kristeva's theory positions those symbolic structures in a dialectical relationship with semiotic drives (227). Since Kristeva allows for the disruptive element of drives, her work is also concerned to elaborate how 'the semiotic is principally centred around those "archaic" dimensions of subjectivity which precede the mirror stage in Lacan's work' (228). Elliot's criticism is that Kristeva's theory of the semiotic does not succeed in resisting oppressive structures, for it can only exert its disruptive force in and through the symbolic order that functions according to the law of the father (230). Exemplifying a certain interpretive approach to Kristeva (an approach I discuss in detail in Chapter 3), Elliot's conclusion is that Kristeva remains within the Lacanian theoretical bind, for her work does not undertake 'a thoroughgoing revision of the Lacanian concept of the
symbolic and the origins of psychical reality’ (230). With regard to this reading, a question I examine and attempt to answer is whether or not Kristeva does provide a comprehensive revision of the Lacanian symbolic. In Chapter 3 my purpose is to question the interpretation of the Lacanian symbolic as a totalising and dominant structure, which can be found in interpretations both by Kristeva and of Kristeva.

Elliot's text is important for its elucidation of how psychoanalysis might contribute to social theory, specifically in terms of its emphasis on self-reflection, which involves the development of strategies to interpret and transform the connections between subjective experience and social structures (271). Nevertheless, Elliot's discussion concludes that the psychoanalytical theories of Kristeva and Lacan are not equal to this task. The Lacanian symbolic order cancels out the 'primary capacity of the psyche to make representations, identifications, affects', and this further contaminates Kristeva work insofar as it cannot account for the relationship between revolutionary language and social revolution (139, 226). The question of how Kristeva theorizes this relationship between the semiotic and the symbolic is addressed in Chapters 1 and 2 where I outline the conceptual background to this theory and the problems that arise from that theoretical alignment. Since it is Elliot's argument that Kristeva cannot escape the deterministic Lacanian symbolic, he is able to conclude that neither Kristevan nor Lacanian psychoanalysis are able to contribute to a theory and critique of society. In terms of the goals of psychoanalysis and those of social theory, the Lacanian theory of subjectivity, which for Elliot includes Kristeva's theory, is not concerned 'with the capacity for critical self-reflection, and thus an alteration of the psychical economy of the self, is repressed at this level of Lacan's work' (141). In Chapters 3 and 4, I will critically examine the significant differences in Kristevan and Lacanian psychoanalysis, particularly in terms of the function of psychoanalysis as a process for the exploration and alteration of subjectivity.

To present the main issues and approach of the following chapters it is therefore relevant to compare my purposes with Elliot's. In his introduction to Social Theory and Psychoanalysis in Transition, Elliot outlines the central aims of his study.

1. To serve as a critical introduction to some fundamental concepts and issues in social theory and psychoanalysis, focusing upon developments in modern critical theory, Lacanian and post-Lacanian thought, the theories of structuralism and poststructuralism, and feminist appropriations of psychoanalysis.
In general, to insist that the interconnections between the psyche and social field, the self and society, have not yet been formulated in an adequate fashion, and must be substantially rethought.

To contribute to the task of reformulating key problems in social theory and psychoanalysis, developing an approach sufficiently alert and sensitive to the psychological processes of the self and human social relationships, deployments of ideology and power, and the analysis of sexuality and gender division (11-12).

In comparison with those aims my approach is similar yet theoretically less extensive in that I am specifically concerned with Kristeva's work and its affiliation with Marxism, structuralism and poststructuralism, Hegelian philosophy, Lacanian psychoanalysis and certain applications of Kristeva's work in education. As with Elliot's aims, this thesis is also a critical introduction, where I revisit certain concepts and theories by Kristeva and Lacan which for social theorists, like Wexler and Elliot, are either valuable or problematic. The key concepts and areas of relevance to a social analysis that I will be addressing are: the semiotic as a subversive force for the symbolic and subjectivity, the difference between the Kristevan and Lacanian conception of the symbolic, the question of the drive in Lacan's work, and the ethical implications of each theory in relation to education. My strategy throughout this thesis is to question the received interpretations of Kristeva's work in relation to Althusser, Hegel and Lacan in Chapters 1 to 3. In the final chapter, the problem I address is whether social theory in education has too easily accepted that Kristeva's work is an advancement upon Lacanian psychoanalysis.

In regard to the second aim in Elliot's summary, my thesis is also concerned with the relationship between the psyche and the social field as Kristeva formulates it. In Chapters 1 and 2, on the basis of an analysis of the received interpretations of Kristeva's work, my purpose is to return to Kristeva's early theory of the semiotic - which, however, is retained throughout her later work - and to reconsider the conceptual limitations of this theory of social and subjective revolution. Chapter 2 is the turning point where through Žižek's re-interpretation of Hegel the thesis becomes directed towards Lacan. Here I discuss how the effect of Althusser's influence upon Kristeva (as explained in Chapter 1) is to cause a conceptual blind spot in Kristeva's interpretation of Hegelian negativity, with the result that what is subversive in Hegel's theory is reduced in an Althusserian misreading. Kristeva's critique of Hegel helps define her interpretation of Lacan's theory of desire, since the notion of negativity in Hegel concerns the question of how the particular identity is produced in and by a social formation. If Kristeva misreads the Hegelian conception of causality by reducing its subversive operations, then might her reading of Lacan's theory of desire and the
symbolic order involve similar problems? How might these problems impact on the understanding of the social and the subject in Kristeva psychoanalysis?

Chapter 3 further develops the question of interpretation in Kristeva's work, by showing how in theory, in practice and in application to education, Lacan's psychoanalysis is at variance with Kristeva's. While I would agree with Elliot that Kristeva does not provide a proper advancement of Lacan, I depart from his findings and contend that Lacan's work is a far more valuable psychoanalysis and, therefore, social theory than is considered in Elliot's study. In effect, by having rethought what are Elliot's first and second aims, by implication my concluding argument will address Elliot's third aim of contributing to the reformulation of key problems in psychoanalysis and social theory. In Chapters 3 and 4, I show how Lacanian theory is already an advancement upon Kristeva's psychoanalysis and, on the basis of this, these chapters also address the problem of how Lacan has been interpreted by Kristeva and others sharing the same approach as we have found here with Wexler and Elliot.

These texts by Wexler and Elliot are nonetheless both significant contributions to the theoretical points of connection between social theory and psychoanalysis. Above all Wexler has extended the theoretical horizons of social theory and of education by emphasising that educationists need to understand their specific field within the complexity of the broader social field. In order to take into account certain developments in the social field of knowledge, this thesis heeds Wexler's emphasis and, in the context of those critical developments, examines anew the question of the contribution of Lacanian and Kristevan psychoanalysis to social theory. The outcome of this critique is to reposition certain accepted views both in Kristeva's reading of Lacan and in prominent interpretations of Kristeva. These readings have misunderstood Lacan's theory of subjectivity to be one where the symbolic law wholly dominates the subject.