

Jean-François Lyotard, "Answering the question: what is the postmodern?", in *The Postmodern Explained to Children*, Sydney, Power Publications, 1992

To Thomas E. Carroll
Milan, May 15, 1982

A demand

We are in a moment of relaxation – I am speaking of the tenor of the times. Everywhere we are being urged to give up experimentation, in the arts and elsewhere. I have read an art historian who preaches realism and agitates for the advent of a new subjectivity. I have read an art critic who broadcasts and sells “Transavantgardism” in the marketplace of art. I have read that in the name of postmodernism architects are ridding themselves of the Bauhaus project, throwing out the baby – which is still experimentation – with the bath water of functionalism. I have read that a new philosopher has invented something he quaintly calls Judeo-Christianism, with which he intends to put an end to the current impiety for which we are supposedly responsible. I have read in a French weekly that people are unhappy with *Mille Plateaux* because, especially in a book of philosophy, they expect to be rewarded with a bit of sense. I have read from the pen of an eminent historian that avant-garde writers and thinkers of the sixties and seventies introduced a reign of terror into the use of language, and that the imposition of a common mode of speech on intellectuals (that of historians) is necessary to reestablish the conditions for fruitful debate. I have read a young Belgian philosopher of language complaining that continental thought, when faced with the challenge of talking machines, left them to look after reality; that it replaced the paradigm of referentiality with one of adlinguisticity (speaking about speech, writing about writing, intertextuality); he thinks it is time that language recovered a firm anchorage in the referent. I have read a talented theatrologist who says that the tricks and caprices of postmodernism count for little next to authority, especially when a mood of anxiety encourages that authority to adopt a politics of totalitarian vigilance in the face of the threat of nuclear war.

I have read a reputable thinker who defends modernity against those he calls neoconservatives. Under the banner of postmodernism they would like, he believes, to extricate themselves from the still incomplete project of modernity, the project of Enlightenment. By his account, even the last partisans of the *Aufklärung*, like Popper or Adorno, were able to defend that project only in particular spheres of life – politics for the author of *The Open Society*, art for the author of *Aesthetic Theory*. Jürgen Habermas (you will have recognised him) thinks that if modernity has foundered, it is because the totality of life has been left to fragment into independent specialties given over to the narrow competence of experts, while the concrete individual experiences

“desublimated meaning” and “destructured form”, not as a liberation, but in the manner of that immense ennui Baudelaire described over a century ago.

Following Albrecht Wellmer’s lead, the philosopher believes that the remedy for this parcelling of culture and its separation from life will only come from a “change in the status of aesthetic experience when it is no longer primarily expressed in judgments of taste”, when instead “it is used to illuminate a life-historical situation”, that is to say, when “it is related to the problems of existence”. For this experience “then enters into a language game which is no longer just that of the aesthetic critic”; it intervenes “in cognitive procedures and normative expectations”; it “changes the way these different moments refer to one another”. In short, the demand Habermas makes of the arts and the experience they provide is that they should form a bridge over the gap separating the discourses of knowledge, ethics, and politics, thus opening the way for a unity of experience.

My problem is knowing what sort of unity Habermas has in mind. What is the end envisaged by the project of modernity? Is it the constitution of a sociocultural unity at the heart of which all elements of daily life and thought would have a place, as though within an organic whole? Or is the path to be cut between heterogeneous language games – knowledge, ethics, and politics – of a different order to them? And if so, how would it be capable of realising their effective synthesis?

The first hypothesis, Hegelian in inspiration, does not call into question the notion of a dialectically totalising *experience*. The second is closer in spirit to the *Critique of Judgment*; but, like the *Critique*, it must be submitted to the severe re-examination postmodernity addresses to the thought of the Enlightenment, to the idea of a uniform end of history and the idea of the subject. This critique was started not only by Wittgenstein and Adorno but also by other thinkers, French or otherwise, who have not had the honour of being read by Professor Habermas – at least this spares them getting bad marks for neoconservatism.

Realism

The demands I cited to you at the beginning are not all equivalent. They may even be contradictory. Some are made in the name of postmodernism, some in opposition to it. It is not necessarily the same thing to demand the provision of a referent (and objective reality), or a meaning (and credible transcendence), or an addressee (and a public), or an addressor (and expressive subjectivity), or a communicative consensus (and a general code of exchange, the genre of historical discourse, for example). But in these various invitations to suspend artistic experimentation, there is the same call to order, a desire for unity, identity, security, and popularity (in the sense of *Öffentlichkeit*, “finding a public”). Artists and writers must be made to return to the fold of the community; or at least, if the community is deemed to be ailing, they must be given the responsibility of healing it.

There exists an irrefutable sign of this common disposition: for all these authors,

nothing is as urgent as liquidating the legacy of the avant-gardes. The impatience of so-called trans-avantgardism is a case in point. The replies an Italian critic recently gave to French critics leave no doubt on the matter. The procedure of mixing avant-gardes together means that artists and critics can feel more confident of suppressing them than if they were to attack them head on. They can then pass off the most cynical eclecticism as an advance on the no doubt partial nature of earlier explorations. If they turned their backs on such explorations overtly, they would expose themselves to ridicule for neoacademicism. At the time the bourgeoisie was establishing itself in history, the Salons and Academies assumed a purgative function – awarding prizes for good conduct in the plastic and literary arts under the guise of realism. But capitalism in itself has such a capacity to derealise familiar objects, social roles and institutions that so called “realist” representations can no longer evoke reality except through nostalgia or derision – as an occasion for suffering rather than satisfaction. Classicism seems out of the question in a world where reality is so destabilised that it has no material to offer to experience, but only for analysis and experimentation.

This theme is familiar to readers of Walter Benjamin. Still, its precise implications need to be grasped. Photography did not pose an external challenge to painting any more than did industrial cinema to narrative literature. The former refined certain aspects of the program of ordering the visible elaborated by the Quattrocento, and the latter was able to perfect the containment of diachronies within organic totalities – the ideal of exemplary educative novels since the eighteenth century. The substitution of mechanical and industrial production for manual and craft production was not a catastrophe in itself, unless the essence of art is thought to be the expression of individual genius aided by the skills of an artisanal élite.

The greatest challenge lay in the fact that photographic and cinematic processes could accomplish better and faster – and with a diffusion a hundred thousand times greater than was possible for pictorial and narrative realism – the task that academicism had assigned to realism: protecting consciousness from doubt. Industrial photography and cinema always have the edge over painting and the novel when it is a matter of stabilising the referent, of ordering it from a point of view that would give it recognisable meaning, of repeating a syntax and lexicon that would allow addressees to decode images and sequences rapidly, and make it easy for them to become conscious both of their own identities and of the approval they thereby receive from others – since the structures in these images and sequences form a code of communication between them all. So effects of reality – or the fantasms of realism, if you prefer – are multiplied.

If the painter and novelist do not want to be, in their turn, apologists of what exists (and minor ones at that), they have to renounce such therapeutic occupations. They must question the rules of the art of painting and narration as learnt and received from their predecessors. They soon find that such rules are so many methods of deception, seduction and re-assurance which make it impossible to be “truthful”. An

unprecedented split occurs in both painting and literature. Those who refuse to reexamine the rules of art will make careers in mass conformism, using “correct rules” to bring the endemic desire for reality into communication with objects and situations capable of satisfying it. Pornography is the use of photographs and film to this end. It becomes a general model for those pictorial and narrative arts which have not risen to the challenge of the mass media.

As for artists and writers who agree to question the rules of the plastic and narrative arts and perhaps share their suspicions by distributing their work – they are destined to lack credibility in the eyes of the devoted adherents of reality and identity, to find themselves without a guaranteed audience. In this sense, we can impute the dialectic of the avant-gardes to the challenge posed by the realisms of industry and the mass media to the arts of painting and literature. The Duchampian readymade does no more than signify, actively and parodically, this continual process of the dispossession of the painter’s craft, and even the artist’s. As Thierry de Duve astutely observes, the question of modern aesthetics is not “What is beautiful?” but “What is art to be (and what is literature to be)?”

Realism – which can be defined only by its intention of avoiding the question of reality implied in the question of art – always finds itself somewhere between academicism and kitsch. When authority takes the name of the party, realism and its complement, neoclassicism, triumph over the experimental avant-garde by slandering and censoring it. Even then, “correct” images, “correct” narratives – the correct forms that the party solicits, selects and distributes – must procure a public which will desire them as the appropriate medicine for the depression and anxiety it feels. The demand for reality, that is, for unity, simplicity, communicability, etc., did not have the same intensity or continuity for the German public between the wars as it had for the Russian public after the revolution: here one can draw a distinction between Nazi and Stalinist realism.

All the same, any attack on artistic experimentation mounted by political authority is inherently reactionary: aesthetic judgment would only have to reach a verdict on whether a particular work conforms to the established rules of the beautiful. Instead of the work having to bother with what makes it an art object and whether it will find an appreciative audience, political academicism understands and imposes a priori criteria of the “beautiful”, criteria which can, in one move and once and for all, select works and their public. So the use of categories in an aesthetic judgment would be similar to their use in a cognitive judgment. In Kant’s terms, both would be determinant judgments: an expression is first “well formed” in the understanding, then only those “cases” which can be subsumed within this expression are retained in experience.

When authority does not take the name of the party but that of capital, the “transavantgardist” solution (postmodernist in Jencks’ sense) turns out to be more appropriate than the anti-modern one. Eclecticism is the degree zero of contemporary general culture: you listen to reggae, you watch a western, you eat McDonald’s at midday and local cuisine at night, you wear Paris perfume in Tokyo and dress retro

in Hong Kong, knowledge is the stuff of TV game shows. It is easy to find a public for eclectic works. When art makes itself kitsch, it panders to the disorder which reigns in the “taste” of the patron. Together, artist, gallery owner, critic and public indulge one another in the Anything Goes – it’s time to relax. But this realism of Anything Goes is the realism of money: in the absence of aesthetic criteria it is still possible and useful to measure the value of works of art by the profits they realise. This realism accommodates every tendency just as capitalism accommodates every “need” – so long as these tendencies and needs have buying power. As for taste, there is no need to be choosy when you are speculating or amusing yourself. Artistic and literary investigation is doubly threatened: by “cultural politics” on one side, by the art and book market on the other. The advice it receives, from one or other of these channels, is to provide works of art which, first, relate to subjects already existing in the eyes of the public to which they are addressed and which, second, are made (“well formed”) in such a way that this public will recognise what they are about, understand what they mean, and then be able to grant or withhold its approval with confidence, possibly even drawing some solace from those it accepts.

The sublime and the avant-garde

This interpretation of the contact of the mechanical and industrial arts with the fine arts and literature is acceptable as an outline, but you would have to agree it is narrowly sociologicistic and historicising, in other words, one-sided. Notwithstanding the reservations of Benjamin and Adorno, it should be remembered that science and industry are just as open to suspicion with regard to reality as art and writing. To think otherwise would be to subscribe to an excessively humanist idea of the Mephistophelian functionalism of science and technology. One cannot deny the predominance of technoscience as it exists today, that is, the massive sub-ordination of cognitive statements to the finality of the best possible performance – which is a technical criterion. Yet the mechanical and the industrial, particularly when they enter fields traditionally reserved for the artist, are bearers of something more than effects of power. The objects and thoughts issuing from scientific knowledge and the capitalist economy bring with them one of the rules underwriting their possibility: the rule that there is no reality unless it is confirmed by a consensus between partners on questions of knowledge and commitment.

This rule is of no small consequence. It is the stamp left on the politics of both the scientist and the manager of capital by a sort of flight of reality from the metaphysical, religious and political assurances which the mind once believed it possessed. This retreat is indispensable to the birth of science and capitalism. There would be no physics had doubt not been cast on the Aristotelian theory of movement. No industry without the refutation of corporatism, mercantilism and physiocracy. Modernity, whenever it appears, does not occur without a shattering of belief, without a discovery of the *lack of reality* in reality – a discovery linked to the invention of

other realities.

What would this “lack of reality” mean if we were to free it from a purely historicising interpretation? The phrase is clearly related to what Nietzsche calls nihilism. Yet I see a modulation of it well before Nietzschean perspectivism, in the Kantian theme of the sublime. In particular, I think the aesthetic of the sublime is where modern art (including literature) finds its impetus and where the logic of the avant-garde finds its axioms.

The sublime feeling, which is also the feeling of the sublime, is, according to Kant, a powerful and equivocal emotion: it brings both pleasure and pain. Or rather, in it pleasure proceeds from pain. In the tradition of the philosophy of the subject coming from Augustine and Descartes – which Kant does not radically question – this contradiction (which others might call neurosis or masochism) develops as a conflict between all of the faculties of the subject, between the faculty to conceive of something and the faculty to “present” something. There is knowledge first if a statement is intelligible, and then if “cases” which “correspond” to it can be drawn from experience. There is beauty if a particular “case” (a work of art), given first by the sensibility and with no conceptual determination, arouses a feeling of pleasure that is independent of any interest and appeals to a principle of universal consensus (which may never be realised).

Taste in this way demonstrates that an accord between the capacity to conceive and the capacity to present an object corresponding to the concept – an accord that is undetermined, without rule, giving rise to what Kant calls a reflective judgment – may be felt in the form of pleasure. The sublime is a different feeling. It occurs when the imagination in fact fails to present any object which could accord with a concept, even if only in principle. We have the Idea of the world (the totality of what is) but not the capacity to show an example of it. We have the Idea of the simple (the non-decomposable), but we cannot illustrate it by a sensible object which would be a case of it. We can conceive of the absolutely great, the absolutely powerful; but any presentation of an object – which would be intended to “display” that absolute greatness or absolute power – appears sadly lacking to us. These Ideas, for which there is no possible presentation and which therefore provide no knowledge of reality (experience), also prohibit the free accord of the faculties that produces the feeling of the beautiful. They obstruct the formation and stabilisation of taste. One could call them unrepresentable.

I shall call modern the art which devotes its “trivial technique”, as Diderot called it, to presenting the existence of something unrepresentable. Showing that there is something we can conceive of which we can neither see nor show: this is the stake of modern painting. But how do we show something that cannot be seen? Kant himself suggests the direction to follow when he calls *formlessness*, the *absence of form*, a possible index to the unrepresentable. And, speaking of the empty *abstraction* felt by the imagination as it searches for a presentation of the infinite (another unrepresentable), he says that it is itself like a presentation of the infinite, its *negative presentation*. He

cites the passage “Thou shalt not make unto Thee any graven image, etc.” (*Exodus* 2,4) as the most sublime in the Bible, in that it forbids any presentation of the absolute. For an outline of an aesthetic of sublime painting, there is little we need to add to these remarks: as painting, it will evidently “present” something, but negatively: it will therefore avoid figuration or representation; it will be “blank” (*blanche*) like one of Malevich’s squares; it will make one see only by prohibiting one from seeing; it will give pleasure only by giving pain. In these formulations we can recognise the axioms of the avant-gardes in painting to the extent that they dedicate themselves to allusions to the unrepresentable through visible presentations. The systems of reasoning in whose name or with which this task could support and justify itself warrant a good deal of attention; but such systems cannot take shape except by setting out from the vocation of the sublime with the aim of legitimating this vocation, in other words, of disguising it. They remain inexplicable without the incommensurability between reality and concept implied by the Kantian philosophy of the sublime.

I do not intend to analyse in detail here the way the various avant-gardes have, as it were, humiliated and disqualified reality by their scrutiny of the pictorial techniques used to instill a belief in it. Local tone, drawing, the blending of colours, linear perspective, the nature of the support and of tools, “execution”, the hanging of the work, the museum: the avant-gardes continually expose the artifices of presentation that allow thought to be enslaved by the gaze and diverted from the unrepresentable. If Habermas, like Marcuse, takes this work of derealisation as an aspect of the (repressive) “desublimation” characterising the avant-garde, it is because he confuses the Kantian sublime with Freudian sublimation, and because for him aesthetics is still an aesthetics of the beautiful.

The Postmodern

What then is the postmodern? What place, if any, does it occupy in that vertiginous work of questioning the rules that govern images and narratives? It is undoubtedly part of the modern. Everything that is received must be suspected, even if it is only a day old (*modo, modo*, wrote Petronius). What space does Cézanne challenge? The Impressionists’. What object do Picasso and Braque challenge? Cézanne’s. What presupposition does Duchamp break with in 1912? The idea that one has to make a painting – even a cubist painting. And Buren examines another presupposition that he believes emerged intact from Duchamp’s work: the place of the work’s presentation. The “generations” flash by at an astonishing rate. A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Thus understood, postmodernism is not modernism at its end, but in a nascent state, and this state is recurrent.

But I would not wish to be held to this somewhat mechanistic use of the word. If it is true that modernity unfolds in the retreat of the real and according to the sublime relationship of the presentable with the conceivable, we can (to use a musical idiom)

distinguish two essential modes in this relationship. The accent can fall on the inadequacy of the faculty of presentation, on the nostalgia for presence experienced by the human subject and the obscure and futile will which animates it in spite of everything. Or else the accent can fall on the power of the faculty to conceive, on what one might call its “inhumanity” (a quality Apollinaire insists upon in modern artists) – since it is of no concern to the understanding whether or not the human sensibility or imagination accords with what it conceives – and on the extension of being and jubilation which come from inventing new rules of the game, whether pictorial, artistic, or something else. A caricatured arrangement of several names on the chessboard of avant-gardist history will show you what I mean: on the side of melancholy, the German Expressionists, on the side of novelty, Braque and Picasso; on the one hand, Malevich, on the other, El Lissitzky; on one side, de Chirico, on the other, Duchamp. What distinguishes these two modes may only be the merest nuance: they often coexist almost indiscernibly in the same piece, and yet they attest to a *différend* [an incommensurable difference of opinion] within which the fate of thought has, for a long time, been played out and will continue to be played out – a differend between regret and experimentation.

The works of Proust and Joyce both allude to something that does not let itself be made present. Allusion (to which Paulo Fabbri has recently drawn my attention) is, perhaps, an indispensable mode of expression for works which belong to the aesthetic of the sublime. In Proust the thing that is eluded as the price of this allusion is the identity of consciousness, falling prey to an excess of time. But in Joyce it is the identity of writing which falls prey to an excess of the book or literature. Proust invokes the unrepresentable by means of a language which keeps its syntax and lexicon intact, and a writing which, in terms of most of its operators, is still part of the genre of the narrative novel. The literary institution as Proust inherits it from Balzac or Flaubert is undoubtedly subverted since the hero is not a character but the inner consciousness of time, and also because the diachrony of the diegesis, already shaken by Flaubert, is further challenged by the choice of narrative voice. But the unity of the book as the odyssey of this consciousness is not disturbed, even if it is put off from chapter to chapter: the identity of the writing with itself within the labyrinth of its interminable narration is enough to connote this unity, which some have compared to that of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Joyce makes us discern the unrepresentable in the writing itself, in the signifier. A whole range of accepted narrative and even stylistic operators is brought into play with no concern for the unity of the whole, and experiments are conducted with new operators. The grammar and vocabulary of literary language are no longer taken for granted; instead they appear as academicisms, rituals born of a piety (as Nietzsche might call it) that does not allow the invocation of the unrepresentable.

So this is the differend: the modern aesthetic is an aesthetic of the sublime, but it is nostalgic; it allows the unrepresentable to be invoked only as absent content, while form, thanks to its recognisable consistency, continues to offer the reader or spectator

material for consolation and pleasure. But such feelings do not amount to the true sublime feeling, which is intrinsically a combination of pleasure and pain: pleasure in reason exceeding all presentation, pain in the imagination or sensibility proving inadequate to the concept.

The postmodern would be that which in the modern invokes the unrepresentable in presentation itself, which refuses the consolation of correct forms, refuses the consensus of taste permitting a common experience of nostalgia for the impossible, and inquires into new presentations – not to take pleasure in them but to better produce the feeling that there is something unrepresentable. The postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes or the work he creates is not in principle governed by pre-established rules and cannot be judged according to a determinant judgment, by the application of given categories to this text or work. Such rules and categories are what the work or text is investigating. The artist and the writer therefore work without rules, and in order to establish the rules for what *will have been made*. This is why the work and the text can take on the properties of an event; it is also why they would arrive too late for their author or, in what amounts to the same thing, why their creation would always begin too soon. *Postmodern* would be understanding according to the paradox of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*). It seems to me that the essay (Montaigne) is postmodern, and the fragment (the *Athenaeum*) is modern.

Finally, it should be made clear that it is not up to us to *provide reality* but to invent allusions to what is conceivable but not presentable. And this task should not lead us to expect the slightest reconciliation between “language games” – Kant, naming them the faculties, knew that they are separated by an abyss and that only a transcendental illusion (Hegel’s) can hope to totalise them into a real unity. But he also knew that the price of this illusion is terror. The 19th and 20th centuries have given us our fill of terror. We have paid dearly for our nostalgia for the all and the one, for a reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, for a transparent and communicable experience. Beneath the general demand for relaxation and appeasement, we hear murmurings of the desire to reinstitute terror and fulfil the fantasm of taking possession of reality. The answer is: war on totality. Let us attest to the unrepresentable, let us activate the differends and save the honour of the name.