



The Severed Head: Capital Visions (European Perspectives: A Series in Social Thought and Cultural Criticism)

By Julia Kristeva

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Informed by a provocative exhibition at the Louvre curated by the author, *The Severed Head* unpacks artistic representations of severed heads from the Paleolithic period to the present. Surveying paintings, sculptures, and drawings, Julia Kristeva turns her famed critical eye to a study of the head as symbol and metaphor, as religious object and physical fact, further developing a critical theme in her work--*the power of horror*--and the potential for the face to provide an experience of the sacred.

Kristeva considers the head as icon, artifact, and locus of thought, seeking a keener understanding of the violence and desire that drives us to sever, and in some cases keep, such a potent object. Her study stretches all the way back to 6,000 B.C.E., with humans' early decoration and worship of skulls, and follows with the Medusa myth; the mandylion of Laon (a holy relic in which the face of a saint appears on a piece of cloth); the biblical story of John the Baptist and his counterpart, Salome; tales of the guillotine; modern murder mysteries; and even the rhetoric surrounding the fight for and against capital punishment. Kristeva interprets these "capital visions" through the lens of psychoanalysis, drawing infinite connections between their manifestation and sacred experience and very much affirming the possibility of the sacred, even in an era of "faceless" interaction.

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Editorial Review

Review

Through her wonder and her doubt Kristeva sets forth a compelling account of the sacred and of the intimate visionary capacity of the human soul.

(Joshua Paetkau *The Ecclesial University Blog*)

The Severed Head is a reminder that art can be the best teacher, particularly when the topic is an uncomfortable one.

(Patricia Contino *New Pages.com*)

This beautifully written and richly layered meditation on mortality and representation will undoubtedly appeal to those readers interested in semiotic and psychoanalytically informed readings of art.

(Jonathan Patkowski *Library Journal XPress Reviews*)

The Severed Head considers a remarkable range of representations of the severed head in art historical, religious and mythological contexts.

(TLS)

Review

Julia Kristeva was invited to curate an exhibit at the Louvre--an exhibit with a point of view. A smart idea. The result: this extraordinary reflection on the severed head, Medusa, John the Baptist, Judith and Holofernes especially, and the guillotine. The powers of horror that engage Kristeva in this book ultimately lead us beyond abjection to a meditation on representation and the sacred. It is an original and powerful narrative.

(Peter Brooks, professor of comparative literature, Princeton University, and author of *Enigmas of Identity*)

About the Author

Julia Kristeva is professor of linguistics at the Université de Paris VII and author of many acclaimed works and novels, including *This Incredible Need to Believe*, *Melanie Klein*, *Hannah Arendt*, *Possessions*, *Time and Sense*, *New Maladies of the Soul*, *Strangers to Ourselves*, and *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. She is the recipient of the Hannah Arendt Prize for Political Thought and the Holberg International Memorial Prize.

Jody Gladding is a poet who has translated more than twenty works from French.

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