

Les Immatériaux: An “Immodern” Project

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The preparatory papers of Jean-François Lyotard for the exhibition *Les Immatériaux*, which can be consulted in the archives of the Centre Pompidou, constitute the sub-text of the final event. The philosopher reflected deeply upon the prefix *in-* (*im-*) which baptises the exhibition by a neologism: “the negation *im-* in ‘immaterials’ indicates the situation of a face-to-face, a confrontation that opposes the subject, the subject of will, of spirit, of the gaze, to that which is not him, and which falls under the general denomination *mât*. This face-to-face situation, then, is undermined today”¹ – undermined, indeed, to the point of suggesting a whole series of aliases, notions and related attitudes (“*immature*”, “*incréter*”, “*immortel*” etc.). Lyotard is aware of the existence of a paradox, and retains all of its critical and dialectical value: Is the project of *Les Immatériaux* really postmodern, even though in many ways it continues the modern project of knowledge and mastery of nature, such that we might rightfully wonder if the title of the exhibition does not hide another, which would be that of the “*immodern*”? – a neologism which Lyotard did not create, and that, from our perspective, has only the status of a working hypothesis.

The philosopher specified that, previously, a material was something natural that man transformed according to his purposes or projects. Today, on the one hand, a material which does not exist can be invented according to the

1 Archives Centre Pompidou, Exposition “Les Immatériaux”, Dossier 2009012; transcript from a recording of Jean-François Lyotard on two cassette tapes, which cannot currently be located. According to the beginning sentences, “Après six mois de travail en commun avec l’équipe du C.C.I. et à un an de l’ouverture de l’exposition intitulée *Les Immatériaux*”. It was probably produced in Spring 1984. The citation is from page 4, line 17 and onward, translation see this volume, p. 32.

project (material of synthesis); on the other, man is more and more conscious that he cannot have any more simple rational projects. Why? First, because he inherits from the past and cannot build on a *tabula rasa* (as the moderns had still hoped). Second, because the complexity of technoscience multiplies types of information, mediation and interaction (with machines, institutions), resulting in a decrease in the voluntary part of collective action (states, companies), and all the more that of the individual. And last, because the models of action and purpose that had been instituted during the Age of the Enlightenment showed the limits of anthropocentrism. Lyotard qualifies the new structure of creativity, in the field of industry as in that of art, as follows: “the principle upon which is built the operating structure is not one of a stable ‘substance’, but of an unstable set of interactions”.² The artificial intelligence of machines and the materials of synthesis decreased the difference between the human mind and things. This instability creates a concern, a concern which characterizes the postmodern condition.

But when we consider the actual exhibition, its catalogue, and the later papers of Lyotard, we can distinguish between Lyotard’s thought when he planned the exhibition and his thought as modified by it. This thought was undoubtedly postmodern in the preparatory stages: the ascendancy of the human subject is “weakened” in the term “*immatériaux*”, as it is generally the case in the postmodern condition (and Lyotard is happy with it)³. Yet, in our view, his thought later became “immodern”, since he considers that the idea “of general interaction strengthens” between man and non-human beings, the machines, the messages, the natural elements (we would add certainly today: animals), since man himself is not “the origin of messages, but sometimes the receiver, sometimes the referent, sometimes a code, sometimes a support for the message; and where sometimes he himself is the message”.⁴ After the ontology of the subject (modernity) and its crisis (postmodernity), the ontology of the interaction (“immodernity”) opens. After the “sorrow”, the “melancholy”, which are the words which qualify the postmodern; the philosopher speaks then of his “gaiety” and even his “very big gaiety”.⁵

An art historian may justly consider *Les Immatériaux* as the first exhibition to have been held in Paris’s Centre Pompidou which considered contemporary art as part of a “global social fact”, to employ the expression of Marcel Mauss.

2 In a text titled “Les Immatériaux. Présentation” dated April 1984, p. 5. The “I” in the text can be ascribed with certitude to the philosopher. Archives Centre Pompidou, Exposition “Les Immatériaux”, Dossier 2009012.

3 Archives Centre Pompidou, Exposition “Les Immatériaux”, Dossier 2009012, transcript, p. 5, “the human subject becomes no longer a subject but, I would say... just one case among the many multiple interactions that constitute the universe”, in this volume, p. 33.

4 Ibid., p. 37.

5 Ibid., p. 36.

In his famous essay *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic societies* (1925), Mauss observed that those human transactions which appear the most free, such as acts of giving and receiving, are framed by obligations of reciprocity which constitute real social rules. The gift represents the donor as well as the relations between the donor and the recipient and beyond, their chalk-linings. In a comparable way, “immatériaux” according to Lyotard are, as already mentioned, an “unstable set of interactions”.⁶

Did Lyotard make the first postmodern (art) exhibition? Shall we say that contemporary artists (since the 1960s) are postmodern only because they did not believe they could enlighten the future of their societies any more, as the avant-gardes of modern art believed?

In the exhibition, we see them nevertheless fascinated by the deciphering of the present, which they do not define according to the past, as did the tradition, but from which they question both the past (origin) and the future (transformation). There also the hypothesis of “immodern art” can be formulated.

Lyotard is impassioned by Barnett Newman’s redefinition of the sublime: as Marx had done for Hegel, Newman put Kant and Burke back on their feet. The sublime is here and now. A Klein, a Fontana, are sublime; no backworld is necessary. And we are in the “Irreprésentable”, in the abstraction, which is only colour and rhythm. On the contrary, Larry Bell’s glass cube and François Morellet’s neon stole the light and presented it in its immanence, filtered by the glass or by the material “neon”. It is light which is at the same time matter (subject) and material (support). Simone Martini’s *Annunciation* (1333) in the exhibition can suggest the overtaking of the opposition between the

6 In *The Gift* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 26, Mauss insisted on the mixture of people and things. The gift is not only an object; it is the person who gives it and in a way remains in it and acts through it: “In short, this represents an intermingling. Souls are mixed with things; things with souls. Lives are mingled together, and this is how, among persons and things so intermingled, each emerges from their own sphere and mixes together. This is precisely what contract and exchange are”. And in the record of Lyotard’s talk presenting the exhibition *Les Immatériaux* in Spring 1984, *Après six mois de travail...*, the philosopher said: “we see a sort of reinforcement, an exaggeration almost, of the intimacy between the mind and things. For example, the software that is coming into general use on all scales is mind incorporated into matter; synthetic products, ... are matters that are a result of knowledge – they are instigated by the mind ...” (in this volume p. 32). Another link between Mauss and Lyotard is their method, that could be summarized in a “Tout parle” (anything speaks; anything means). In *The Gift* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 56, describing the houses of the Trobriands, Mauss asserts: “Everything speaks – the roof, the fire, the carvings, the paintings – for the magical house is built”. In the talk just mentioned, Lyotard said: “Basically it will always be a question of asking: What does it speak of? How does it speak? What does it speak with? What speaks and what does it speak to? Presupposed in the very idea of modernity is the idea that everything speaks ...” (ibid., p. 31).

transcendence of the “irreprésentable” and the immanence of the “Stolen light” (Lumière dérobée).

“Immodern” is the *Annunciation*, in its anachronistic presence. The exhibition proposed the *anamnesis* of art. A new “In-” is outlined: “*Intemporel*” (timeless), a title that Malraux gave to the last book of his trilogy *The Metamorphosis of the Gods* in 1973. For Malraux, the last stage of the “Musée imaginaire” is the “museum of broadcasting”. And *The Metamorphosis of the Gods* had become in 1978 a documentary under the title *Métamorphoses du regard* made by Clovis Prévost. The transfer from book to film is essential in Malraux’s thinking. A similar transfer from book to an audiovisual media production such as the exhibition *Les Immatériaux*, is conceived by Lyotard as a real fulfilment. Lyotard stressed that it was he who had the idea of including sound in *Les Immatériaux*: he even said that this was his real contribution.

The exhibition, but also its hidden images – those that were not used and are still in boxes,⁷ potential – present breathtaking material: scientific images via the electron microscope, plans of drops of water and chromosome, radiologies, scanners and chromatographies. The underlying idea of a laboratory of cosmogenesis – of “1985: A Space and Time Odyssey”, in reference to Stanley Kubrick’s movie of 1968, *2001: A Space Odyssey* – appears in the numerous photographs of the sky, the spectographs of invisible stars, and the impressive audiovisual astrophysics device projected on a circumference of three metres in diameter in *Creusets stellaires* (*matière* site). But as in science fiction, the modern project is infused with a “sorrow”, a “melancholy”: it is a very sophisticated civilization, but at its end, it wonders about its origins. Already machines seem more human than man and sing songs before dying, as did the robot HAL 9000 in Kubrick’s movie. Man needs to be born again.

Modernism, according to Lyotard, is the history and the narrative of a robbery, of an interception: “all the messages were not intended for us, we steal them” (*matière* site). Man folded the world in his intention. Drawing is considered as the “mother of all the arts”: the exhibition shows that with the calculated images and the materials of synthesis; it is reality which is summoned to look like drawing (*Référence inversée*). Nevertheless, the artists are precisely those who stage a reality which escapes being kidnapped: in the impressive *Present continuous past(s)* (1974) by Dan Graham, the matter (subject) of time is infinitely divided in the mirrored image. Also, as Matisse had previously noticed, the immanence of colour always escapes the line drawn by the pencil.

Of all those who tried to define what an “art world”, an “art network” is (Michael Baxandall, 1972; Howard Becker, 1982; Raymonde Moulin, 1992), Lyotard is the only one to have individualized the “matrix” – the code, separating it clearly from the four other “mat”s: *matériau*, *matériel*, *matière* and

7 Archives Centre Pompidou, Exposition “Les Immatériaux”, Dossier 94033.

maternité. For Baxandall as for Becker, patrons and artists share maternity – if we transpose it into the terms of Lyotard – of works (materials) which deal with subjects according to the mental and sensitive equipment peculiar to a given period and culture. The code is fluid in the exchange: the matrix is transparent in the exchange. We can say that it's the same for the art anthropologist Alfred Gell when he represents the "network of art" (*Art Nexus*) in his book *Art and Agency* (1998): the relations reveal four fundamental terms: artist / index / prototype / recipient, which – except for the "recipient", who does not really have an equivalent in the five "*mat*", according to Lyotard – correspond to material / maternity / ... / material (subject), with two positions: active, passive (agent, patient). The reciprocity of the given orders (information) and the received orders operates in Gell's view as in an exchange between people (Mauss).

Only in Lyotard's view does the matrix (the code) exist independently of the people, and even threatens to escape them for ever. A set of rules, rolls, rations, uniforms takes towards the human being a distance equivalent to the one that the human being had taken towards nature by stealing all the messages. Could the same kidnapping be made at his expense? Could the inhuman – the machine – be able to take command?

Lyotard sometimes seems to lean towards a pessimistic vision of "immatériaux". Fourteen years after the exhibition *Les Immatériaux*, released only one year after the death of the philosopher in April 1998, the movie *Matrix* (1999) by the Wachowski brothers gave a global dimension to this pessimism. Not only machines became the executioners of human beings, but the matrix – the code, which gives its title to the movie – became a "system" of oppression. The movie postulates that any hybridization with machines, any artificial construction, any measure (*mâtram*) will inevitably turn against human beings. It activates a sort of "Neo-" symbolism ("Neo" is the name of the hero) related to Gothic revival or New Age revival. Nothing seems more distant from the thought of Lyotard, for whom the postmodern condition doesn't imply a return to the origin, but a return on the origin.

More optimistic, more critical, more articulate, the recent movie *Interstellar* (2014) by Christopher Nolan is thus ultimately more Lyotardian. Having crossed a black hole, the hero Cooper comes back from the future of space just behind the bookcase of his daughter Murph, and sends her a message. The bookcase reminds us of Borgès's library, which is a major reference of *Les Immatériaux*. In the fourth dimension (see Marcel Duchamp and Lyotard), Cooper can walk in an architecture whose galleries would be as many different moments in life. The bookcase is the interface between multiple interconnected spaces. Cooper implements (im)materials (prints, drawings in the dust, magnetic current), a matrix (Morse code), a material (books, watch), a maternity (he is the father who co-produces the equations with his daughter),

and a subject matter (the secret to boost life, to prevent everything from again turning into dust).

For that purpose, it has been necessary for him to go over to the other side: to pass through a wormhole opening onto other galaxies. This wormhole recalls the symbol of life given by the goddess to the Egyptian Pharaoh Nectanébo II in the Egyptian bas-relief of Karnak which opened the exhibition *Les Immatériaux* in the Centre Pompidou in 1985. This wormhole recalls the symbol of life given by the goddess to the Egyptian Pharaoh Nectanébo II in the Egyptian bas-relief of Karnak which opened the exhibition *Les Immatériaux* in the Centre Pompidou in 1985. The engraved stone stood at the entrance, and a stretched-out, staggered photographic reproduction was the last exhibit. The bas-relief reminds us of the monolith in Kubrick's 2001, *A Space Odyssey*. Like the monolith, it testifies to the human as being a "case". Lyotard indeed saw the human subject no longer as master, but "as a case of the multiple interactions which constitute the universe".

His vision joins that of Hannah Arendt, who in *Between Past and Future* (1961) asserted that works of art "are fabricated not for men, but for the world which is meant to outlast the life-span of mortals, the coming and going of the generations."⁸

That would be the "immodern" hypothesis.

8 Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future*. (New York: Viking, 1961), p. 210.