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Exhibiting and Thinking: An Anamnesis of the Postmodern

Anne Elisabeth Sejten

Jean-François Lyotard's extraordinary exhibition *Les Immatériaux* was a complex, exciting cultural manifestation, and even 30 years later it is not hard to recall the special, joyful and intense atmosphere that surrounded the exhibition. Once it opened, the large gallery on the fifth floor of the Centre Pompidou was transformed into a laboratory that invited museum visitors to experience the arts, technology and philosophy as something tangible and corporal, yet also as highly intellectual and ambiguous. Entering the dark labyrinth pre-organised by the philosopher, one could not help but deconstruct and reconstruct a fragmented lesson on philosophy. For a moment, philosophy joined the public sphere on surprisingly philosophical premises.

Of course, this exhibition experience went beyond ordinary philosophy teaching. *Les Immatériaux* was conceived for neither amateur nor professional philosophers, but for the Centre Pompidou's broad, general public. Nevertheless, the philosophical agenda was quite obvious. Lyotard had just published *Le Différend*, a book of philosophy which, he claimed, espoused the "philosophy of sentences" upon which *Les Immatériaux* was built. The exhibition's concrete composition also rested upon a linguistic infrastructure – on the communication model of linguistic pragmatics – which again was a means of creating a Wittgensteinian playground for various linguistic families and enunciation instances, themselves incompatible and lacking a common meta-language that might summarise and articulate them as a whole. Lyotard chose five words to create zones of inquiry and physical arrangement: "maternity" (*maternité*), corresponding to the function of the sender; "material" (*matériel*), corresponding to the instance of the receiver; "material" (*matériau*), corresponding to the support of the message (the hardware that moves the

message); “*matrix*” (*matrice*), corresponding to the code of the message; and “*matter*” (*matière*), corresponding to the referent (what it is about). Each word focused on a diversity of questions: “From where?”, “To where?”, “How?”, “By means of what?”, and “Concerning what?” On the basic level of senders, receivers and codes, the entire exhibition was directly engaged in the study of media, questioning man in his relationship of troubled author to the materials of the technological, postmodern world.

In the same spirit, Kantian concepts implicitly inform the “sites”, which should be considered as particular, autonomous spaces, something more (or less) than mere stops on a one-way journey through the exhibition. How the sites were organised was reminiscent of the landscape or mapping that Lyotard liked to draw when it came to Kant and the third *Critique* (the *Critique of Judgement*), insofar as reflective judgement embodies the critical activity itself, an activity of establishing rules for different and specific uses of reason incommensurable with one another, and therefore demanding a rigorous demarcation of their respective realms of validity.

Such traces of Lyotard’s horizons of thought might in fact be said to function as the *transcendants* of *Les Immatériaux*. The exhibited items and sites would then seem to be permeated by two kinds of immateriality: one at a technological level, pointing to the *immaterials* they are made of (which also includes the inventive scientific mind); one at a more philosophical, conceptual level of *transcendants*, pointing to Lyotard’s idea about them – or, more precisely, his staging of them. Being one of the original features of *Les Immatériaux*, this duality remains a subject of inquiry when revisiting the exhibition so many years later. How were thinking and exhibiting, philosophy and exhibition space actually brought together? How could thinking and exhibiting possibly meet on an equal footing? How could one exhibit thinking at all? “Thinking” apparently seems to pass through “exhibiting” in a movement from inside out, and does not inform the exhibition from the outside in. The organisers’ aim was not to be pedagogical, but highly experimental; they demanded an intellectual effort on the part of the visitors. Even though the visitors were not meant to be philosophers, their sensory and intellectual involvement was required. But how did thinking and reflection, as specifically mental, immaterial activities, and join “the immaterials” of the exhibition? And how should we understand the only discourse that was explicitly assumed by the organisers, which pointed towards a changing condition of society as such, presenting the exhibition as “postmodern dramaturgy”?¹

1 Jean-François Lyotard, “Les Immatériaux. Un entretien avec Jean-François Lyotard” (with Jacques Saur and Philippe Bidaine), *CNAC Magazine*, no. 26, 1985, p. 13. Also, in the opening words of the exhibition catalogue, the director of the Centre Georges Pompidou, Jean Maheu, evoked the “dramaturgy” of a “changing epoch” while speaking

In addressing these questions I propose to discuss more thoroughly how the almost hidden philosophical (transcendental) framework of *Les Immatériaux* was activated – or even performed – as an exhibition, revisiting “the post-modern” in particular as a major issue. Considering the many attempts Lyotard made after the publication of his 1979 *The Postmodern Condition* to explain and specify what he had intended by launching the debate, the exhibition could be seen as taking part in an ongoing anamnesis of the post-modern. From that perspective, *Les Immatériaux* concerns the issue of what had kept being forgotten in the debate on the postmodern.

The Transcendentals of *Les Immatériaux*

While the term “transcendental” may appear inaccurate, it is more than an amusing play on words that makes “transcendentaux” rhyme with “Immatériaux”; it is, once again, a hint at Lyotard’s signature. During the 1980s, he had committed himself to a close reading of Kant. Both in *Le Différend* and at his weekly seminar at Paris VIII, Lyotard insisted on interpreting the Kantian project backwards, almost word for word, starting from the third *Critique*. And this re-reading of Kant, at its very source, was not only a matter of aesthetics – even though Lyotard’s interest in the sublime might initially have pushed him to undertake it. Rather, Lyotard was captivated by the destabilizing effect of the third *Critique*, and by Kant’s courage in reopening his critical project, re-examining, problematising and clarifying the fragile foundation of what he had previously achieved by establishing and separating, back to back, the two major faculties of man: understanding and reason. Because at the bottom of cognitive reason and practical reason, Kant rehabilitated reflective judgement, *die reflektierende Urteilskraft*. This rather complicated use of reason, which lacks any jurisdiction prior to its proceedings, thus has to establish, afterwards (*après-coup*), its own rules, reflexively in each particular case.

Lyotard insists on meeting Kant in this vulnerable, exposed – exhibited – position, in which the determining judgement finally has to step aside, recognising that it owes its solidity to an anterior activity of the mind, namely the reflective judgement, which cannot claim the same legitimacy, because it has to proceed without concepts. Logic is not an option here, which is why reflective judgement has to be deduced in an aesthetic context, as it is grounded on a feeling only, the feeling of the right adjustment between imagination and reason. Of course, there would be no philosophy without concepts. As Adorno stated in *Negative Dialectics*, “thinking is identifying”.² It is impossible to think without concepts, and philosophical concepts necessarily

about “postmodernity”. See *Album et Inventaire* (Paris: Editions du Centre Georges Pompidou, 1985), p. 3.

2 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1966), p. 17. (“Denken heißt identifizieren.”)

subsume the particular by means of universal categories. But following the very same commitment as that of Adorno, Lyotard dedicates his thinking to what does not disappear in the concept without leaving traces of resistance. He wants to bear witness to what he calls “the unrepresentable” or “the figural”, just as Adorno spoke about “the non-identical”.³ So, if thinking essentially equals identifying and determining conceptual thinking, the non-determinable should nevertheless be the horizon of philosophy, its instigation and secret aim. With their polyphonic and heterogeneous space, “the Immaterials” offer a similar springboard for experimentation on the very edge of the exhibition’s conceptual entries, and are designed to make visitors sensitive without getting them caught in stigmatising conceptualisation. At the same instant that we are invited to approach what an exhibited object might represent, signify or challenge as “immaterial”, by marking it conceptually, the conceptualising activity of our minds should somehow be marked negatively by the affects that it causes.

For Lyotard, all the Kantian negative determinations of the aesthetic judgement of taste – being without interest, proceeding without concepts, having no other aim than its own purely formal finality “without purpose” – stand as an entry into the realm of philosophy *as such*; they have to do with the conditions of possibility for critical thinking. This is also why Lyotard was always emphasising the transcendental level of Kant’s criticism instead of dismissing it. By exploring the limits and conditions of knowledge and reason, Kant certainly deals with the conditions of possibility, which are a priori to any empirical reality; but he does so, not in order to escape reality, but rather in order to grasp those unrepresentable – thus immaterial – mental structures which make thinking possible.

Les Immatériaux simultaneously exhibits and builds upon such a transcendental framework. The Kantian horizon serves as more than just an external frame of reference towards the exhibition: with *Les Immatériaux*, rather, Kant becomes operational. Under the transcendental authority of reflective judgement, Kantian concepts such as the sublime and the *sensus communis* migrate into the organisation of *Les Immatériaux* and work there as a kind of *transcendentaux*. *Les Immatériaux* does not present a display of artworks and other objects accompanied by some philosophical explanation. It would be truer to argue that it embraces a transcendental dramaturgy, outlining the conditions of possibility in order to generate sensations in the spectator. The aim is to activate a sense of awareness of that which is not yet defined, or that is even undefinable. It is a matter of creating reactions, of generating intellectual and emotional attention. *Les Immatériaux* was philosophical in a truly experimental way, less because a philosopher exhibited his philosophy than because the exhibition aimed at making mental

3 Ibid., p. 152.

activity possible among those who walked down the labyrinth on their own, simultaneously transforming the exhibition into the interface of their random walking.

Pursuing the idea of this intimate relationship between thinking and exhibiting, it would not be wrong to say that *Les Immatériaux* was well-situated at the fifth floor of the Centre Pompidou, which was normally devoted to temporary art exhibitions; for the exhibition was precisely an artwork, a *Gesamtkunstwerk*.⁴ The exhibited items derived from all possible domains of knowledge and everyday life. Besides the artworks – among others, those emblematic of Giovanni Anselmo, Marcel Duchamp, Dan Flavin, Yves Klein, Joseph Kosuth, François Morellet, Philippe Thomas and Andy Warhol – visitors met a diverse range of technological and scientific documentation and objects: musical scores, architectural drawings, projections of photos and films, music videos, robots, and almost futuristic high-tech devices that were the precursor of interactive communication, anticipating today's social media – especially in the section called “Épreuves d'écriture”, which was displaying a computer-mediated discussion among 26 participants (including Jacques Derrida, Daniel Buren and Michel Butor) of 50 terms proposed by Lyotard. *Les Immatériaux* had indeed little to do with traditional or even advanced art exhibitions, nor did the organisers adopt a documentary format. The exhibition was nonetheless all that at the same time: documental *and* artistic *and* almost an amusement park where the spectator could try different attractions. This hybridisation of the exhibition genre contributed to creating a blurring effect, an uncomfortable unreadability that almost certainly characterises all art.

It might also be at this global level that the concept of “the sublime” makes sense. The sublime did not primarily work as a thematic guideline for *Les Immatériaux*, nor as an art-historical reference, but at a performative level; and like all performances, this again points to the visitor, who was solicited by her senses in a troubling way that one might compare to the sublime and its twofold structure of pleasure and displeasure. The iconic works of art that were exhibited – even those by Jacques Monory and Marcel Duchamp, about whom Lyotard wrote extensively – were not chosen for their possible aesthetic dialogue with the sublime. Somewhat surprisingly, Lyotard stressed that Duchamp's aesthetics had nothing to do with the sublime that it left behind.⁵ The sublime instead concerns the exhibition as a whole, and has to do with its general opacity and resistance to being perceived in a simple way. If the exhibition was in fact difficult to read, to decipher, it was partly due to its fluid and immaterial organisation of space, by means of which human perception

4 Lyotard, interviewed by Bernard Blistène, confirmed his artistic ambition with the exhibition: “I'm particularly concerned with turning the exhibition itself into a work of art.” “Les Immatériaux: A Conversation with Jean-François Lyotard”, *Flash Art*, no. 121, March 1985, p. 8.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

came under pressure. This disruption of perception made it possible, however, for the visitor to experience – perhaps even joyfully – something at the very level of bodily perception, without really becoming readable in terms of sign, sense and signification.

Thus, perception was deliberately made problematic, interesting and shifting; it depended on how the different sites addressed different senses, intensified by the soundtrack. One major tool for creating potentially sublime experiences was the grey metallic curtains. Enabling a fluid and immaterial organisation of space, the partition material challenged traditional ways of defining things. Suspended from the ceiling to the floor, these unsteady, woven, thin metallic walls created a blocked transparency, more or less opaque, according to the lighting. In fact the variety of ways in which the curtains were lit allowed the distance of the gaze to vary, but without being prescriptive, since many of the sites had intersections that allowed visitors to walk in a number of different directions.

The dramaturgical setting created a sort of theatricality of *Les Immatériaux*, but essentially from the visitor's perspective. If the exhibition was conceived as theatre – even, according to the first site of the exhibition, as “Theatre of the non-body” – this theatre, again, was basically conceived as a performance that engaged the visitor in his or her entirety. A striking example on the “material” track is that of the site “Musician despite himself”, where microphones, sonars and computers translated every movement visitors made into music, the sound made audible by the transmitter circuit and headphones. This set-up also indicated that the eye should no longer be the sole conduit of perception in the exhibition experience. In the exhibition catalogue, Lyotard vindicates postmodern space-time as a radically new way of organising an exhibition, explicitly breaking with the traditional organisation of art exhibitions that accorded an exclusive privilege to the eye for centuries.⁶

In achieving this ambition, the most radical ingredient was perhaps the soundtrack, which changed from one radio zone to another as the visitors walked around the exhibition space. Completely void of commentaries of any kind, the soundtrack contained acoustic presences, texts by authors such as Beckett, Artaud, Proust, Borges, Mallarmé and Zola, but also by theoreticians, philosophers and scientists like Barthes, Bachelard, Blanchot, Baudrillard, Virilio and Lyotard himself – voices that could thus take part in what might be at stake in each specific site. The texts were read aloud in a neutral way, deliberately avoiding any interpretation of the words spoken. These real, immaterial works were actually nothing but voices, yet they in fact seemed material, corporeal, like music entering the flesh, challenging the presence of absences. This context may also afford us an understanding of Lyotard's

6 See *Les Immatériaux* catalogue, *Album*, p. 19.

increasing interest in Malraux, to whom he devoted a philosophical biography ten years later. Essentially, Lyotard tried to rethink Malraux's old question of "the voices of silence" in terms of his own ideas about making visible, audible, and thus thinkable, that which cannot be seen, heard or thought. That paradox also constitutes the inner structure of what Lyotard associated with the concept of the sublime – and, accordingly, with the attempt to bear witness to the unrepresentable (at this point he is following, as noted, Adorno).

In the end, there seems to be no real consensus about what these "Immaterials" should stand for. They are indeed made ambiguous and contradictory, with the only intention to call for attention and become *in act*, as Paul Valéry would have put it. "The Immaterials" demanded that they be acted upon by visitors. It was a matter of engendering a state of mind, where sensibility, affection and reflection were mobilised in an open, free, non-determined play, not necessarily as an activity, but as pure receptiveness, sensitiveness. It was a matter of being able to receive something without defining it. This openness and indetermination brings us back to reflective judgement and, more specifically, to the *sensus communis* that Kant deduces in the fourth moment of the judgement of taste. Lyotard interprets the *sensus communis* in a restrictive, purely transcendental way.⁷ *Sensus communis* is not an empirical consensus regarding the beautiful; it has nothing to do with a shared community, but points to a sign – or a testimony, or a promise – of compatibility between the faculties within each subject. What makes *sense here* is the mere capacity to think reflexively, which can only be considered afterwards, as emphasised again and again by Lyotard.

This complicated concept thus points to a self-reflexivity, caused by the aesthetic shock that can only ever be experienced individually. Be it students of Lyotard, regular museum visitors or random visitors of any background, the task is the same. *Les Immatériaux* was meant to encourage this specific kind of reflection, a sort of intellectual sensibility, or sensible intellectuality, towards these heterogeneously exhibited objects that might perhaps, not in themselves, but thanks to their complex staging, inspire a feeling of uncertainty; an uncertainty about the aim of technological developments, and an uncertainty about the identity of the human individual. It is at precisely this point that the issue of the postmodern arises as a challenge that justifies taking a closer look at the rather complicated philosophical agenda assumed by the postmodern in Lyotard.

7 Jean-François Lyotard, "Sensus Communis," *Le cahier du collège international de philosophie*, no. 3 (1987), p. 71–74, and Lyotard, *Leçons sur l'analytique du sublime* (Paris: Galilée, 1991), p. 31–33.

***Les Immatériaux*: an Exhibition of Postmodernity?**

On the one hand, postmodernity happened to be the only discursive element that informed the exhibition thematically, giving it a strong symbolic value. On the other hand, postmodernity was not exhibited in any representative way. To be sure, the mayor of Paris, Jacques Chirac, had turned down President François Mitterrand's request that Paris celebrate the bicentennial of the French Revolution with a universal exhibition, which is why *Les Immatériaux* can be seen as an ironic comment to both politicians; in other words, as a sort of universal exposition of postmodernity. Anticipating the exhibition that would not take place in 1989, on the other hand, *Les Immatériaux* indirectly became the symbol of the end of universal exhibitions and a symbol of their impossibility.

Nonetheless, the general question about how the relationship between man and nature, or materials, was "affected by the revival of new technologies" was indeed, from the very beginning, subject to a postmodern framing. In an interview Lyotard gave on *Les Immatériaux* when the exhibition was still being planned, he clearly states that the entire exhibition was meant to address our "anxiety about the postmodern condition".⁸ And his reply to the question about what postmodernism could "finally" be said to be confirms his commitment to that question: "My work, in fact, is directed to finding out what that is, but I still don't know. This is a discussion that's only just beginning. It's the way it was for the Age of Enlightenment: the discussion will be abandoned before it ever reaches a conclusion".⁹

This remark is rather prophetic, the question of the postmodern having probably already caused Lyotard more trouble than philosophical scrutiny, and he would indeed ultimately have to abandon the postmodern before coming to terms with it. Still, it is worth noting how Lyotard's attachment to the postmodern was heavily inscribed in the initial ideas underlying the exhibition. *Les Immatériaux* somehow *elaborates* on the postmodern. Indeed, the postmodern might even refer to the "missing signified" for "the entirety of the exhibition".¹⁰ At any rate, it is in a vocabulary which combines the postmodern and the sublime that Lyotard connects *Les Immatériaux* to the "chagrin that surrounds the end of the modern age as well as the feeling of jubilation that's connected with the appearance of something new".¹¹

These comments recall the philosophical work that Lyotard called *anamnesis*, a term he had borrowed from Freud and made use of to describe situations

8 "Les Immatériaux: A Conversation with Jean-François Lyotard," (with Bernard Blistène) *Flash Art*, no. 121 (March 1985), p. 10.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

in which the philosophical community was affected by discomfiting feelings. His 1988 book on Heidegger (*Heidegger and "the Jews"*), for example, was presented as an anamnesis, by means of which Lyotard dismissed the bad alternative between "accusations" and "apology" that characterised the vehement French Heidegger debate at that time. How could a thought devoted entirely to the theme of oblivion, the oblivion of being, forget and keep silent about relegating a whole people to oblivion? Something non-forgettable is forgotten, over and over again. Even though the Heidegger disciples already knew, even though they were aware of the problem of Nazism in Heidegger, a disquieting feeling remained, and Lyotard insisted on that disquietude as fundamental. The postmodern debate might have needed a similar treatment, a kind of anamnesis, elaborating on what had gone wrong in that debate – that is to say, what kept being forgotten.

The publication of *The Postmodern Condition* in 1979 made Lyotard world-famous and many people began reading him at this particular point; which is somewhat ironic given that *The Postmodern Condition* happens to be the least representative of his works. Postmodernism can likewise be considered an event. Something new had finally happened within philosophy and the humanities – not, of course, without dissention, and the media did not hesitate to dramatise the event, often by opposing French irrationalism to German fidelity to the Enlightenment. The battle of postmodernism was on. Considering Lyotard's attitude towards the Heidegger affair, just drawing the lines of battle should be a warning. What had become of the event, philosophically speaking? Precisely the feeling that the debate had failed to address the issue of the postmodern – and failed painfully – demanded a reinvestigation of the postmodern.

Initially, the term postmodern addressed the changing status of knowledge in philosophy in highly developed societies (the subheading of *The Postmodern Condition* is *A Report on Knowledge*). On the one hand, Lyotard stresses the impact of informatics (and information science) on knowledge. The capacity to store an ever-increasing amount of data necessarily affects knowledge and, accordingly, challenges crucial notions such as those of history, memory and time. *Les Immatériaux* continued to explore that perspective. On the other hand, the provocative thesis on the decline of the grand narratives contributed to a postmodern definition of knowledge. From Hegel to Marx, a recitative structure works at the core of the philosophy of history, Lyotard argues. The discourses of knowledge issuing from this tradition are narratives, because, although laying claim to scientific stringency, their truth claims are supported by a narrative which, scientifically speaking, is not knowledge at all. They simply tell a "good story" – the story, for example, about the progress of humanity towards an ever-better society. When a *telos* of this nature is hidden in the discourse of knowledge, this discourse can hardly give proof

of its validity (as scientific knowledge) by pleading the scientific criteria of truth or falsity. The idea of a predestined humanity cannot be proved; it is only, as Lyotard later shows with Kant, a universal "Idea", inconceivable to the cognitive reason of history.

It is probably at this far too "famous" point of the grand narratives that we have to remain careful. According to the debates on postmodernity, the failure of the grand narratives of legitimation became the whole crux of the matter. How, for example, does one adopt a position towards this decline, now an object of celebration and affirmation, now an object of lamentation and depression? Focusing exclusively on the issue of the grand narratives, the debate inevitably disintegrated into opinions and mainstreams – in a word, into ideology – without much attention being paid to the fact that the experience of delegitimation was not new, but rather immanent in modernity. When, for example, Lyotard (again following Adorno) refers to the name "Auschwitz", he wants to pay attention to a "sign of history", which indicates how much Western history – "our" history – is apparently inconsistent with the modern project of emancipation. In a certain way, real history, atrociously real, has denied the possibility of a human history already. The radically new in the postmodern situation, as Lyotard explains in *The Postmodern Condition*, was that, by means of a performative self-legitimising gearing, technological development and science had become adherent to the critique of the philosophy of history to eventuate its final fall.

Thus, if postmodernity does not represent a new age, but rather repeats essential features of modernity, it points to a different way of legitimating that gives rise to concern, and that concern was evidently shared by the organisers of *Les Immatériaux*. The whole idea of a subtle change within legitimating processes clearly motivated the organisation and specific site designs, insofar as the exhibition was meant to make the visitor experience new technologies in ambiguous ways. Fascination, uncertainty, anxiety, if not disgust, are associated with all the various site names: "Site of the second skin", "Site of the angel", "Site of the blown-up body", "Site of the undiscoverable surface", "Site of the bodiless painter", "Site of the invisible man", "Site of the shadow of shadow" etc. With *Les Immatériaux* Lyotard implicitly delivers a challenge to be sensitive – and this in an almost auditory sense – towards something that more than ever is silenced by the postmodern techno-reality. Regardless of how we address *Les Immatériaux*, the postmodern reference keeps cropping up, but becomes more and more complex and ambiguous. That is why we must risk, even 30 years later, an anamnesis of the postmodern.

Postmodernism, Postmodernity, the Postmodern: Which One to Choose?

A reconstruction of the postmodern certainly requires a global approach and a more retrospective cross-reading of Lyotard. *The Postmodern Condition* seems to prefer the sociological and historical aspect to the philosophical – a point of contention to which Lyotard was the first to concede and to renounce. In subsequent years corrections, addendums and elaborations characterise his attempt to defend the importance of the postmodern question, to rescue it, even though the term had already been abused. As mentioned above, *The Differend*, published in 1983, contains this original “philosophy of sentences” that rephrases the problem of legitimation that was at the core of the book on the postmodern condition. In 1986 Lyotard published various essays attempting to outline the implications of the postmodern question in *The Postmodern Explained for Children*. The provocative title, it should be noted, embraces more than irony. The appeal to children implies that only those who have not excluded childhood, including its aspect of indetermination, from the supposedly self-enclosed sphere of adulthood, may come to an understanding of the postmodern. In 1988 another collection of essays appeared in *The Inhuman*, which again takes up, though more indirectly, the postmodern question, this time with a straight-faced attack on French neo-humanism.¹² What these essays share is a sharp demarcation whereby Lyotard forbids any ideological expropriation of the concept of the postmodern. One could say that he separates the postmodern from postmodernism as well as from postmodernity.

On the one hand, the postmodern is not identical to postmodernism. Postmodernism avoidably infers an “-ism”, which here points to a trend within the arts and – especially in this case – within architecture. Architectural postmodernism may be defined as eclecticism – an assemblage of fragments of style from various periods. The final work of art (of architecture) appears as “quotations” from earlier periods and hence as a paradoxical stating of the present, which is incapable of inventing a new “grand” style. However, a careless use of the past might run contrary to this exercise of memory, which Lyotard, drawing on Freud, designates anamnesis. The anamnesis instead refers to an interminable labour of memory in the act of elaborating something that is permanently blocked. Anamnesis seeks an inaccessible past. In this sense it might not be surprising if Lyotard condemns postmodernism insofar as postmodernists, architects, rhetoricians or others act as if the past were accessible; in reality, they are only repeating defence mechanisms towards resistant moments, which cannot be repeated but ask for

12 Victor Farias's 1987 book, *Heidegger*, instigated the fierce French Heidegger debate.

“elaboration”, i.e. to be “worked through” in conformity with the epistemology of the Freudian *Durcharbeitung*.

On the other hand, the postmodern is not the same as postmodernity. The postmodern does not essentially mark a new epoch coming after modernity. Even though some explanations concerning *Les Immatériaux* seem to indicate a change in society, Lyotard refutes the idea of an epoch-making change of paradigm. The postmodern change instead inscribes itself in modernity. As he emphasised during the same period in the mid-1980s – specifically in the important “Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?”¹³ – the postmodern is not to be situated at the end of modernity, but at the source of modernity, which fundamentally reveals the discovery of the “*little bit of reality in reality*”.¹⁴ Issuing from this tradition, the postmodern communicates with an essential aspect of modernity: the lack of foundation, the lack of grounding.

What are we left with after getting rid of the most prevailing biases of the postmodern? Not much, really. One of the difficulties of the postmodern probably consists in its duality. The postmodern seems to concern system as well as resistance. A basically descriptive approach refers to technological and social development, to what we could call *system*. But the feeling of a postmodern situation simultaneously manifests, although more implicitly, something that *resists* system. These two poles, system and resistance, are intertwined. For what the system cannot absorb and, therefore, excludes, the pole of resistance tries to restore and elaborate. Once again, as in Freudian anamnesis, elaboration happens to be the essence of resistance.

The complicity of this unlikely pair – system/resistance – is central to grasping the philosophical depth in Lyotard’s postmodern. In arguing for the duality of the postmodern, I will adhere in particular to Lyotard’s 1988 book *The Inhuman*, whose essays outline two kinds of inhumanities. And, seen from this later point of view, the postmodern must be thought of from an axis passing through two essentially different inhumanities, which were indeed also addressed by *Les Immatériaux*. The first one implies the necessity of seeking refuge and resistance in the other one. By virtue of this internal tension there appears an almost ethical, if not political, aspect that takes place in, and vitalises, the postmodern.

13 It is worth noting that the term chosen by Lyotard in the original French title was “postmodern” and not “postmodernism”: *Le postmoderne expliqué aux enfants* (Paris: Galilée, 1986).

14 “Réponse à la question: qu’est-ce que le postmoderne”, op. cit., p. 25 (“la découverte du *peu de réalité de la réalité*”).

The Inhumanity of System

The first inhumanity could be said to concern system. It refers to an inhuman order, where man happens to occupy a minor place. In post-industrial society the discrepancy between system and man has in fact become more and more visible. Increasing control within the sciences and technologies, paradoxically, has not resulted in greater human autonomy, but rather in loss of control. The current economic crisis is but a recent example of these fatal dynamics. The postmodern condition as reality, as situation, actualises – in the most literal meaning of the word – a complexification in which humankind is only one subordinated link.¹⁵ Performance, differentiation and complexity cover an inhuman condition that we were once bold enough to call progress and development. In this sense, Lyotard argues, system's inhumanity, in the name of Progress, is about to be realised.

This accomplishment is indeed a question of time, and is very much actualised by the new computer technologies that were massively present in – and placed in question by – *Les Immatériaux*. What is left when the storing of data reaches the point of saturation, asks Lyotard, which is a question that also haunts *Les Immatériaux*. If memorisation approaches a maximum, the increasing memory reduces the chance or risk that something not yet memorised can occur. The saturation of data simply means the neutralisation of events. The future subordinates the present, because, when the future is already determined (memorised), the present loses the privilege of being a moment that cannot be grasped in itself. The tension of the event is simply broken in that the event is always an occurrence between a “not yet” (*pas encore*) of the future and an “already no more” (*déjà plus*) of the past. Nothing occurs, in the sense of the event, if everything is programmed in advance, already memorised and saved in the computer bank. The modern project, understood as the belief in a human future to come, paradoxically ends up as a program, in the sense of programmed future; and this accomplished future must necessarily destroy the last remnants of the human project that sought freedom.

Equally, invoking Leibniz's monadology, Lyotard compares computer time to the divine monad.¹⁶ God's “big monad” coincides with the universe; it is congruent with the universe, because even the most remote and humble corner falls within God's field of vision. This is the reason why realisation of the divine monad necessarily causes a loss of human and historical time – this time which precisely is invested by the inadequacy of individual monads and their merely partial knowledge of the universe. As a monadological analogy, the

15 See Jean-François Lyotard, *L'inhumain* (Paris: Galilée, 1988), especially the “Avant-propos: de l'humain,” p. 13, as well as the chapter entitled “Le temps, aujourd'hui,” p. 75, and 78.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 49, and 71.

postmodern condition might resume the movement in which all the individual monads approach the “big monad”, thus being dissolved in its perfection.

The “time-saving” nature of computers and their eventual destruction of human historical time was probably a basic idea motivating Lyotard when he first brought the postmodern situation up for discussion, but also when he sketched out the exhibition design for *Les Immatériaux*. In contradistinction to modernity, where the source of legitimation is displaced in the ideal future to become present, postmodernity finds its legitimacy upon itself, upon a kind of self-sufficiency, as if it were the “big monad”. Postmodernity does not need ideologies, because it legitimises itself. Its horizon does not lie in the future, but is here already. The nature of its goal is self-ensured by the performative gearing of the system. Legitimacy, thus, is no longer a problem; the universal project of emancipation of modernity is no longer separated from reality as an Idea regulating moral and political actions and decisions. Instead, it is immediately consumed by technological expansion itself.

This collapse between reality and Ideas confronts philosophy with a challenge. For when reality no longer differs from the Ideas, metaphysics actually disappears from the remit of philosophy. The traditional field of thinking is now monopolised by information sciences, because they simply realise metaphysics, outside philosophy. Metaphysics, which ought to assume an ideal content beyond what is conceivable, becomes an inhuman reality, and even obtains the rights of facticity.

The Inhumanity of Resistance

How can this first inhumanity, one which constitutes a challenge to philosophy, be resisted? How can critical thinking and an attitude that deals with this logic of inhuman development be maintained? Taking these questions seriously, Lyotard concentrates on another inhumanity at the core of the human being itself. If the first inhumanity, the systemic one, connotes an over-human level of complexification, this other inhumanity points to an ontological aspect, to the inner individual. But no preposition is adequate to situate this “inside”, which is rather “under” or “behind” innerness. Something radically other and estranged occupies the individual. It might be at this difficult, implacable level that the second aspect of the postmodern can precipitate resistance.

These ideas on the second inhumanity might seem cryptic and need, in fact, to be related to Lyotard’s understanding of childhood as such – and, in particular, to his interest in the Freudian concept of “originary repression”. Lyotard refutes humanism in the allegorical name of childhood. Childhood cannot be elevated and negated in the dialectical manner of Hegel’s *aufgehoben* without something being left behind. An untameable and invincible childhood remains deeply engrained in every grown-up; it is this childhood that announces the

inhumanity now in question. Deep in human nature – which perhaps is not all that human, and not all that deep – smoulders a pain, a suffering; because civilised man, from family to state, has to endure society's institutions. Of course, anomalous behaviour bears witness to such immoral needs of escaping from social conventions and social life. However, literature, the arts and philosophy – these activities of spirit that, paradoxically, have obtained institutional status in our society – do it as well. Lyotard interprets these domains as vestiges of an indetermination and a childhood that grown-up life never totally rids itself of.

Lyotard argues, in other words, against a dialectical closing of childhood. Something does not add up. He calls it *l'inaccordable*¹⁷ – “the non-accordable” – the absence of accordance. Just as when he refers to Hölderlin's *Remarks on Oedipus* (1804), saying that the beginning no longer rhymes with the end. The end is no longer inscribed in the beginning, as in the Greek oracle. Thus, the disharmonies of modernism replace classical harmonies. It might be accidental that the attention being paid to the “non-accordable” resorts to a vocabulary of music. It is, however, in fact appealing to the ear; Lyotard makes an appeal to hearing, because the moment we have to pay attention to is almost immaterial, unrepresentable. It is only a voice calling.

Enduring this context it is useful to consider Lyotard's persistent reference to the Freudian concept of *originary repression*, an interest which goes back to *Discourse, Figure* from 1971. Within this specifically psychoanalytic context, man's childhood likewise becomes an incommensurable moment. Its place appears as a non-place, because something that has not taken place in the psyche nevertheless always already will have taken place. The notion of an “originary” or primary repression thus embodies an almost archaic jolt, prior not only to consciousness, but also to sub-consciousness. Secondary repression, in contrast, can be said to refer to distinct disturbances which are accessible through the interpretation of dreams. So, when we speak of primary repression, we refer to something having shaken and affected the subject without, however, having left any representative inscriptions in the psyche. This archaic moment implies that no proper reception has been made and, consequently, no defence against this initial jolt exists. The “object” of the originary repression only returns later, *after* the jolt, when the psyche already will have been affected. This return manifests itself as an intangible anxiety, because a stranger will already have taken the individual as hostage. Confronted with this non-object beyond time and space, Lyotard invokes the immemorial. Something emanates from a past, something which defies every present, because the forgotten has never been memorised by any consciousness or sub-consciousness; a kind of oblivion before memory, and what is left

17 Lyotard, *L'inhumain*, p. 12.

are only traces of a primary life-giving terror – the non-forgettable forgotten, as Lyotard writes in *Heidegger and "the Jews"*.

This shift in interest from the secondary repression to the primary repression allows Lyotard to approach an inborn inhumanity that destabilises the integrity of the individual from the inside out. This inhumanity clearly refers to another, entirely different, temporality than the time implied in an informational system, as described before. Something already *will have* happened before it later (and far too late) returns to the subject as anxiety and pain. In fact, the crux of the matter for Lyotard emerges here: if we were to try to precipitate the initial jolt, we would be too early, for our psychic apparatus is not yet formed; whereas any time afterwards is too late. It is exactly here (where?), between the "too early" and the "too late", in the ungraspability of the future perfect, this "always already will have happened", that this occurrence resides.

What does all this have to do with resistance? Let us not forget to note that the paradoxical temporality of the future perfect reappears in the modality of occurrence of the event. So affected by the future perfect, thought might be able – however painfully – to experience events and hence to seek that which system excludes. Binary logic only receives information that is immediately classifiable. System embraces the already given and not that which simply occurs, i.e. that which is arriving in the sense of the German *es gibt*. Such heterogeneous occurrences can occupy no byte. In this sense, it is staggering how much information "reason" must exclude: literature, poetry, free association (in the psychoanalytic sense), indeed ordinary language – that is to say, any non-operative use of language that eventuates the unrepresentable to be experienced and formulated.

Experiences, under the sign of the future perfect, therefore, increase the distance to well-organised and unconcerned social life. In company with psychoanalysis, which aims to disrupt the repetitions generated by the defence mechanism of memory, we should concentrate on resisting the repetitions and the defence mechanisms of society. Social interaction and communication would then be transcended by a reflexive work of memory caring for that which is not inscribed in the universe of informatic significations. Even the word "culture" signifies the circulation of information rather than the work to be done to get to the point of presenting what is not presentable in its occurrence. And yet, perhaps in cultivating the inhumanity inherent to man, this reduction of culture to the circulation of bytes of information might be opposed.

Towards a Postmodern Ethics?

In the end, Lyotard's postmodern position seems less and less definable, becoming more and more complex. Uncertain, modest and open, these, and similar, words might be used to characterise his questioning of a "post-modern situation". He does not seek simple answers – the simple which is, as he once said, the barbarian – but rather intends to expose and elaborate the fundamental disquietude facing this pretended postmodern reality.

However, the asymmetrical tension whereby the two inhumanities take a place in the postmodern question – that is to say, their inarticulation, because they follow two different directions – can be articulated quite simply. In fact, it is as if we have but to be open to the second inhumanity – that inhumanity being housed in the empty heart of the subject – in order to resist the first inhumanity, system's inhumanity. When the second inhumanity is sought, elaborated and cultivated as a work of reflexion, something unbearable appears to the logic of system – namely, an inoperative presence of absence. But resistance can never be positive. This is the very point, if one insists upon a specific postmodern position. Resistance remains bound to the inhuman aspect. Because that which constitutes the subject is radically other, the force of resistance cannot be positive. Rewriting Freud's originary repression, Lyotard reveals a subject that is obliged to the condition of the afterwards-ness (*Nachträglichkeit, après-coup*), because something has affected it before mental receptivity.

The question, then, becomes one of how to interpret a resistance, considered in this negative perspective, in terms other than those outlining a kind of ethics. In fact, Lyotard does seem to allow an ethical problematic to inform the postmodern. A certain vocabulary of ethics dealing with an obligation toward the unknown Law recurs almost word-for-word in this attentiveness toward an unknown voice *in* the subject. We have to listen to a strange voice whose message cannot be deciphered by signifying language or by phenomenological perception, and we have to bow to the law emanating from this inhumanity that inhabits man and forbids him to become his own master. On the strength of playing on an obvious ethical theme, Lyotard seems to appeal to a specific attitude concerning the thinking subject, which we recognise in *Les Immatériaux*. It is not a simple matter of passivity versus activity, but rather of an attitude, which, in French, is called *passibilité*. This passibility is to be understood as a form of receptivity that presupposes a withdrawal of the conceptualising subject. Ethics, in this sense, is not a call, but rather the ability to be called upon from something unknown.

In general, Lyotard wants to commit philosophy to heterogeneous and vanishing – that is, immaterial – objects. In a certain way, he keeps drawing nourishment from an almost secret layer of philosophy. The decline of

master narratives perhaps signifies the end of philosophy as institutional metaphysics, but is not the end of philosophy as such – as thinking, as questioning, as use of reflective judgement. On the contrary, when Lyotard announced a postmodern challenge to philosophy, he outlined much more than a simple coming to terms with the philosophy of history, a settlement, which obviously precedes his entire work. Even his hostile analysis of Marxism as an example of a grand narrative, narrating the future victory of the working class, hardly justifies either relief or total disillusionment, as if there was no need for philosophy any more. There is a reflexive work to be done – in the name of that which is excluded from reality and, what is even more urgent (and more difficult to realise), in the name of that which cannot be presented by any reality. And this work is, indeed, and perhaps more than ever, instigated by the postmodern banalisation and vulgarisation of reality. This postmodern reality neutralises what is “real”. It destroys the event. As in the Heidegger debate, the postmodern debate seems to be an occasion for Lyotard to recall that which haunts thought.

This peculiar ethics traverses the anaesthetic aesthetics of *Les Immatériaux*, where we have to be sensitive to the signs of postmodern a-teleology – even if these signs, signifying almost nothing, are particularly ambiguous – in order to realise a postmodern situation at all. In that respect, *Les Immatériaux* played an active part in Lyotard’s efforts to rethink the postmodern, even to rescue it by means of instruments that did not have to be restricted to the medium of the book. That is why, conversely, *Les Immatériaux* can itself be seen as a kind of performative philosophy, transforming Lyotard’s thoughts into action, especially his ongoing reflections on the nature of the event. The postmodern dramaturgy of the exhibition aimed to make the visitors experience how something already *will have* happened. Regardless, without sensibility, there would be no disquietude and no questioning. Pointing to something like postmodern sensibility, Lyotard and his team at *Les Immatériaux* attempted to transform a cultural event into possible events of sensitivity at the edge of conceptual thinking, a kind of intellectual sensitivity that brings us back to reflective judgement.

In conclusion, we could say that “the postmodern” would have liked to join the list of ambiguous concepts that Lyotard kept questioning throughout his works; concepts such as “figurality”, “heterogeneity”, “dissension”, “the event”, “the thing” (*la chose*), “desire” – all terms that point to the fact that what is sought marks a difference that cannot be organised around a common axis. This was precisely his definition of “*le différend*”, which evoked an asymmetrical conflict arising from the lack of a common language. And yet perhaps, before joining this philosophical family, the postmodern got lost in ideology and the mainstream. Maybe the postmodern was simply too exposed by the media to be able to assume a real exhibiting function – that is, this “over-exposure” by

means of which Lyotard and his team at *Les Immatériaux* would have liked to instigate reflection upon the human condition in an increasingly technological world. However, when we both look back on the exhibition's many innovative, performative features, and look forward to curatorial practices that it might have subsequently inspired, the almost untraceable, but undeniable long-term effects of *Les Immatériaux* force us to perceive the degree to which Lyotard strained every nerve to transform the postmodern from being a term of mere historical classification into a philosophical agenda. The postmodern, thus, would have called for an increasing awareness of and a critical reflection on a high-technological society and its materials, which have become vertiginously immaterial.