

The sublime from Lyotard to Schiller

Two readings of Kant and their political significance

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I will here offer a few reflections on a paradoxical object that Jean-François Lyotard puts at the centre of aesthetic theory: the aesthetic of the sublime. Two closely interconnected questions will be raised: What makes this theoretical construction possible? What is at stake in it?

I will focus on Lyotard's short essay 'After the Sublime, the State of Aesthetics'. At the beginning of this text, Lyotard makes the following proposition: 'for the last century, the arts have not had the beautiful as their main concern, but something which has to do with the sublime'.¹ This concern is presented as proper to the avant-gardes in painting and music. And for Lyotard it is jeopardized by some new artistic currents – such as trans-avant-gardism or neo-expressionism – which either come back to old artistic formulas or blend them with the modernist tradition.

In the first instance, let us note that the identification of modern art with an 'art of the sublime' poses a very simple problem: for Kant, the very idea of a sublime artwork is a contradiction in terms. The sublime does not designate the product of an artistic practice as such. Even when experienced before the Pyramids or St Peter's in Rome, the sublime is entirely contained in a subjective experience determined by a certain relation between the powers of reason and imagination. In this experience we emerge from aesthetics proper and enter the realm of morality; we are led from the feeling of imagination's impotence to the feeling of humankind's destination in the supersensuous Kingdom – the province of Reason and Freedom – that would impose its rule over the power of Nature.

Lyotard is of course aware of the problem. But he states it in a way that amounts to dismissing it. In his own words, 'the sublime is none other than the

sacrificial announcement of the ethical in the aesthetic field.' It is on the basis of this understanding of the sublime that he asks, 'what is an art, painting or music, an art and not a moral practice, in the context of such a disaster?'²

I return to the terms Lyotard uses here – sacrifice and disaster. Of primary interest is the very formulation of his question. Lyotard asks: *What is an art* in this context. That is, what art is possible under the category of the sublime? But obviously this question skips over the logically prior question: *is there an art* thinkable under this category? How is it possible that *any* art be subsumed under it? Lyotard's question is actually an answer. And this answer substantializes in advance the idea of a sublime art.

In this way, Lyotard seems at first glance to be in keeping with the Hegelian innovation. Hegel changed the Kantian feeling of the sublime into the characteristic of an art, the symbolic art. He makes the sublime discrepancy into a property of artworks themselves.³ Nevertheless, in Hegel the cause of the discrepancy remains close to the Kantian view: it is first of all a discrepancy inherent in the idea that the artist tries to express through words or stones.

But Lyotard apparently takes a step further: he holds that the properties of the sublime belong to the matter of art itself – that is, to the *aistheton* as such – so that the task specific to the art of the sublime is to 'approach' matter, to approach 'presence' without having recourse to representation. In a word, the point is to approach matter in its alterity. The art of the sublime is art responding to the alterity of its matter, to the *aistheton*.

What are the characteristics of this alterity? The first characteristic of matter is that it is *pure* difference, meaning the difference that is not determined by any

set of conceptual determinations, like the difference of nuance or tone as it distinguishes itself from the sets of differences and oppositions that determine the harmonies of colours or the combinations of notes. Now Lyotard gives to this pure difference that defines matter an unexpected name: he calls it 'immateriality.' That which properly defines matter is its immateriality.

You could say that the idea of 'immaterial matter' merely binds together two well-known traditions: first, an artistic tradition, dating back to the end of the nineteenth century, that identifies pure sensuous presence with the invisibility of thought, and the light of the Idea with the immateriality of energy and electricity; second, a phenomenological tradition that emphasizes the *there is*, the invisible event of a coming-to-presence. But Lyotard's analysis has a more specific goal. It aims at giving matter the properties that Kant gives only to aesthetic form.

At the heart of Kant's *Analytic of the Beautiful* there is a new idea of form. Form is no longer what it had been with Aristotle: the active power that shapes matter. On the contrary, there is aesthetic form in so far as the active power no longer imposes its law on passive matter. The chief property of aesthetic form is its unavailability. Aesthetic judgement is referred to a form that is precisely not a conceptual form imposing its law to the manifold of sensation. The beautiful is beautiful as such to the extent that it is neither an object of cognition, subjecting sensation to the law of the understanding, nor an object of desire, subjecting reason to the anarchy of sensations. This unavailability of the object with respect to any power of cognition or desire allows the subject to feel an experience of autonomy, a 'free play' of the faculties.

This *neither... nor...* is the presupposition of aesthetic experience as such. This is why Kant's argumentation is so confused when it comes to the status of the pleasure induced by *tone* and *colour*. It is unclear whether such pleasure belongs to the mere agreement of the sensation, which is an effect of the regularity of vibrations on our senses, or whether it depends on the perception of the regularity as a form. This ambiguity helps to restore the traditional opposition of form and matter and to reset the stage of an *either... or...*, as is obvious in the fourteenth paragraph of the *Critique of Judgement*. Lyotard's analysis thus appears as a specific response to Kant's analysis and to its difficulty. It is no coincidence that Lyotard brings the status of tone and colour to the heart of his argumentation; or that he wants precisely to claim that colour and tone have the autonomy, the unavailability of the aesthetic form. With Lyotard, Kant's autonomy of the subject

before the free form is relocated in matter, in the event of sensation itself.

There is significantly more at stake in this shift than the 'modernist' privileging of 'presence' over 'representation.' The issue is the autonomy of aesthetics as such, the *neither... nor...* that expresses its logical form. By giving the 'charming sensation' the properties of the aesthetic form, Lyotard goes so far as to cancel the very existence of a specific sphere of experience. He consciously mixes the Kantian aesthetic form with its opposite – the Aristotelian form – because he wants to dismiss the Kantian *neither... nor...*, to replace it with a sheer *either... or...* Either the aesthetics of the beautiful, meaning the conceptual legislation of form unifying the manifold of sensation, or the aesthetics of the sublime, meaning the conflicting complicity binding the material 'immateriality' of sensation to the transcendence of Reason. Ultimately this means: no aesthetics at all. There is either the autonomy of the mind in knowledge or its heteronomy in Ethics.

This reconfiguration is more obvious still when we look at the second property Lyotard gives to matter. Matter, he tells us, is 'the event of a passion.' At the end of the ninth paragraph, after having emphasized the singular, incomparable quality of the grain of skin, the fragrance of an aroma, of the tone or the nuance, Lyotard goes on to specify:

All these terms are interchangeable. They all designate the event of a passion, a possibility for which the mind will not have been prepared, which will have unsettled it and of which it conserves only the feeling – anguish and jubilation – of an obscure debt.⁴

This is the second characteristic of matter in Lyotard's construction. Matter designates 'the event of a passion', a disarray that brings to mind the consciousness of 'an obscure debt'. The first characteristic of matter, its 'immateriality', is borrowed from the Kantian *Analytic of the Beautiful* and transferred from form to matter. Clearly the second characteristic is borrowed from the *Analytic of the Sublime* with the result of yet another displacement. Lyotard first bestows upon the 'agreement' of tone or colour the autonomy of form. But in a second move he wants to confer to the *aistheton* the 'disagreement', the 'discrepancy' that in Kant is specific to the experience of the sublime.

This means that the *aistheton* is two things at once: it is pure materiality and it is a sign. It is the sign of an unrepresentable. Put simply, in Lyotard the tone or the nuance seems to play the same role as the pyramid or the stormy ocean in Kant. They induce a disagreement, a break in the mind's capacity to take

hold of its object. But the ways and ends of these two forms of disagreement are diametrically opposed. In Kant's analysis, the 'incapacity' to seize the object is referred to the imagination. It cannot offer Reason an apprehension of the magnitude as a whole. Through the sublime it betrays its own inadequacy, and this inadequacy is none other than the inadequacy of 'the greatest faculty of sense'.⁵ The imagination is revealed, or rather it reveals itself, in its incapacity to present the Ideas of Reason.

In so doing it proves two things: Reason's power of conception that goes beyond sensory experience, and Reason's power of command, which makes the imagination recognize in reason a power to complete what imagination itself can never complete. At bottom, 'the subject's very incapacity betrays the consciousness of an unlimited faculty of the same subject.'⁶ The disarray of imagination before the sublime is the pathway that leads the subject to the field of the supersensuous. It also leads from the autonomy of aesthetic free play to a superior autonomy, the autonomy of Reason as a supersensuous legislator.

Lyotard turns all this on its head. The core of the 'sublime' is the experience of a double heteronomy. The *aistheton* acts as a shock that induces in the mind the sensation of its radical dependence. As he puts it in 'Anima Minima': 'The soul comes into its existence dependent on the sensuous, thus violated, humiliated. The aesthetic condition is enslavement to the *aistheton* without which it is anesthesia.'⁷ The condition of the soul is the dependence on an *either... or...*: either

the *aistheton* which means servitude, or its absence which means death. 'Servitude or Death' is obviously a reversal of the revolutionary motto 'freedom or death'. It invalidates any intellectual pretension to autonomy.

Now this is not all. As in Kant's third *Critique*, the relation to the sensuous in Lyotard reveals a relation between the subject and the law. But here too Lyotard turns the conclusion of the deduction into its opposite. Enslavement to the *aistheton* means enslavement to the law of alterity. The experience of the sublime in Lyotard reveals the exact contrary of what is revealed in the Kantian sublime. The law of ethics is here identified rigorously with a 'debt' to an Other. It is the law of heteronomy, the enslavement to the mere, mute alterity of 'the Thing' – the power inside the mind and prior to the mind that the mind ever tries to overcome, and never succeeds.

It is pointless to argue that Lyotard has misread Kant. It would be more relevant to ask why he reads Kant the way he does. But the primary question is: why did he bring Kant into the picture at all, why go looking in Kant's theory of the sublime for a cluster of ideas that are hardly to be found there: an idea of artistic avant-gardism; a definition of the task of that avant-garde as bearing witness to the misery of the subject; an idea of an ethical Law in terms of radical heteronomy?

Such is the paradox presented by Lyotard's aesthetics of the sublime: it ties the idea of bearing witness to the Freudian immemorialness of 'the Thing', to the



idea of the artistic avant-garde's task. This paradox cannot be resolved by reference to a postmodern turn. The standard view of Lyotard as a postmodern theorist is misleading. Postmodernity is for Lyotard a descriptive category that accounts for a state of things; it is not a new paradigm of art and of rationality. Lyotard's appropriation of the sublime aims openly at defending the essence of modern art and of the avant-garde's duty, in opposition to the so-called postmodern forms of artistic eclecticism, such as trans-avant-gardism or neo-expressionism. Against this eclecticism, Lyotard calls for the resumption of the tradition of modernity as a straightforward movement, for barring any kind of 'return' to figuration or mixing of figurative features with abstract features. And he takes on the task of this resumption in a way that could hardly fail to recall Greenberg's own polemics.

The question thus arises, how does Lyotard reconcile two apparently opposite ideas: the idea of the enslavement of thought to the immemorial law of 'the Thing', and the idea of a one-way history of artistic 'revolution', still more or less attuned to an idea of political emancipation? How can he conceive a historical task of modernity that would be witness to the originary and inescapable servitude of the subject? Apparently the paradoxical recourse to Kant, which results in the opposite of what Kant intended, is linked to this conflation of temporalities and politics.

Perhaps matters may be clarified if we refer to another essay, 'Representation, Presentation, Unpresentable', which also takes on the issue of trans-avant-gardism:

Mixing on the same surface neo- or hyperrealist motifs and abstract, lyrical or conceptual motifs means that everything is equivalent because everything is good for consumption. This is an attempt to establish and have approved a new taste. This taste is no taste.... To the extent that this postmodernism, via critics, museum and gallery directors and collectors, puts strong pressure on the artist, it consists in aligning research in painting with a *de facto* state of 'culture' and in deresponsibilizing the artists with respect to the question of the unrepresentable. Now in my view this question is the only one worthy of what is at stake in life and thought in the coming century.⁸

How can it be determined not only that a taste is bad, but that it is not a taste? Lyotard's answer is that if this aesthetic equivalence in consumption is a taste, the historical duty, the very meaning of our life and thought, is lost. It is not a taste because it must not be a taste. We easily recognize the form of this argument. It runs through all Adorno's polemics against eclecticism

in music. We may recall, for instance, the point made in *Philosophy of Modern Music* concerning some chords of nineteenth-century salon music that *are* no longer audible unless, as Adorno says, 'all is deception'.⁹ If those chords are audible, if they can still be heard today with pleasure, the promise of art reveals itself as a lie, which also means that the historical path to emancipation is lost.

The comparison throws some light on Lyotard's argumentation. Undoubtedly the 'impossibility' of mixing figurative and abstract motifs on a canvas is indebted to a certain tradition of Marxist argumentation linking the radical purity of art and its one-way movement with the promise of political and social emancipation, a tradition championed by Adorno and Greenberg. This argumentation remains relevant because it clearly invalidates the idea of an opposition between 'art for art's sake' and 'engaged art'. It substitutes for it a quite different idea: art is political to the extent that it is only art, to the extent that its products are different from objects of consumption and are endowed with a character of unavailability. Obviously this does not mean that they are not sold; what is suggested, rather, is something in their very sensory texture, in the way we experience them, that stands in sharp contrast to the status of consumable things.

This is also the point behind Kant's comeback: I mean the comeback of Kant's tripartition of the good, the beautiful and the agreeable. The only thing that can ensure the border between artworks and consumable objects is the specificity of the feeling that they induce. The beautiful, Kant maintains, is neither the agreeable nor the good. Artworks, Adorno or Lyotard maintain, must not be agreeable, they must not be available to the desire that holds objects as consumable. And in so far as they are unavailable in this way, they produce a specific 'good' themselves. Art has to do with disagreement. And it is this power of disagreement that makes it good and ties it to another good.

In Adorno the argument is clear. The disagreement of art is called contradiction. Contradiction is the property that characterizes art, in opposition to the eclecticism that acts as the market's principle. Contradiction endows the artwork with the double property of a power and a lack of power: a power of a self-containment which challenges the law of the market; and a lack of power, an 'insufficiency' that prevents it from indulging in its self-containment and has it bear witness to alienation.

Lyotard's position should be considered as both the last offspring of that political interpretation of art and its reversal: art still carries the historical task of

preserving a sensory difference among the objects of the world; it is still set in opposition to the market. But the ways and the ends of the artistic disagreement no longer fall under the concept of contradiction. And the disagreement no longer bears witness to an alienation that should be suppressed. The disagreement is now called a 'disaster'. It is the sheer inscription of alienation, an enslavement of the soul that cannot be suppressed.

What makes this reversal possible? Here again, the reference to a postmodern break does not help account for the problem. To the extent that the notion of postmodernism makes sense – which is not much in my view – it dismisses the idea of a historical duty of the avant-garde. To understand Lyotard's conceptual operation adequately we have to take our distance from the standards of modernism and postmodernism and reset the originary stage of the politics of aesthetics. Lyotard's paradoxical reading of Kant becomes comprehensible once it is read as a kind of palimpsest, as both returning to a primary political reading of Kant and erasing it at the same time. The analysis of the *aistheton* as bearing witness to a condition of enslavement should be read as an exact response to a first analysis of the 'aesthetic state' which stages the promise of freedom. I have in mind, as announced in my title, Schiller's reading of Kant in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Mankind*.

Agreement as disagreement

What is at stake in this reading of Kant by Schiller? I would say that the point is, first, to emphasize the aesthetic *neither... nor...* as the principle of a specific sphere of human experience, and second, to spell out the political implications of this autonomy of aesthetic experience.

Schiller's reading rests on a basic thesis: aesthetics is a field where the relations of power that frame the experience of the subject as knowledge, desire and action are suspended. The free play of understanding and imagination in the experience of the beautiful puts an entirely new kind of freedom in play. It puts in play an autonomy that has nothing to do with the autonomy that the mind imposes, as its own law, to the manifold of sensation. Rather, aesthetic autonomy is the withdrawal of that kind of autonomy; its autonomy is in fact strictly related to the withdrawal of power. The free appearance stands before the subject and is unavailable to the domination of knowledge or will. The aesthetic experience is the experience of a specific sensorium cancelling the oppositions of understanding and sensibility, form and matter, activity and passivity. This

suppression of opposites is resumed in the concept of the 'play drive', which contrasts at once with the power of the 'formal drive' imposing the law of the mind on the sensations, and with the 'sensuous drive' imposing the anarchy of sensations over the mind.

So it turns out that the agreement without concept of understanding and imagination is a disagreement as well. There is no need to look in the sublime experience of magnitude, power or fear for the mark of disagreement that would found the radicality of art. The experience of beauty, the experience of the *neither... nor...*, is already a double-bind, an experience of attraction and repulsion. It underscores the identity of Kantian opposites, charm and respect, that Schiller translates as grace and dignity. We may recall the well-known passage concerning the statue of Juno Ludovisi, which both attracts by its charm, and remains inaccessible by its self-sufficiency. We are, Schiller writes, 'drawn by this contradictory movement in a state of utter repose and supreme agitation'.¹⁰ The sublime disquiet is entailed in the aesthetic rest. The disagreement is operative at the heart of the 'aesthetic agreement'.

It is this meeting of agreement and disagreement which allows the aesthetic experience to be politically significant – that is, to be more than a Kantian 'common sense' promising to bridge the gap between the refinement of the elite and the simplicity of the lower class. Why does the statue simultaneously draw us over and keep us at bay? Because the goddess the statue represents has the characteristic of divinity that is nothing less than the characteristic of the human being's full humanity: she does not work, she plays. She neither yields, nor resists. She is free from the links of will and obedience.

This state of harmony clearly disagrees with the kind of 'agreement' that governs human societies, that pins people down to their proper places, separating those who rule from those who are ruled, those who work from those whose leisure is won on the back of workers, and so on. This aesthetic disagreement can thus be posited as a single response to both the kind of 'agreement' imposed by the old despotism and the 'agreement' imposed by the revolutionary and terrorist form of political disagreement.

In Schiller's view the French Revolution had failed. It turned to terror because the revolutionary power had played the traditional part of the Understanding – meaning the state – imposing the law of universality onto the matter of the sensations – meaning the masses. The Revolution was still in line with the old partition of the sensuous according to which the 'culture' of the elite must rule over the 'savageness'

of the people. The Revolution remained true to the traditional opposition between a class of the mind and a class caught in sensation. By contrast, true revolution would be revolution that overthrows the power of 'active' understanding over 'passive' sensuousness, that undermines the power relation that establishes the class of 'activity', of 'law' and 'intelligence' as dominating over the class of 'sensuousness' and 'savageness.' It would be a new partition of sensuousness. This new partition represents precisely what is at stake in the aesthetic experience, which, far from simply reversing the power of understanding over sensuousness, as the Revolutionary power had done, instead neutralizes it. Active thought and passive sensation now cohere in a unique mode of the sensuous and a specific sphere of being. There is a new meaning to universality, a new sensuous equality, involved in the experience of free play and pleasure in appearance. For Schiller, this new sense carries the promise of equality, the promise of a new way of sharing a common world. The 'aesthetic education of man', the development of a new kind of 'humanity', is the pathway that leads to this truly free state.

Adorno's aesthetics and Lyotard's aesthetic of the sublime are made intelligible once brought over to this 'originary stage' of aesthetics, where the autonomy of art and the promise of an emancipated humanity are grounded in the specificity of a sensory experience. This sensory experience is the experience of a heterogeneous sensuousness, cancelling the oppositions of activity and passivity, or form and matter, which frame ordinary experience. And this experience presents this cancellation in the specific form of a double-bind.

It is this double-bind, this becoming dynamic of the *neither... nor...*, that Schiller introduces into Kant's *Analytic of the Beautiful*. This means that the sublime disagreement is already involved in the beautiful agreement. The experience of the beautiful is both agreement and disagreement. The aesthetic free play is not simply a state of mediation, as it is with Kant. Schillerian free play is neither a common sense, reconciling high culture and popular simplicity, nor a step towards the moral subject's self-discovery. It is not only a suspensive state but a power of its own, a specific freedom that can as such act in society and supersede the deadlock of political freedom. Free play is the seed of a new humanity, opposed to the present state of social and political domination. And this new humanity can come to fruition through a historical process of self-education.

The idea of aesthetic self-education makes the idea of a new revolution possible: a revolution in the

sensuous conditions of common life. It clears a path that leads to the idea of an aesthetic revolution, the revolution first spelled out in the so-called 'Oldest Systematic Programme of German Idealism', fostering the Marxian idea of the 'human revolution' by contrast to the merely political revolution, and culminating in the Futurist and Constructivist programmes in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Put otherwise, the Schillerian idea of aesthetic self-education opened the door to the metapolitics of aesthetics.

The whole issue for this metapolitics lies in the relation between the *selfness* of aesthetic *self-education* and the kind of 'otherness' that shapes the *neither... nor...*, the neutralization proper to aesthetic experience. I said that this otherness highlights a lack of power. The subject is promised the possession of a new sensuous common world by the 'self-contained' divinity expressed in a work of marble that cannot be possessed in any way.

But in order to make this artwork a principle of self-education, it has to be considered in a completely different way. The self-containment of the Greek statue immediately turns out to be the expression of another self-sufficiency: the self-sufficiency of the very collective life that gave rise to the statue. The statue's self-containment thus expresses the life of that ideal Greek community that did not even know the 'otherness' of aesthetic experience because its experience did not rend itself into separate activities, because art and life, art and politics, life and politics were not severed from one another. And this self-contained statue therefore promises to modern humanity, torn to pieces by the division of labour, ranks and occupations, the restoration of a state of integrity, where the forms of art would again be identical with the forms of collective life. The Other turns out to be nothing but the Self severed from itself.

From this point on, the 'otherness' or 'heteronomy' that had first fostered the autonomy of the aesthetic experience is erased for the benefit of a new *either... or...* Either the everlasting splitting of the human subject or its integrity; either the passivity of the spectator contemplating the representation of a lost integrity in the dead marble, or the activity aiming at the reappropriation of that integrity in the life of human beings, the construction of a new world where, as Malevich says, the collective projects of life will take the place of the old Greek ladies, and the forms of art will be the forms of a collective life.¹¹

As is well known, the deadlock of 'aesthetic education' turned into 'human revolution' would provoke yet again a reformulation of the aesthetic double-bind

– a reformulation that some Marxist philosophers would contrast to the state powers of Marxism. The principle of that reformulation is simple. It consists in two main aspects.

It aims, first, at restoring the ‘separation’, restoring the otherness of aesthetic experience that alone carries the promise of a new sensuous world. It is no coincidence that so many Marxists in the last century became – and some of them still are – the most uncompromising champions of the ‘autonomy of art’. The question is not to oppose an ‘open-minded Marxism’ to a sectarian one. At issue is the link between the promise of emancipation and the assessment of a difference in sensory experience, the experience of a heterogeneous sensuousness, cancelling of the power of active form over passive matter, the power that epitomizes the law of domination. The aesthetic alternative does not oppose, as is often assumed, autonomy to heteronomy. It opposes one linkage of autonomy and heteronomy to another linkage of them.

Restoring this separation means displacing the point where the double-bind produces its effect, going from the aesthetic experience to the work of art itself. This is the second point of the reformulation: the equality of the opposites, the mutual cancellation of activity and passivity becomes the law of attraction and repulsion, the gravitation of the artwork itself. Such a position is expressed succinctly in Adorno’s reformulation of matters. Obviously Adorno has the same basic concern as Schiller: the division of labour, the separation of labour and enjoyment. But Adorno’s response is that the path to the suppression of the opposition consists in hardening the opposition, in pushing it to the extreme. The promise of emancipation can be kept only by sweeping aside any kind of reconciliation, by resisting any ‘agreement’.

Moses or McDonald’s?

The ‘aesthetic’ stage therefore turns out to be the stage of the irreconcilable. The autonomy of Schoenberg’s music, as Adorno conceptualizes it, is a double heteronomy: in order to denounce the capitalist division of labour and the agreements of commodification, it has to take that division yet further, to be more technical still, more ‘inhuman’ than the products of capitalist mass production. And this inhumanity in turn makes the blotch of what had been repressed – the blotch of the unconscious – rise to the surface and disrupt the perfect technical arrangement of the work.

So the aesthetic double-bind becomes the contradiction of the work, the contradiction sealed in its sensory

texture. In so far as it is a contradiction *in actu*, the work alone keeps the promise of emancipation. This also means that the ‘aesthetic’ stage could take the place of both politics and morality.

Lyotard’s construction appears as the last scene of this metapolitical plot, the last turn in the play between aesthetics, ethics and politics. Lyotard takes the Adornian conception of the irreconcilable to the point where it is reversed. The meaning of the postmodern moment in Lyotard’s thinking thus becomes clear: it was just the moment of disconnection between artistic modernism and political emancipation. The dismissal of the latter allows for artistic avant-gardism to get into a new connection and endorse a new ‘historical task’. The avant-garde indeed must indefinitely draw the dividing line and sever modern art from commodity culture. But the inscription of the double-bind is no longer the contradiction revealing the mark of alienation and bearing the promise of emancipation. The tracing of the line has become a mere stroke, the sheer inscription of the Other’s strike.

With the contradiction, it is the ‘aesthetic’ that has vanished. ‘Anima Minima’ states it unambiguously: Kant’s *Analytic of the Beautiful* is a collection of ‘logical monsters’: universality without concept, pleasure devoid of interest, and so on.¹² Contradiction thus only means inconsistency. The field is cleared in this way for the sublime double-bind that becomes the law of art. This means that the practice of art is a practice of mere witnessing to Otherness. The sublime seemed at first to reside in the work. But in actuality the work is nothing but a stroke. The important thing is the self-inscription of the stroke, the otherness of the *aistheton* inside the mind, the immemorial law of dependence.

Schiller opposes the emancipating power of the aesthetic double-bind to the cruelty of the revolutionary motto ‘freedom or death’. Lyotard, by contrast, puts in the place of the revolutionary motto a sheer ‘enslavement or death’. Schiller elaborates from Kant an idea of the aesthetic experience as a third way between the eternity of domination and the savagery of rebellion. As it were, the sensuous realm signals that something else is possible. But this is the stake of the Lyotardian reformulation, for the *aistheton* offers the opposite sign – it signals that there is no third way, that there is nothing to do other than obey the immemorial law of alienation. For Lyotard, the avant-garde has to draw the line precisely with this in view: it must denounce the whole trickery of emancipation. The reformulation of what is at stake in the aesthetic opposition now reads: *either one disaster or another*.

Either the disaster of the sublime, the recognition of the immemorial dependence of the human mind on the immemorial law of the Other inside it, or the greater disaster of the promise of self-emancipation and its completion in either the overt barbarity of Nazi or Soviet totalitarianism or in the soft totalitarianism, the anaesthesia, of commodity culture.

Art is still taken in the metapolitical plot. But the meaning of the plot has been entirely overturned. Art is no longer the carrier of the Schillerian promise. It is still 'resistance' as with Adorno. But resistance has taken on a new meaning. It is nothing else than the anamnesis of 'the Thing', the anamnesis of the inescapable enslavement to the Other. Either the enslavement to the Other that 'violates' us, or the enslavement to the Self that leads us to the anaesthesia of commodity culture. Either the Law of Moses or the law of McDonald's. Such is the last word that the self-cancelling aesthetic of the Sublime gives to the metapolitics of aesthetics. This last word swallows both aesthetics and politics in the mere ethical double-bind. How much this new Law of Moses actually contrasts to the law of McDonald's remains, of course, a debatable point.

Translated by Max Blechman

Notes

1. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1991, p. 135.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 137.
3. Of course Lyotard makes no reference to Hegel. He rather refers to Burke, because this thinker offers him the overtones of night, power and terror that he associates with the sublime. But the sublime in Burke is a feeling. It is not the concept of a specific sort of art.
4. Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, p. 141.
5. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1952, §27, p. 106.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 108.
7. Jean-François Lyotard, 'Anima Minima', in *Postmodern Fables*, trans. Georges van den Abbeele, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1999, p. 243.
8. Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, p. 127.
9. T.W. Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster, Seabury Press, New York, 1973, p. 34.
10. F. Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man, in a Series of Letters*, trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1982, p. 109.
11. See 'On the Museum', in K.S. Malevich, *Essays on Art 1915-1928*, ed. Troels Andersen, trans. Xenia Glovacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin, Borgen, Copenhagen, 1968, pp. 68-72.
12. See 'Anima Minima', p. 240.



C R O S S I N G S
A C O U N T E R - D I S C I P L I N A R Y J O U R N A L

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