
The Sublime and Capitalism in Jean-François Lyotard

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Introduction

Jean-François Lyotard (1924-1998) began to write on aesthetics in the early 1970s after he had finished his political activities in Algeria. Lyotard met Pierre Souyri while he was teaching in Lycée de Constantine in Algeria (1950-52), and they participated in the activities of Socialism or Barbarism (*Socialisme ou barbarie*), an association established in 1949 by Claude Lefort, Cornelius Castoriadis, and others. Lyotard discussed political problems in Algeria with them, using a false name. During this period, Lyotard vigorously contributed to the journal *Socialism or Barbarism* and later to *The Power of Laborers* (*Pouvoir ouvrier*).¹ According to Lyotard, these journals “had been wrecked or stopped in a port between 1964 and 1966 after around 15 years of ocean navigation.”² Indeed, after the dissolution of these associations, Lyotard ceased his Marxist activities in 1966. He then restarted his philosophical writing, which had been suspended since his first book *The Phenomenology* (1954). Moreover, starting with *Discourse, Figure* (1971), he published many books consecutively that were based on psychoanalysis, phenomenology, and Marxism, combining these three fields of thought in a unique style.

In examining his activities until 1970, it can be difficult to find any connection to his aesthetic writings in later years. In fact, some people even find a shift, something along the lines of “from activist

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1. Many of his texts in this period are collected in Jean-François Lyotard, *La Guerre des Algériens. Écrits 1956-1963*, Paris: Galilée, 1989.
 2. Jean-François Lyotard, *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud*, Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1973, 11.

to philosopher” or “from political to aesthetic discourse” in Lyotard’s works from the late 1960s. However, his aesthetics since *Discourse, Figure* has always been an extension of his political activities. In *Drift from Marx and Freud* (1973), Lyotard talks about the critical function of aesthetics in politics.

“Aesthetics” was not an alibi or comfortable retreat for the political activist who I used to be (or still am), but was a fault line or fissure to descend to the basement of the political scene, or a cave with a grand vault to look into the depths of reversed, inverted politics. Or it was a circuit for surrounding or reversing the political scenes. For the operations of desire, which are shown in the production of “works,” give us operations that are hidden in the production of ideologies. Here, the following equality is derived: “aesthetics = *atelier* where one can forge the most discriminating concepts for critics.”³

The equals sign in the last sentence indicates his emerging interest, which led to his continuous work on Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.⁴ In any case, he worked on it for approximately 30 years, in the *atelier* that he called “aesthetics.” In spite of this, these political aspects, which remained in his later writings, have not been explained, except from very limited perspectives. That is, Lyotard’s political theory has been generally regarded merely as successor to the theories of Marx and Adorno. It is true that they deeply influenced his appreciation of the avant-garde and criticism of the conformist cultural industry. However, in this paper, I shall treat the problem of Lyotard’s concept of capitalism, which has rarely been considered in relation to his aesthetics. In particular, by focusing on the notion of the “sublime” in his texts, we will find a link to understanding his theory on the sublime from the perspective of a “critique of capitalism.”

3. *Ibid.*, 20.

4. Cf. Jean-François Lyotard, *Leçons sur l'Analytique du sublime: Kant, Critique de la faculté de juger*, §23-29, Paris: Galilée, 1991; *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994.

1. Drift: Toward the Outside of Criticism

In this section, we shall look at Lyotard's attitude toward capitalism, to which he refers in texts from the early 1970s. For example, in *Drift from Marx and Freud*, he emphasizes that capitalism comprises a movement that captures all negative forces and creates new values from them. Therefore, it is not only difficult but also almost impossible to criticize it directly. In the preface of *Drift from Marx and Freud*, he suggests this by mentioning a "book without a title and author's name."

With Bruno Lemenuel, we used to dream of a book without a title and author's name. It was naïve. Because even if it were possible, that is, even if a publisher produced it, the law of value would necessarily introduce it into a circle, drawing out more values from the very fact of its possessing emptiness. Indeed, because of the absence of a title and author's name, people would make such a book a prestigious, commercial object. [...] The capitalistic economy sometimes deprives us of anonymity, rendering itself a mode of appropriation of surplus value.⁵

The above-mentioned "book without a title and author's name" is, as Lyotard writes, apparently perceived to be outside the laws of value. However, in reality, such a book would be absorbed into the law through its "novelty" — through a quality that previous books did not have. Even if it were aimed at evoking irony or criticism of capitalism, its dynamic movement, which always seeks out some novelties, would accept such criticism as well. Therefore, "every criticism, far from overcoming capitalism, shall enforce it."⁶ With such an assumption, Lyotard had no choice but to use a strategy of extending "criticism without criticism" to capitalism.

He sums up his attitude as "it is needed to drift out of the criticism [*il faut dériver hors de la critique*]."⁷ He states that capitalism can be

5. Lyotard, *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud*, 7-8.

6. *Ibid.*, 16.

7. *Ibid.*, 15. Although this notion of "drift" is doubtlessly derived from that of Jacques Lacan,

destroyed not by “criticizing” but by “diverting” it. Here, “divert” means “to turn aside” and “to replace” the desire and energy that sustain the institutions. This term, as Lyotard mentions, is derived from the Latin word *derivatio*, which means not “to leave the *rive* [shore], but to divert the *rivus* [flow], and to go to another end from the precedent.”⁸ In other words, to “divert” does not mean to criticize the capitalistic system from a distant perspective but to confuse or disturb the desire that gives rise to capitalism and sustains it. According to Lyotard, what makes capitalism or a capitalistic society possible, in general, is the “cathexis” (*investissement*, *Besetzung*) of desire. In *Libidinal Economy* (1974) and other works from this period, the capitalistic society is presented as comprising the articulation of desire and its energetic cathexis on bodies, languages, lands, and cities. Therefore, criticizing capitalism merely adds a new element and, in its own way, enforces cathexis. Instead, authentically critical action aimed at capitalism is found in diverting the flows of desire and invalidating the former cathexis.

What might destroy capitalism is the diverting of desire, namely, the loss of cathexis. It is not what economists are searching for [...], but the loss of libido in the capitalistic system and every pole of it.⁹

Although Lyotard rarely refers to these texts in this period, it is evident that this critical attitude to capitalism remained in the 1980s and 1990s as well. It is true that his Marxist activities came to an end in the 1960s, but his critical attitude toward capitalism continued to manifest in his aesthetic writings.

Lyotard is not necessarily faithful to the use of this term. On the notion of “drift” in Lacan, see Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre VII: L'éthique de la psychanalyse*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, Paris: Seuil, 1986, 132.

8. Lyotard, *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud*, 18.

9. *Ibid.*, 16.

2. Capitalism as a Metaphysical Principle

However, does not his critical stance toward capitalism — which, rather than proposing an alternative model to capitalism, would try to change it from the inside — ultimately emerge as an affirmative one? That is, would not his attitude, which would thoroughly remain within capitalism, finally support it? Indeed, while Lyotard is generally critical of capitalism, he occasionally makes comments that can be read as an affirmation of the system. For example, in the conference on Nietzsche in Cerisy-la-Salle in 1972, he defines “capital” as follows in relation to Nietzsche’s concept of “eternal return”:

On the one hand, capital [*Kapital*] is production as consumption, consumption as production. In other words, it is *metamorphosis* without end or finality. This metamorphosis functions not only as dissolution of the *old* and pre-capitalistic institutions but also as self-dissolution of its proper institutions, which are endlessly dissolved and rebuilt. When I use the word “institution,” I mean all that are given (political, legal, cultural...) stable signification, namely, all that are residing peacefully in the adjusted distance and making representations. The character of *metamorphosis*, which endlessly transforms from things to human beings and vice versa, from products to means of production and vice versa, is the economy as far as it is *non-political*. It is exactly capital about which it informs us. Such modernism as dissolution is profoundly *affirmative*, and there is no nihilism in *this* movement. However, there is a *sketch* [*ébauche*] of the superhuman or the inhuman.¹⁰

Capital is considered to be the embodiment of Nietzsche’s “affirmation” or “eternal return.” This vision on capitalism is an affirmative movement without negativity. A similar statement is found in “The Energetic Capitalism” at the beginning of *Driving Disposition* (1973); furthermore, it leads to *Libidinal Economy*, where social structures were explained from libidinal monism. As is often noted,

10. Jean-François Lyotard, *Des dispositifs pulsionnels*, Paris: Union Générale d’Éditions, 1973, 308-309.

Lyotard criticized his own “libidism” later; therefore, one might say that it is impossible to relate it to his writings from the 1980s and 1990s. However, although he abandoned such psychoanalytic vocabulary as “libido” or “cathexis,” his view on capitalism in the earlier works was mostly consistent with that in his later works. For example, in the following passage from *The Tomb of Intellectuals* (1984), Lyotard states that “everywhere, I hear that today’s important problem in society is that of state. This is terribly mistaken. Today’s most important problem, including that of state in our time, is that of capital.”¹¹ He continues:

Capitalism became, and has actually become a metaphysical figure and not an “economical” or “sociological” one. The infinite is posed there as what is not yet determined, and as perpetually controlled, appropriated by the will. [...] You have to conquer such infinity and make it a means to attaining the end. And this end is the glory of will, which itself is infinite.¹²

At first glance, this appears to be a strange statement: that capitalism “became, and has actually become a metaphysical figure.” This, however, is an image of capitalism as a system, which embodies a kind of metaphysical principle called “infinite development.” Although Lyotard says that we have to conquer such “infinity” and make it a means to an end, it is to be overturned soon. “There is no class,” he says, “that can incarnate and monopolize the infinity of will. When I use the word ‘capitalism,’ I do not mean the owner of the capital, nor controller of it.”¹³ That is, according to Lyotard, the “infinity of will” is embodied in inhuman movement, while it is impossible for institutions like states and individuals to “instantiate” it.¹⁴ Capitalism, as a system, has no end in the sense that it aims at some technological, social, or political goals. He insists that capitalism as such has the “aesthetics of the sublime.”

11. Jean-François Lyotard, *Tombeau de l'intellectuel et autres papiers*, Paris: Galilée, 1984, 77.

12. *Ibid.*, 78.

13. *Ibid.*, 80.

14. *Ibid.*, 80.

Capitalism has no end, such as aims at some technological, social, or political fruit [*œuvre*] made by certain rules. Its aesthetics is not that of the beautiful but of the sublime. Moreover, its poetics is of genius, whose creation does not obey but makes the rules.¹⁵

Here, the aesthetics of the beautiful is clearly opposed to that of the sublime. From this passage, one can see that this opposition corresponds to that of “aesthetics that follows a rule” and “aesthetics that makes a rule.”¹⁶ Why does Lyotard consider the sublime to be opposite to the beautiful in this slightly strange way? To gain some insight on this topic, let us proceed to his theory from the 1980s on avant-garde art.

3. Avant-garde Art and the Aesthetics of the Sublime

Lyotard first used the term “sublime” in the early 1980s when he published some papers on “avant-garde” art. In this period, he repeatedly criticized the Neo-expressionism and Trans-avantgardism that were the ongoing trends in painting because he considered them as eclecticism of the representative and abstract, and as conformism to the taste of the general public.¹⁷ He mentioned that they were eclectic in that they synthesize the motifs peculiar to Abstract Expressionism and other currents that preceded the representative paintings. Furthermore, he believed that they were conformist in that they seek the “beautiful,” which is controlled by the industrial principle. What is opposed to eclecticism and conformism is “avant-garde,” which for Lyotard is unlike the avant-garde movement in the narrow sense. In his

15. *Ibid.*, 79.

16. Regarding this aspect, see also the notions of *homologie* and *paralogie* in Jean-François Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne*, Paris: Minuit, 1979, 9; *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

17. In particular, his criticism of Bonito Oliva, who curated “Transavanguardia,” is recognizable. Cf. Jean-François Lyotard, *L'inhumain*, Paris: Galilée, 1988, 139; *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991, 127.

definition — in this period, at least¹⁸ — avant-garde artists are those who would go against the “taste” of the general public, thus evoking not only “pleasure” but also “pain” through their works.

It is the Kantian “sublime” to which he refers in relation to support for the avant-garde and the issue regarding pleasure and pain. We see this in “Response to the Question: What Is the Postmodern?” where he writes the following:¹⁹

In particular, I think the aesthetics of the sublime is where modern art (including literature) finds its impetus, and where the logic of the avant-garde finds its axiom.²⁰

“Sublime feeling,” he continues, “which is also the feeling of the sublime, is, according to Kant, a powerful and equivocal emotion: it brings both pleasure and pain.”²¹ This statement is based on *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.

The feeling of the sublime is thus a feeling of displeasure from the inadequacy of the imagination in the aesthetic estimation of magnitude for the estimation by means of reason, and a pleasure that is thereby aroused at the same time from the correspondence of this very judgment of the inadequacy of the greatest sensible faculty in comparison with ideas of reason, insofar as striving for

18. In his works from the 1970s, for example in *Drift from Marx and Freud*, “avant-garde” is sometimes referred to in a negative context. Cf. Lyotard, *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud*, 234-236.

19. The French version of this article appeared in 1982. As far as I know, it is believed to be the first where Lyotard refers to the Kantian “sublime.” Simon Malpas also begins his analysis on Lyotard’s “sublime” from the same text. Cf. Simon Malpas, *Jean-François Lyotard*, London: Routledge, 2003, 33.

20. Jean-François Lyotard, *Le postmoderne expliqué aux enfants*, Paris: Galilée, 1986, 25; *The Postmodern Explained: Correspondence 1982-1985*, ed. Julian Pefanis and Morgan Thomas, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992, 10.

21. *Ibid.*, 25-26; 10. Lyotard’s use of words is based on the French translation of Kant by Alexis Philonenko. Cf. Emmanuel Kant, *Critique de la faculté de juger*, traduit par Alexis Philonenko, Paris: Vrin, 1979.

them is nevertheless a law for us.²²

According to Kant, the discord or conflict between the faculty for conceiving the absolute and the faculty for presenting it leads to the “sublime” sentiment, which is painful as well as pleasant. As stated earlier, Lyotard emphasizes that the avant-garde must present viewers with pain as well as pleasure. Further, to evoke this ambiguity he refers to Kant’s *Analytics of the Sublime*. Elaborating on the “Ideas of the reason” that are not presentable aesthetically, Lyotard states that our Idea has no possible presentable figure. Therefore, even if our imagination tries to present it, it is not presentable except in such a way as to be in discord with our Idea. This absolutely huge, absolutely powerful, which Kant calls the “Idea of reason,” Lyotard calls the “unpresentable” (*l'imprésentable*).

The unpresentable, “for which there is no possible presentation and which therefore provides no knowledge of reality (experience), also prohibits the free accord of the faculties that produces the feeling of the beautiful. They obstruct the formation and stabilization of taste.”²³ This notion of the “unpresentable” is the core of the theory on the sublime in Lyotard. Indeed, we can even say that it is inseparable from the very notion of the “sublime.”

“Making a representation” (*Darstellung*) in Kant means that it can be captured in the aesthetical dimension. On the contrary, the sublime sentiment, which is not presentable directly, is in the domain of the supersensible, that is, the domain of the reason. Therefore, we can consider that Kant’s theory on the sublime has a structure of “allusion,” whereby the “Idea of reason” can be presented indirectly — not directly.

Returning to Lyotard’s texts, we find these discussions also in “Representation, Presentation, Unpresentable” (1982). This article, which is now included in *The Inhuman* (1988), devotes some pages to the photograph, dealing with the transformation of paintings after the invention of the photograph. However, this point is not far from the

22. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790), Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2006, AK 257; *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, Cambridge University Press, 2000, 141.

23. Lyotard, *Le postmoderne expliqué aux enfants*, 27; 11.

foregoing text (“Response to the Question: What Is the Postmodern?”). Here, Lyotard roughly compares paintings and photographs since the nineteenth century from an “industrial” perspective. Creating a painting is an expensive process; it involves acquiring artistic skills, bearing the cost of materials, and working for a long period. In contrast, creating photographs is relatively inexpensive, beginning with the cost of the materials and ending in the finished product. Thus, Lyotard asserts, “With the photo, the industrial *ready-made* wins out.”²⁴ If so, what will painters choose to do? Duchamp, as one example, decided not to paint anymore, stating, “The time for painting has gone.” However, the avant-garde, says Lyotard, maintaining a distance from the general public, should question: “What is a painting?”

Those who persist have to take on the challenge of photography. They move into the dialectic of the “avant-garde.” What is at stake in this dialectic [i.e., *dialectique négative*] is the question, “What is painting?”, and what keeps the dialectic moving is the refutation of what was done or has just been done: “no, *that* wasn’t indispensable to painting either.” Painting thus becomes a philosophical activity: the rules of formation of pictural images are not already stated and awaiting application. Rather, painting has as its rule to seek out these rules of formation of pictural images, as philosophy has as its rule to seek out the rules of philosophical sentence.²⁵

For Lyotard, the contemporary avant-garde should *incessantly* pose philosophical questions on the rules of the painting; in fact, he believes that the questions would be endless. That is, those who are called avant-garde must continue seeking the “rules of formation of pictural images” and overturning them. Their search for the “unpresentable,” therefore, is called “negative dialectic.”

As we have seen, Lyotard’s theory on the sublime as it relates to the avant-garde is based on the “presentation of the unpresentable” in the

24. Lyotard, *L'inhumain*, 133; 121.

25. *Ibid.*, 133; 121.

Kantian sense. Lyotard, who defined avant-garde artists as those who continuously seek “rules of formation of pictural images,” situates the negative presentation of the “unpresentable” (which is supersensible) along with the “Idea of reason” in Kant as the very moment for the sublime.

4. The Complicity of Avant-garde Art with Capitalism

As noted earlier, the “beautiful” is nothing but conformist art, whose effects are calculated to suit the public’s tastes. The “aesthetics of the beautiful,” therefore, is considered obedience to ready-made rules. On the contrary, the “aesthetics of the sublime” lays down the rules, as is typical of the avant-garde, which Lyotard admires.

We have seen both types of the sublime in Lyotard. On the one hand, making rules is a characteristic of the avant-garde artist. On the other hand, as we have seen in section two, Lyotard also states that capitalism makes new rules incessantly. Originally, these two aspects are not compatible, for common sense tells us that artistic creations and capitalistic movements are diametrically different. Furthermore, the creations of avant-garde artists were regarded as sublime because of their critical power against the capitalistic industrial system. Nevertheless, when we take Lyotard’s view on the sublime into account, the “aesthetics of the sublime,” which implies “not obeying the rules but making them,” is to be shared between capitalism and the avant-garde; in other words, between what is criticized and what criticizes it. This is the paradox of the “aesthetics of the sublime” that is shared by both sides.

The proposition that “the capitalistic aesthetics is that of the sublime” assumes that the capitalistic creation does not obey but makes the rules. However, more distinctively, Lyotard asserts in “The Sublime and the Avant-garde”:

There is something of the sublime in capitalist economy [*Il y a du sublime dans l'économie capitaliste*]. It is not academic, it is not physiocratic, it admits of no nature. It is, in a sense, an economy

regulated by an Idea [*Idée*] — infinite wealth or power.²⁶

This passage appears to be complicated. It is necessary to note that the word “Idea” is derived from the Kantian word *Idee*. Taking the Kantian theory into consideration, Lyotard declares the following in *The Massacre of the Experience by Painting* (1984): While the sublime in the Kantian period was of “transcendence,” in the contemporary period it becomes of “immanence.”²⁷ Kant, in developing his theory on the judgment of taste, distinguished natural objects without finality from the artificial ones they accompany. However, Lyotard argues that our experience is never expressed except through an artificial environment. As we are no longer surrounded by nature, our experience and sentiments are also fabricated by capitalistic and techno-scientific surroundings. The Kantian sublime is transcendent in a twofold sense, because it is brought about by nature, which is transcendent to our human society, and because it belongs to the Idea of reason, which is transcendent to our sensitivity. To these transcendent aspects of the sublime, Lyotard opposes the “immanent” ones, which occur within the capitalistic system and have no relation to natural objects. If we accept such a definition of the “transcendent” and the “immanent,” it would be safe to say that contemporary sublime is within capitalism and is therefore immanent.

To understand these statements more profoundly — that is, the proposition that “there is something of the sublime in capitalist economy” — we must adopt a wider perspective. This proposition not only assumes both our surroundings and the finitude of our faculties but also implies the complicity of the avant-garde with capitalism. By declaring this, Lyotard clearly grasps this complicity.

Yet there is a kind of collusion between the capital and the avant-garde [*Pourtant il existe une connivence entre le capital et l'avant-garde*]. The forces of skepticism and even of destruction that capitalism has brought into play, and that Marx never ceases

26. *Ibid.*, 116; 105.

27. Jean-François Lyotard, *L'assassinat de l'expérience par la peinture, Monory*, Paris: Le Castor Astral, 1984, 153.

analyzing and identifying in some way, encourages among artists a mistrust of established rules and willingness to experiment with means of expression, with styles, with ever-new materials.²⁸

This suggests that, regardless of how resistant it is to the normalizing power of capitalism, the avant-garde, whose creation should be sought for new values, is driven by the dynamics of capitalism. Lyotard, who constantly considered the problem of capitalism after the 1960s, was naturally aware of this twofold bind. That is to say, Lyotard was aware of this ambiguity of the avant-garde, which not only cannot render itself sublime without capitalism but is also inevitably complicit with it.

As discussed earlier, the Lyotardian notion of the sublime was applied to capitalism as well as to the avant-garde. Both are in a state of constant development, and while one is to be criticized, the other may be regarded as the means to criticize it. In fact, this type of ambiguity is also applicable to others of Lyotard's notions: for example, terror, inhuman, and immaterial.

To summarize these points, criticism of capitalism is consistent in Lyotard's texts; it is situated in the center of his aesthetical as well as political writings. Lyotard refers to artistic creation, the effects of which are critical of capitalism, as sublime, even as he also refers to the aesthetics of capitalism and to capitalism itself as sublime. They are, in fact, sharing the same dynamics in that rather than obeying ready-made rules, both attempt to lay down new ones.

As noted at the beginning of this essay, Lyotard's idea of the sublime has usually been explored from a limited perspective. Most people have regarded it as an exclusively aesthetic one by merely reading such of his texts as "The Sublime and The Avant-garde" or "Newman: The Instant." Instead, it is necessary to emphasize the political and economic aspects in his thoughts on the sublime. This approach allows us to perceive that his writings since the 1960s were consistent with the following question — How do we critically reflect on capitalism?

28. Lyotard, *L'inhumain*, 116; 105, slightly modified.

5. Burke's "Sublime" and the Problem of Presentation

In his essays on Barnett Newman, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde" (1985) and "Newman: The Instant" (1984/85), Lyotard's theory of the sublime reveals a different aspect. These essays are relatively well-known examples of his essays on the sublime, but the fact that they present another logic on the sublime, distinguished from that of the "presentation of the unrepresentable," is often ignored. These essays seem to have been read as successors to the texts of the early 1980s because they deal with the painting of Newman, who is often considered as an abstract expressionist. However, the subject of these texts is no longer the "presentation of the unrepresentable," but "the sublime apparition," which suspends our imagination through the presentation itself. In other words, the moment of sublime feeling is no longer found in an allusion to the unrepresentable, but in the very notion of "presentation."

One of the most important points here is that, in his texts on Newman, Lyotard takes into account Burke's theory on the sublime as well as that of Kant. As mentioned above, Lyotard's definition of "unrepresentable" is based on Kant's Idea of reason; therefore, both of them have the structure of allusion in common. In contrast, in his reference to Burke in discussing the work of Newman, Lyotard develops another logic on the sublime, which is heterogeneous with the Kantian one. It is remarkable that Lyotard introduces the question of time, which he sees as lacking in Kant's analytic of the sublime. Regarding this point, let us examine paragraph 26 of *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.

To take up a quantum in the imagination intuitively, in order to be able to use it as a measure or a unit for the estimation of magnitude by means of numbers, involves two actions of this faculty: apprehension (*apprehensio*) and comprehension (*comprehensio aethetica*). There is no difficulty with apprehension, because it can go on to infinity; but comprehension becomes ever more difficult the further apprehension advances, and soon reaches its maximum, namely the aesthetically greatest basic measure for the estimation of magnitude. For when apprehension has gone so far

that the partial representations of the intuition of the senses that were apprehended first already begin to fade in the imagination as the latter proceeds on to the apprehension of further ones, then it loses on one side as much as it gains on the other, and there is in the comprehension a greatest point beyond which it cannot go.²⁹

In this passage, Kant distinguishes “apprehension” (*Auffassung, apprehensio*), which is the faculty to take up a certain quantum as a partial representation, from “comprehension” (*Zusammenfassung, comprehensio aesthetica*), the faculty to synthesize these representations in our imagination; the former “can go on to infinity,” whereas the latter has a certain limit. What Kant calls the “mathematical sublime” appears when the comprehension reaches its maximum, owing to the “monstrous” or “colossal” object.³⁰ Regarding this point, Lyotard gives an interpretation from an original viewpoint.

The analysis is conducted from the perspective of space, but it is easy and interesting to carry it over to the form of time. The painful character proper to the sublime feeling proceeds notably from the aporia of the judgment it involves from a quantitative point of view. Transposed into time, this aporia signifies an inability to synthesize the givens by containing them within “a single moment” (*in einem Augenblick*).³¹

Here, Lyotard suggests the possibility of transplanting Kant’s mathematical sublime from the spatial to the temporal form. Lyotard insists that the question of time “does not form part — at least not explicitly — of Kant’s problematic.”³² From these perspectives, Lyotard moves on to Burke’s treatise on the sublime, instead of Kant’s, to search for the sublime in the logic of time. In short, when discussing Newman’s painting, Lyotard develops his theory on the sublime alongside the

29. Kant, *Kritik der Urteilkraft*, AK 251-252; 135.

30. Kant, *Kritik der Urteilkraft*, AK 253; 136. On these expressions, see also Jacques Derrida, *La vérité en peinture*, Paris: Flammarion, 1978.

31. Lyotard, *Leçons sur l’Analytique du sublime*, 37; 22.

32. Lyotard, *L’inhumain*, 110; 99.

question of time, relating it to the notions of “event,” “appearance,” and “suspension of the imagination,” although he, along with Kant, had earlier defined it as the “presentation of the unrepresentable.”

We look next at “The Instant: Newman,” an essay originally collected for the exhibition *Time: Looking at the Fourth Dimension* at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels. In this text, Lyotard assigns distinguished value to Newman’s painting and considers it in isolation from other abstract paintings by introducing the question of time.

What distinguishes the work of Newman from the corpus of the “avant-gardes,” and especially from that of American “abstract expressionism” is not the fact that it is obsessed with the question of time — an obsession shared by many painters — but the fact that it gives an unexpected answer to that question: its answer is that time is the picture itself.³³

What does the sentence “time is the picture itself” mean? To clarify this enigmatic statement, Lyotard refers to Marcel Duchamp’s work. According to Lyotard, Duchamp’s *The Large Glass* and *Etant donnés* are “two ways of representing the anachronism of the gaze.”³⁴ These works present “the other” that cannot be fully represented — the “analogon of apparition,” in Duchamp’s words. Lyotard goes on to say that Duchamp attempts to “outwit the gaze” through the way he presents his work. “He is,” Lyotard insists, “trying to give an analogical representation of how time outwits consciousness.”³⁵ In contrast, “Newman is not representing a non-representable annunciation: he allows it to present itself.”³⁶ To sum up, whereas Duchamp’s strategy is to outwit the viewer’s gaze by operation of the subjective time or gaze of the viewer, Newman’s work presents itself as pure apparition; the feeling that is evoked through such an apparition, Lyotard says, is the sublime, which is no longer caused by the “presentation of the unrepresentable” but by

33. *Ibid.*, 89; 78.

34. *Ibid.*, 89; 79.

35. *Ibid.*, 90; 79.

36. *Ibid.*

the presentation itself.

So many expressions of a feeling which does have a name in the modern aesthetic tradition (and in the work of Newman): the sublime. It is a feeling of “there” [*Voilà*]. There is almost nothing to “consume,” or if there is, it is what I do not know [*le je ne sais quoi*]. One cannot consume an occurrence, but merely its meaning. The feeling of the instant is instantaneous.³⁷

Newman’s painting does not attempt to present what is unpresentable, but, he states, it is the apparition that presents itself. This shift is extremely important, because Lyotard changes his description of the sublime, from being a “negative presentation” to being the “presentation itself,” from the absence to the presence. What, then, is the difference between the apparition and the mere representation? According to Lyotard, the apparition is the presentation that should not be reduced to a signification, such as a representation. Further, to understand the phrase “the feeling of the instant” in his article on Newman, it is necessary to revisit his interpretation of Kant. According to Kant, the main role of our imagination is to synthesize the past, present, and future lineally. In this context, presentation is regarded as suspending this continuity of subjective time. In other words, when we are confronted with the presentation, the imagination that synthesizes time would be suspended for a moment, and instead, the terror of “privation” appears.

It is also necessary to refer to Burke in this discussion, because his inquiry on the sublime also contains the suspension of our mental faculty. In part II of *The Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, when labeling the most powerful effect of the sublime as “astonishment,” Burke refers to it as a “state of soul, in which all its motions are suspended.”³⁸ When Lyotard identifies the notion of astonishment by presentation in Newman’s work, it is clear that he is

37. *Ibid.*, 91; 80, slightly modified.

38. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757/59), London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968, part II, section 1, 57.

bearing these distinctions in mind. Burke also refers to the feeling of “terror” in connection with the sublime.

No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear. For fear being an apprehension of pain or death, it operates in a manner that resembles actual pain. Whatever therefore is terrible, with regard to sight, is sublime too, whether this cause of terror, be endued with greatness of dimension or not.³⁹

It is obvious that Newman’s painting does not contain terrifying representations. Rather, Lyotard interprets the “apparition” as engendering the terror of the privation of the sensible, by referring to this passage from Burke, who regards the terrifying sight as sublime.

To summarize, Lyotard presents the theory on the “sublime,” which is produced through the “apparition,” or the presentation itself. It is caused by the suspension of the way our imagination synthesizes time. His aesthetics of the “sublime,” then, distinguishes itself from the allusion or “negative presentation,” and ends up as the “aesthetics of shock” (*esthétique du choc*), to use his own words from *Heidegger and the “Jews”* (1988) — “It introduces what, in Benjamin’s reading of Baudelaire and in the later Adorno, will be an aesthetics of shock, an anesthetics.”⁴⁰

6. Perceiving the Material: From the “Sublime” to “Immaterial Matter”

What Lyotard calls the “aesthetics of shock” has been proposed through the notion of the “sublime” since the mid-1980s and was adopted by the subject of “matter” in the late 1980s. Lyotard had already used the term “matter” in the 1970s when referring to his

39. *Ibid.*, Part II, section 2, 57.

40. Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger et « les juifs »*, Paris: Galilée, 1988, 59; *Heidegger and the “Jews,”* trans. Andreas Michel and Mark S. Roberts, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990, 31.

aesthetic theory — for example, in “Freud by Cézanne” (1971) and “Plural Silences” (1972) under the strong influence of Freud. However, in the texts of the 1980s, the connotation of this term is completely different from that in the 1970s, when the connotation was primarily in the context of psychoanalysis. In this section, I will demonstrate that Lyotard’s notion of “matter” or “immaterial matter” in *The Inhuman* and *The Postmodern Fable* (1993) implies something different from the mere “material,” as used in other contexts.

In “After the Sublime, the State of Aesthetics” (1987), his view on “immaterial matter” is evident. Lyotard criticizes what he calls the “metaphysical disposition,” wherein he is referring to the dualism of the form (*eidos*) and the matter (*hyle*) as defined by Aristotle, where matter is inevitably regarded as a resource given to the form. Lyotard criticizes a teleological regime where “matter” is secondary to “form.”

In contrast to such a view, Lyotard insists that it is necessary to approach the presentation itself instead of the means of the presentation — the “matter” instead of the “form.” It should be noted that Lyotard is not referring to mere escape from the formal aspects of work in considering the material aspect. Rather, he suggests approaching the “immaterial matter” (*matière immatérielle*), that will never be objectified.

The matter I’m talking about is “immaterial,” un-objectable, because it can only “take-place” or find its occasion at the price of suspending these active powers of the mind. I’d say that it suspends them for at least “an instant.” However, this instant in turn cannot be counted, since in order to count this time, even the time of an instant, the mind must be active. So we must suggest that there is a state of mind which is a prey to “presence,” [...] a mindless state of mind, which is required of mind not for matter to be perceived or conceived, given or grasped, but *so that there be some something*.⁴¹

“Immaterial matter,” says Lyotard, would suspend the active powers

41. Lyotard, *L’inhumain*, 152-153; 140.

of the mind; it cannot be given or grasped, but it is *there*. The word “suspension” or “there” reminds us of his discussion on Newman. As we have seen, Lyotard characterizes Newman’s painting as something that evokes the feeling “there is something.” This feeling of “there” (*Voilà*) is opposed to consuming or understanding the work. Confronted by Newman’s painting, Lyotard says, we must sense the “instant” of the “apparition” instead of its “meaning.” This “instant” does not belong to the succession of time in a general sense, but to the lapse of that succession.

If we compare these observations with the discussion in “The Instant: Newman,” we can find an essential continuity between Lyotard’s views on the “sublime” and “immaterial matter.” Although Lyotard did not use the notion of “immaterial matter” at this time, he had already emphasized the essential role of matter in Newman’s work. The presence of Newman’s painting is, according to Lyotard, derived from its “nudity” in terms of “matter.” Lyotard says that its “plastic nudity” (*sa nudité plastique*) should be opposed to the “histories or stories” (*histoires*) of painting. Lyotard argues that because Newman intended for the colors and lines in his painting not to have any allusion to the story, he succeeds in engendering the astonishment of “there” and then placing us in “a face-to-face relationship, in the second person.”⁴²

Considering these points, it is evident that Lyotard’s sublime in relation to Newman is totally different from “the presentation of the unrepresentable” inherited from Kant. In contrast to the negative presentation of the Idea of reason, it is the presence of the matter that is considered to be the trigger of the sublime in his texts on Newman. Lyotard states that Newman’s painting is inexplicable from Kant’s perspective; he situates the Kantian sublime on the scale of abstract expressionism and minimal art, which are opposed to Newman’s artwork.

In his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant outlines, rapidly and almost without realizing it, another solution [*i.e.*, different from Burke’s] to the problem of sublime painting. One cannot, he writes,

42. *Ibid.*, 92; 81.

represent the power of infinite might or absolute magnitude within space and time because they are pure Ideas. But one can at least allude to them, or “evoke” them by means of what he baptizes a “negative presentation.” As an example of this paradox of a representation which represents nothing, Kant cites the Mosaic law which forbids the making of graven images. This is only an indication, but it prefigures the minimalist and abstractionist solutions painting will use to try to escape the figurative prison.⁴³

In this passage, the “negative presentation” we have spoken of is regarded as leading to a minimalist and abstractionist methodology. In contrast, Lyotard describes the “surprise that there is something” in Newman’s painting.

For Newman, the escape does not take the form of transgressing the limits established for figurative space by Renaissance and Baroque art, but of reducing the event-bound time [*temps événementiel*] in which the legendary or historical scene took place to a presentation of the pictorial object itself. It is chromatic matter alone and its relationship with the material [...] and the lay-out [...] which must inspire the wonderful surprise, the wonder that there should be something rather than nothing.⁴⁴

To sum up, Lyotard’s sublime, as derived from that of Burke, turns out to be in complete contrast from Kant. In other words, it is defined as the moment of “presence” or “apparition,” not as “negative presentation.” Furthermore, such “presence” is revealed by means of the nudity of “matter.” Since Lyotard insists that this shock by the presence of matter suspends our imagination “for an instant,” he turns the sublime into a temporal notion, whereas it has been traditionally characterized as spatial. From the Greek *hypsos* (height) in Pseudo-Longinus’ *On the Sublime* and the Latin *sublimis* (under the lintel) to contemporary languages, the notion of the sublime has been coupled

43. *Ibid.*, 96; 85, slightly modified.

44. *Ibid.*, 96; 85.

with the elevated, dignified, and supernatural, such as God. However, Lyotard's writings on Newman and "immaterial matter," reveal the "temporal sublime," which may suspend our power of synthesizing time; it is this sublime that "is not localizable in time."⁴⁵

Conclusion: The Caesura of the Sensible

Lyotard continued to work on such motifs, depending mainly on psychoanalysis, in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The shock from the presentation of matter may be comparable to the effect of a high frequency sound on our sense of hearing. Although it is definitely sensed, it cannot be objectified as audible matter. It "presents" itself to us, but *as a presentation that is too strong to be properly perceived*.

As already noted, in the texts on Newman, Lyotard regards this shock as a suspension of the succession of time and then characterizes the resulting sublime as a supersensible experience, as does Kant. However, whereas in Kant it is the Ideas of reason as transcendental objects that appear when our senses are "vibrated" between repulsion and attraction,⁴⁶ Lyotard carefully seems to prevent these transcendental objects from getting into the logic of the sublime. In *Heidegger and the "Jews,"* the "nothing" or "affection" appears when we escape from the subjection to the sensible, through the medium of the sublime experience.

I have invoked briefly such an occurrence in Kant's analysis of the sublime: the incapacity into which imagination is put when it has to produce forms to present the absolute (the thing [*la chose*]). This incapacity to produce forms inaugurates and marks the end of art, not as art but as beautiful form. If art persists, and it does persist, it is entirely different, outside of taste, devoted to delivering and liberating this nothing, this affection that owes

45. Lyotard, *Heidegger et « les juifs »*, 61; 32.

46. Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, AK 258; 141.

nothing to the sensible and everything to the insensible secret.⁴⁷

As Jacques Rancière states, Lyotard might inevitably introduce transcendental instances such as “the Other” (*l'Autre*), “the Absolute” (*l'Absolu*), or “the Thing” (*la Chose*) inasmuch as his concept is based on Kant’s “negative presentation.” It seems to be true that in this schema, the unrepresentable object must necessarily be the supersensible, resulting in the “subjection” to the transcendental.⁴⁸

However, it can be argued that Lyotard’s sublime in the late 1980s is different from that of Kant, for it suggests the possibility of escaping from the supersensible by introducing a “suspension” in the succession of time. Lyotard repeatedly emphasizes this point. Some artworks would render us “insensible” by their absolutely powerful presence; this may be referred to as “anesthesia.” The shock deprives us of all faculties of sensation “for an instant,” suspending the succession of time charged by imagination. Such a state of mind is regarded as belonging to *pathos* instead of *aesthesis* — namely, to the original passivity instead of our ordinary sensation. What Lyotard calls “sublime feeling” or “sublime convulsion” leads to the loss of the capacity of sense, the “anesthesia,” which is immanent to the sense itself.

A sentiment of aesthetics at the limit, the sublime spasm is felt, like the good fortune of taste, on the occasion of a sentiment. But this is from the fact that the latter exceeds sensibility and ravishes it to the point of loss, instead of echoing the sweet consent by which it is offered to the beautiful.⁴⁹

That is, the “sublime spasm” deprives us of the faculty of sense, with the result that only “anesthesia” is left. Rather than being a state of mind as such, anesthesia is a temporary deprivation of all capacities of sense,

47. Lyotard, *Heidegger et « les juifs »*, 78; 44.

48. Jacques Rancière, « Lyotard et l'esthétique du sublime: une contre-lecture de Kant », in *Malaise dans l'esthétique*, Paris: Galilée, 2004, 119-141.

49. Jean-François Lyotard, *Moralités postmodernes*, Paris: Galilée, 1993, 203; *Postmodern Fables*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, 240.

implying that there is no space for the supersensible, such as the Idea of reason. To sum up, Lyotard defines the “sublime” as an experience of shock that would suspend the temporal-spatial experience, and he clearly rejects the Kantian scheme concerning this point — the “negative presentation of the unrepresentable.”

Anesthesia thus becomes the basis for the sublime, for it is the state of the suspension of our sensibilities. As a result, the sublime is no longer found in the negative presentation of the supersensible, but is regarded as a feeling perceived in the sensible shock, resulting in the suspension of the sensible. It is such a “caesura,” to use his own word,⁵⁰ that Lyotard sought to present in his writings on aesthetics after the mid-1980s.

50. Jean-François Lyotard, *Que peindre? Adami, Arakawa, Buren*, Paris: La Différence, 1987, 11.