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# The Contour of Sublimity in the Postmodern Age: The Exemplary Case of Jean-Francois Lyotard

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## ABSTRACT

Toward the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, sublimity was neglected and untended; the sublime was relegated to the margin of intellectual arena. It was until the middle of the twentieth century, the time of the rise and the development of postmodernism, the sublime rose to the surface of critical thought. In a series of writings, Jean-Francois Lyotard, along with Jameson, Nancy and other prominent postmodern thinkers, have emphasized the alienating, destructive aspects of the sublime, which relate to the "unpresentable." The postmodern sublime, as (differend), is structured by the contradictions, aporias, hysteria, and schizophrenia; in fact, it bespeaks the postmodern global system characterized by fragmentation, particularly the dissociation of signs and their arbitrary referents. Postmodernism, therefore, evinces the decline of social agreement and the withering of the individual, and the postmodern age is apocalyptic fin-de-millennium. As a result, the postmodern experience is one in which the individual subject is fragmented, overpowered, or annihilated, as the social realm and any notion of the community suffers a similar erasure. So, as the dominant postmodern ontological frame of mind is "overwhelmed" by the aesthetic of the sublime, the aesthetic of the beautiful is subverted or relegated to the margin.

**Keywords:** postmodernism; sublime; unrepresentable; (differend); aporia; fragmentation; ontology.

## Introduction

Jean-Francois Lyotard is the major theorist of the sublime in its relation to postmodernity. In a series of writings, Lyotard has emphasized the sublime as a particularly relevant category to postmodern aesthetics and culture. Lyotard follows Nietzsche and Heidegger in emphasizing the alienating, destructive aspects of the sublime. Indeed, Lyotard *celebrates* these very elements in the sublime.

Lyotard (1984) constructs his notion of the sublime as a category of opposition to what he terms "the fantasies of realism" with its "supporters... of what exists" (p.74). Postulating that the rules of realism "must appear... as a means to deceive, to seduce, and to reassure," Lyotard concludes that this "makes it impossible for them to be 'true'" (1984, pp. 74 -75). In Modernism, Lyotard sees an effort to reject realism: "Modernity, in whatever age it appears, cannot exist without a shattering of belief and without discovery of the 'lack of reality' of reality" (1984, p.77). This "lack of reality" Lyotard identifies with Nietzschean nihilism, which is, he notes, another version of "the Kantian theme of the sublime" (1984, p. 77).

Lyotard's sublime derives principally from Kant's mathematical sublime, in particular Kant's idea that the imagination is unable to represent the idea of totality. This moment marks an intimation of an Idea "of which no presentation is possible," and consequently no knowledge of "reality" can be imparted; as a result, "the free union of the faculties" and the "formation and stabilization of taste" −the hallmarks, Lyotard argues, of both realism and the aesthetic of the beautiful −are frustrated. This constitutes what Lyotard terms "negative presentation," a moment that

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"will enable us to see only by making it impossible to see" (1984, p. 78). The disruption of the unified subject, and the rejection of any consonance between the subject and the world, is for Lyotard the principal thrust of the Kantian sublime:

> The analysis of the beautiful still allows one to hope that the subject will ground itself as the unity of the faculties and that the accord between real objects and the authentic destiny of this subject −the Idea of nature − will be legitimated. But... the "Analytic of the Sublime" −like a meteor careening into the work devoted to this double edification −appears to put an end to these hopes. (1993, p.109)

Lyotard argues that the mission of avant-garde art is to provide moments of such negative presentations, to provide the reality-shattering experience of the sublime. Burke's and Kant's elaborations of the sublime "outlined a world of possibilities for artistic experiments in which the avant-gardes would later trace out their paths" (2012, p. 538). The "logic of the avant-gardes finds its axioms," Lyotard asserts, "in the aesthetic of the sublime" (1984, p. 77).

There can be two possible responses to this shattering of the real: the first is a sense of "nostalgia for presence felt by the human subject"; the second, an emphasis "on the increase of being and the jubilation which result from the invention of new rules of the game"(1984, pp.79-80). The first response Lyotard characterizes as "regret," and identifies it with a strain in modernism that is nostalgic for unified forms and "confines to offer to the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure"; the second response Lyotard characterizes as "assay," and identifies it with a strain in modernism that "puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that... denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste" and "searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable." This latter response Lyotard terms "postmodernism" (1984, pp. 79-81). For Lyotard then, the sublime and the postmodern constitute identical aesthetic and political moments, each defining and defined by the effort to present that which cannot be represented.

The aesthetics of realism, or of the beautiful, Lyotard argues, constitute a "transcendental illusion" that imposes an image of totality where one should not be; the price to pay for such an illusion, he insists, is terror. Against such an illusion Lyotard champions the sublime, as that which destroys such comforting forms and resists a totalized reality: "Let us wage a war on totality," he urges, "let us be witnesses to the unpresentable" (1984, p. 82). Hence the sublime experience in Lyotard's thought is one of profound liberation and deconstruction, in which all of the great metanarratives of Western Enlightenment thought− from "the tradition of the subject" (1984, p. 77) to "market economics" (2012, p.541) −all dissolve before the energies of the sublime. The mission of the sublime, Lyotard argues, consists "in making reality increasingly ungraspable, subject to doubt, unsteady" (2012, p. 541).

Projected into a postmodern and avant-garde context, the sublime appears to Lyotard as an *aesthetic expression of the differend*: "The *differend* cannot be resolved. But it can be felt as such, as *differend*. This is the sublime feeling" (Lyotard, 1994, p. 234). How exactly is the sublime as *differend* to be understood? "*Sublime* is what, by its resistance to the interest of the senses, we like directly" (Kant, 1952, p. 127), writes Kant and explains: "The beautiful prepares us for loving something, even nature, without interest; the sublime, for esteeming it even against our interest (of sense)" (Kant, 1952, p. 127). The sublime, in other words, is contradictory because it elicits admiration and at the same time inspires fear and terror by its sheer greatness or power. Kant speaks of 'threatening rocks, thunderclouds piling up in the sky..., volcanoes with all their destructive power, hurricanes with all the devastation they leave behind, the boundless ocean heaved up" (Kant, 1952, p. 120). Lyotard develops this train of thought when he redefines the sublime as *differend*, that is as a contradiction between that which reason can conceive and that which can be imagined within a form.

The antagonism between a reason capable of conceiving the sublime as an absolute or endless entity, that is as an Idea, and an understanding linked to imagination, is turned by Lyotard into an allegory: "Reason thus enters 'the scene' in the place of understanding. It challenges the thought that imagines: 'make the absolute that I conceive present with

your forms'. Yet form is limitation.... It cannot present the absolute" (Lyotard, 1994, p.123). The *differend* between reason and imagination consists in the fact that the infnite in the mathematical sense and the tremendous in the dynamic sense can be thought by reason, but not imagined. The billions of light years which lie between us and the most distant galaxies can be expressed in mathematical terms, but they defy imagination. This is why Lyotard speaks of a "*differend* of the finite and the infinite" (Lyotard, 1994, p.151) that cannot be resolved insofar as reason and imagination are two different faculties as they are two heterogeneous modes of perception. They cannot be reduced to a common criterion because the rules of the one are not those of the other. Thus, the postmodern character of the sublime is also to be found in the contradictory or aporetic structure which excludes all kinds of unification. While the beautiful contributes, by virtue of its harmony and its universal validity, to the constitution of the subject, the sublime threatens the very foundations of subjectivity. About the subject (set in quotation marks) Lyotard writes: "Taste promised him a beautiful life; the sublime threatens to make him disappear" (Lyotard, 1994, p.144). For the sublime does not only combine two heterogeneous modes of perception (reason and imagination); it also amalgamates contradictory emotions: joy and awe, admiration and fear. The subject appears as torn between these incompatible emotions. Lyotard goes on to explain: "The sublime feeling is an emotion, a violent emotion, close to unreason, which forces thought to the extremes of pleasure and displeasure, from joyous exaltation to terror" (Lyotard, 1994, p.228). The oscillation between pleasure and pain, joy and terror, enthusiasm and madness eventually leads to a dissolution of the subject which frequently accompanies social upheavals and revolutions.

It is important to refer now to an idea that is recurrent in the postmodern discourse: how closely related are reason and unreason, reason and madness. Reason's demand that the sublime be represented by imagination, by the senses, turns into madness. The postmodern attempt to relate reason and madness to one another, instead of separating them in a rationalist manner, is inspired by the idea that a seemingly rational reality is imbued with madness and that only a thought aware of the contradictions and aporias of the sublime is capable of understanding late capitalism. Lyotard speaks of a "connivance" between capitalism and the avant-garde in the realm of innovation and concludes: "There is something of the sublime in capitalist economy" (1991, p.105).

In this situation, late modern and postmodern art and literature take on the well-nigh impossible task of presenting the unpresentable: "The sublime is perhaps the only mode of artistic sensibility to characterize the modern" (Lyotard, 1991, p. 93). Elsewhere, Lyotard remarks about capitalism that its aesthetics are inspired by the sublime, not by the beautiful (Sim, 2001, p. 219). If this hypothesis is correct, then art and aesthetics in late capitalism, considered as the basis of postmodernism by Fredric Jameson (1991) can only be structured by the contradictions and aporias of the sublime.

Another major theorist of postmodernism, Fredric Jameson, has also described the sublime as the paradigmatic postmodern experience. In his seminal work, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Capitalism* (1991), Jameson, like Lyotard, draws on the Kantian sublime. He thinks that the sublime in Kant is "a form of representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds to grasp" (1991, pp. 37-38). He concurs with Lyotard when he believes that the world is not unknowable but "unrepresentable" (p. 34). Wes Hill thinks that Jameson "linked the sublime to a postmodern anxiety towards representation" when he attempted to trace the impact of "the globalization of capitalism, and technological superstructure, on cultural forms and subjectivities" (2016, p. 125). In this respect, Jameson states:

> Something else does tend to emerge in most energetic postmodern texts, and this is the sense that beyond all thematics or content the work seems somehow to tap the networks of the reproductive process and thereby to afford us some glimpse into a postmodern or technological sublime, whose power or authenticity is documented by the success of such works in evoking a whole new postmodern space in emergence around us. (1991, p. 37)

For Jameson, the postmodern global system produces random incomprehensible signs that terrorize and thrill the

subject, who is left in postmodern sublimity characterized by hysteria and schizophrenia (Hill, 2016, p. 125) – the postmodern sublime, then, is hysterical for Jameson. Jameson describes the cultural manifestations of postmodern sublimity in artworks, such as the multiscreen video, that give a barrage of images; for him, these works of art provide the viewer with the

> impossible imperative to achieve that new mutation in what can perhaps no longer be called consciousness…. The postmodern viewer is called upon to do the impossible, namely, to see all the screens at once, in their radical and random difference … and to rise somehow to a level at which vivid perception of radical difference is in and of itself a new mode of grasping what used to be called relationship: something for which the word *collage* is only a very feeble name. (1991, p. 31)

Such forms of collage directly relate to the postmodern fragmentation, particularly the dissociation of signs and their arbitrary referents. The postmodern sublime experience, for Jameson, derives from "unexpressed referents"; this notion corresponds to that of Lyotard's "the unrepresentable in presentation itself" (Lyotard, 1984, p. 81). In addition, Jameson affirms that the postmodern sublime artworks offer a "representational shorthand" that helps in recognizing the otherwise unconceived world, despite the fact that he thinks that the postmodern society, as a totalizing system, "negated the potential for any avant-garde" (Hill, 2016, p. 126). Hence, both Jameson and Lyotard drew on Kant when they agree on the idea that the postmodern sublime "revealed an absence that provided an awareness of the postmodern condition" (Hill, 2016, p. 126).

For Jameson, the Postmodern sublime therefore is most marked for its ability to reduce and destroy the human subject and human community. He describes the sublime as "an experience bordering on terror, the fitful glimpse, in astonishment, stupor, and awe, of *what was so enormous as to crush human life altogether*" (1991, p. 34; emphasis added). Jameson's theory, however, suggests that Lyotard's celebration of the sublime experience may be a very odd jubilation indeed. For the dominant theories of postmodernism echo the destruction of both self and society that Jameson implies is produced by the sublime. If this is indeed the case, then a more suitable response than celebration may seem appropriate.

The aesthetics of postmodernism are rife with the terminology and characteristics we have seen associated with the sublime. The general properties of postmodernism as sketched out by Ihab Hassan, for example, reveal a number of categories that have run throughout this discussion of the sublime: antiform, anarchy, decreation, deconstruction, absence, dispersal, anti-narrative, schizophrenia, indeterminacy, immanence (1987, pp. 91-92). Hassan's definition of postmodern literature as "the literature of silence," a literature in which representation fails and form breaks down, is clearly related to the sublime. The most audible voice within such literature, Hassan argues, "is the cry of outrage, the voice of apocalypse," in which "the very being of man is put on trial." The result of this literature is a demonic violence that concludes in negation and apocalypse: "What ensues is a dialectic of violence, demonic action and demonic reaction compressed into a terrible unity that finally becomes a nought." In this "nought," Hassan concludes, both civilization and human identity are rejected, and ultimately the result is silence, "the disruption of all connections between language and reality" (1987, pp. 3-5, p. 16).

Hassan's characteristically dramatic prose may seem to overemphasize the apocalyptic elements in postmodernism. Linda Hutcheon, in her *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, recognizes the same basic categories in postmodernism that Hassan elaborates – "we hear of discontinuity, disruption, dislocation, decentring, indeterminacy, and antitotalization" – but she is more at pains to express the contradictory nature of postmodernism, and its resistance to defining concepts. Yet Hutcheon too understands the various analyses of postmodernism (including those of Lyotard and Jameson) as challenging "the notion of consensus" and contesting "the unified and coherent subject." Like Hassan, her analyses of postmodernism circle around the decline of social agreement and the withering of the individual (Hutcheon, 1988, p.3, pp.11-12).

The implications of these general views of the postmodern are given their most dramatic expression in the apocalyptic prose of Arthur Kroker and David Cook, in their *The Postmodern Scene: Excremental Culture and Hyper-Aesthetics*. Kroker and Cook see in postmodern culture "signs of detritus, wreckage and refuse which... signal that this is the age of *the death of the social*." They define the postmodern age as "a *fin-de-millenium* consciousness which... uncovers a great arc of disintegration and decay against the background radiation of parody, kitsch, and burnout" (Kroker and Cook, 2001, pp.7-8; emphasis added). Of particular importance is their idea of "the postmodern scene," in which an instant of apparent illumination −their version of the experience of the sublime −is revealed to be not a revelation of the divine, but rather a revelation of the abyss, of the nothingness described by Heidegger and echoed by Hassan: "The postmodern scene begins and ends with transgression as the 'lightning-flash' which illuminates the sky for an instant only to reveal the immensity of the darkness within: *absence* as the disappearing sign of the limitlessness of the void within and without" (Kroker and Cook, 2001, pp. 8-9; emphasis original).

This spectacular analysis of the postmodern condition expresses the culmination of the views offered by Lyotard, Jameson, Hassan and numerous other theorists of the postmodern: that the postmodern experience is one in which the individual subject is fragmented, overpowered, or annihilated, as the social realm and any notion of the community suffers a similar erasure. Such a view is implicit in Hassan who, despite his professed view that "negative transcendence... is a form of transcendence nevertheless" (Hassan, 1987, "The Literature of Silence", p. 3), and that consequently postmodernism "does not necessarily augur the death of the spirit," still formulates the essence of postmodernism around what he calls "terms of unmaking": "decreation, disintegration, deconstruction, decenterment, displacement, difference, discontinuity," etc. (Hassan, 1987, "Toward a Concept of Postmodernism" 92). The dominant categories of postmodernism are all such terms of destruction of the social and the individual, and are all allied with the view of the sublime as professed and celebrated by Lyotard.

Brian McHale's analysis of postmodernism shares these same characteristics; it also suggests the problem with these theories, and hints at the direction one would need to take to find alternative ways of imagining contemporary culture and aesthetics. McHale's basic argument on postmodern fiction and culture, in his *Postmodernist Fiction*, is that it is structured around the dominant of *ontology*, that is, it foregrounds questions of being and of existence:

> the dominant of postmodernist fiction is *ontological*. That is, postmodernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions [that] bear either on the ontology of the literary text itself or on the ontology of the world which it projects, for instance: What is a world?; What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated? (1987, p.10)

Modernist fiction, on the contrary, is structured by the dominant of *epistemology*, and foregrounds questions of knowledge. McHale's system, though perhaps overly schematic, does account for the dominant concerns of much of postmodern fiction in the nineteen-sixties and nineteen-seventies, and seems to convey adequately the essence of the theorists of the sublime discussed above. Yet, McHale's categories are unable to account for the new directions expressed by such prominent postmodern authors as Pynchon, Rushdie, and Morrison. What McHale's terms and method do suggest, however, is an avenue down which one might be able to find a discourse that *would* offer both a counter to the dominant theorizations of the sublime, and a descriptive poetics that would account for the most recent works of contemporary fiction.

In brief, it is suggested here that McHale's rubric is in need of a third term. The dominants of ontology or epistemology are insufficient to explain or interpret the concerns that novelists like Pynchon, Rushdie, and Morrison have explored in their writings of late 1980s, and are also insufficient to stand as a counter to the apocalyptic and destructive theories of postmodernism that have dominated the critical scene for the late nineteen-eighties. The third term for which one should seek, and the philosophical dominant that best suggests the concerns and strategies of the

literature of the nineteen-eighties and beyond, is the *ethical*. For if, as seems apparent, the dominant discourse of postmodernism −like the contemporary discourse of the sublime −entails a destruction of both the social realm and the individual, then a turn toward the ethical −toward social relations and the preservation of the individual −would be a logical and appropriate response.

Such a turn toward the ethical has been suggested by a handful of critics, particularly John Fekete in his *Life After Postmodernism: Essays on Value and Culture*, whose very title suggests the need to formulate some sort of critical theory beyond or after the postmodern. Fekete defines his project as an attempt to resuscitate the discussion of values in relation to postmodernism: "the oceans and continents of value," he states, "though much travelled, remain almost entirely uncharted in any way suitable to the navigational contingencies of postmodern itineraries" (1987, p.i). Fekete acknowledges the apparent commitment in the postmodern "to do without foundational, asituational, representational, and hypostatising-stabilizing closures"; yet he still sees the effort to construct some form of provisional, relative, plural system of value for the postmodern era as a worthwhile one:

> the prospect of learning to be at ease with limited warranties, and with the responsibility for issuing them, without the false security of inherited guarantees, is promising for a livelier, more colourful, more alert, and, one hopes, more tolerant culture that draws enjoyment from the dappled relations between meaning and value. (I am prepared to use a deliberately upbeat vocabulary in order to place my bets on the upbeat possibilities.) (Fekete, 1987, p. xi)

Fekete is attempting to outline his vision for a more value-laden postmodernism:

> To say this, of course, is to claim a value for, and to assume responsibility for, a more differentiated world view and a more differentiated value language, or, put differently, for a postmodern pluralism of images and narratives of action, rationality, and value, within the frame of a commitment to foreground with richer density the play of value in the practice of life. (p. x)

What Fekete envisions here relates to differentiation and pluralism, terms close to the multiplicity and indeterminacy championed by Lyotard that leads one toward the oblivion of the sublime. Fekete attempts to label the sort of practice he has in mind −"a kind of post-Marxist, post-existentialist current that I can only characterize, for lack of a better name, as 'pragmatism plus'" (p. xiv). Fekete's inability to offer a discussion of value that avoids such vagueness and tentativeness reveals a gap in the discussions and debates on postmodernity, a gap that parallels the historical difficulty of theorizing on the aesthetic of the beautiful. This gap will be discussed below.

Lyotard celebrates in the sublime the disruption of the unified subject and the dissonance between the individual subject and the world, and emphasizes the sublime's ability to make reality ungraspable. Radically deconstructive in its refusal of presence and its endless deferral of unified meaning, Lyotard's position supports the "deconstructive materialism" that, as Frances Ferguson argues, leads to a notion of "the infinite being defined as loss of control, loss of agency" (1992, p. 21). Such a formulation suggests how far the sublime has travelled from the idea of the infinite as transcendence in the romantic sublime of Kant and Wordsworth, and again indicates the radical withering of individual subjectivity implied in Lyotard's theory.

A comparable notion of the sublime is presented by Jean-Luc Nancy. Nancy's understanding of the sublime emphasizes the overwhelming of the subject in an experience that cannot be controlled or cognized: "Sublime presentation is the feeling of this striving at the instant of rupture, the imagination still for an instant sensible to itself although no longer itself, in extreme tension and distension ('overflowing' or 'abyss')" (1993, pp. 45-46). Whereas the beautiful brings discrete entities together in a harmonious gathering, the sublime overwhelms and dissolves individual identities, leveling distinctions and annihilating difference. Hence Nancy states that "the sublime is concerned with

union, as the beautiful is concerned with unity" (pp. 39-40). Nancy's idea of the sublime is consonant with Lyotard's, emphasizing the overwhelming of the subject; it directly opposes the beautiful, which seeks to preserve the integrity of the subject. According to Nancy, the postmodern sublime is a

> fashion that has persisted uninterruptedly into our own time from the beginnings of modernity. … it has always been a fashion because it has always concerned a break within or from aesthetics …it has been a kind of defiance with which aesthetics provokes itself −"enough beauty already, we must be sublime!" (1993, pp. 250)

It is clear so far that the dominant postmodern frame of mind is "overwhelmed" by the aesthetic of the sublime; the aesthetic of the beautiful is subverted or relegated to the margin.

Such uses of the sublime raise a number of worrying questions, as Paul Crowther has noted in his analysis of Lyotard's mutations of Kant's theories. Crowther points out that Lyotard's arguments, while quite complex, are also "highly generalized," and that it is very difficult to know just what Lyotard means by such concepts as the "'unpresentable'" (1993, pp. 154-57). Crowther also notes that Lyotard "makes no reference to the supersensible −an awareness of which... is, for Kant, the source of the pleasurable aspect of the sublime" (p. 158). In effect, Lyotard translates Kant's theories into a program for defending what Lyotard sees as the "mission" of the avant-gardes: "Lyotard's theory," Crowther thinks, "is an attempt to legitimize avant-garde art in relation to the needs and structure of contemporary Postmodern culture" (1993, p. 157).

Crowther argues that Lyotard's notion of the sublime does not square with the sublime's historical definitions, and that furthermore Lyotard's attributing to the avant-garde some radical power to expand our notion of possibility and subvert realist conceptions of the world is ultimately a failure:

> any innovatory work, in effect, asks the question "what is painting" through its expanding the possibilities of the medium. Lyotard, of course, might well say that radical avant-garde artists ask this question more directly and insistently, but it is difficult to see what is gained by this. For... whilst *some* superlative avant-garde works may evoke an overwhelming sense of the medium being latent with infinite possibilities of development, this is surely a striking exception rather than a rule which defines what counts as authentically avant-garde. Indeed, there is no intrinsic reason why the best non-avant-garde works should not also sometimes achieve this. (1993, pp. 159-60; emphasis original)

Ultimately, Crowther concludes, "Lyotard's linking of the Kantian sublime to avant-garde art and the postmodern sensibility is unsuccessful." Were Lyotard to attend to Kant's theories of genius and originality, which lie closer to Lyotard's true concerns, he might be able to construct a more tenable support for his ideas. Yet this would involve the abandonment of Lyotard's principal project, the construction of exact links between the avant-garde, the sublime, and the postmodern (1993, pp. 160-61).

Lyotard's elaborate theoretical apparatus for justifying avant-garde activity is extremely tenuous, not least because of the implausibility of its opponent, what Lyotard terms "realist" art. As Crowther points out, Lyotard's idea of realist art is extremely naive and insufficient (1993, p. 158). And one wonders what precisely Lyotard is championing in its place: if he would dismiss the "supporters of what exists," does he then advocate vigorous support of what does not exist? Lyotard argues that the rules of realist art have traditionally been "a means to deceive, to seduce, and to reassure"; he then concludes, in a leap of dubious logic, that this "makes it impossible for them to be 'true.'" (Lyotard, 1984, pp. 74-75) Lyotard urges a dismissal of "realist art" and of the suppositions upon which he thinks it depends − such as the subject, individual identity, social reality −and his tool in this dismissal is the sublime.

That Lyotard's project results in a sundering of the individual from the social world is perhaps not surprising, given its dependence on the avant-garde movements. As Andreas Huyssen has argued, the twentieth century has witnessed

"the ultimate and perhaps unavoidable failure of the historical avantgarde to reintegrate art and life" (1986, p. 192). This failure is repeated in Lyotard's call for the avant-gardes to disrupt and disintegrate the relationship between the individual and the community. The real result of Lyotard's theories of the sublime is, as it has been repeatedly emphasized, the withering of the individual subject and the decay of communal solidarity.

This debate between realist and avant-garde aesthetics recurs throughout postmodern theory. Hal Foster recasts it as a debate between neoconservative cultural politics and the more radical position of poststructuralism. The neoconservative position Foster associates with Lyotard's idea of "realism," and sees therein "the return of history" and "the return of the subject." The poststructuralist position, in contrast, "is profoundly anti-humanist," and launches a critique on assumptions of realism, representation, and the subject (1983, p. 67). Foster, like Lyotard, sees the "dispersal of the subject" as the principal thrust of the poststructuralist position, and he too celebrates this dispersal as a moment of liberation and empowerment:

> Here, then, we begin to see what is at stake in this so-called dispersal of the subject. For what is this subject that, threatened by loss, is so bemoaned? Bourgeois perhaps, patriarchal certainly −it is the phallocentric order of subjectivity. For some, for many, this is indeed a great loss −and may lead to narcissistic laments about the end of art, of culture, of the West. But for others, precisely for Others, this is no great loss at all. (1983, p. 78)

Foster's position generates what in effect a dominating question of this respect: how accurate, and how useful, is this celebratory account of the decline of this subject? For if, writers like Thomas Pynchon, Salman Rushdie, and Toni Morrison reveal in their writings of late 1980s a strong effort to preserve, strengthen, and restore the notion of the individual, and a desire to resist scenes of sublime dismembering, then we must look askance at Foster's and others' approval of the dispersal of subjectivity. For one assumes that at least writers like Rushdie and Morrison would be granted the privileged status of "Other" in Foster's thinking; why then do they seem not to recognize the benefits of their new-found freedom from "the phallocentric order of subjectivity"?

Ultimately the celebratory turn to the sublime envisioned by Lyotard, Nancy, Foster and others results not in scenes of liberation and empowerment, but rather in an *increase* of domination and totalizing power −an increase in the very forces of mastery that these theorists claim they seek to counter. This tendency toward totality, as Huyssen points out, has always been inherent in the discourse of the sublime: "the turn to Kant's sublime [by Lyotard] forgets that the 18th-century fascination with the sublime of the universe, the cosmos, expresses precisely that very desire of totality and representation which Lyotard so abhors and persistently criticizes" (1986, p. 215). Indeed, Huyssen goes on to argue, the postmodern sublime is itself quite close to the terror and overwhelming power that theorists like Lyotard claim they wish to oppose: "Even today the sublime has not lost its link to terror which, in Lyotard's reading, it opposes. For what would be more sublime and unrepresentable than the nuclear holocaust, the bomb being the signifier of an ultimate sublime" (1986, p. 215). As Huyssen suggests, the postmodern sublime is closer to annihilation than it is to liberation, closer to the "union" favoured by Nancy and far away from the "unity" ascribed to the beautiful.

Indeed, as several thinkers have rightly observed, Lyotard's theories are themselves gestures toward totality. Ernesto Laclau points out that Lyotard's rejection of metanarratives, far from eliminating the metaphysics of presence, simply translates it into another set of terms:

> to postulate the outmodedness of metanarratives (without taking into consideration what happens to other narrative species) is to achieve rather modest intellectual gains in comparison with the objectives sought. The logic of identity, of full presence, is simply displaced, fully intact, from the field of totality to the field of multiplicity of atomized narratives. (1988, p. 64)

Similarly, Linda Hutcheon has remarked on this paradoxical nature of Lyotard's "obviously meta-narrative theory

of postmodernism's incredulity to meta-narrative." Such theories, she states, partake of "the masterful denials of mastery, the cohesive attacks on cohesion, the essentializing challenges to essences, that characterize postmodern theory" (1988, p. 20).

This tendency toward totalization, inherent both in postmodern formulations of the sublime and in the attendant analyses of postmodern culture, argues for a view of the sublime that is much closer to the sublime scenarios present in the early novels of Pynchon, Rushdie, and Morrison. This is the vision of the sublime as suggested by Huyssen, the sublime as atomic apocalypse. Gary Shapiro is aware of the proximity of the sublime to totalization, a link that he sees as also connected to Heidegger's influence on poststructuralist theories: "Heidegger's notorious connection with the Nazis," Shapiro writes, "shows that an exclusive poetics of the sublime can lend itself all too easily to irrationalist, fascist politics." Shapiro is aware that the aesthetic of the sublime leads to a separation between individual and community and a devaluation of the social world: "Authentic art is possible now only in the mode of the sublime, testifying to the radical degradation of the world and to the loss of a real community of artist and audience" (1985, p. 216).

In sum, the postmodern sublime became connected with alienation, fragmentation, disruption, and apocalypse. What was once seen as an experience in which one glimpses the divine is now seen as an experience in which one is shattered by the demonic. Certain theorists of the postmodern age, notably poststructuralists, have celebrated the sublime as a liberating experience, in which the totalizing illusions of Western metanarratives are fractured and deconstructed. The consequent sense of alienation and fragmentation, they argue, is the beginning of a new field of opportunities and possibilities, in which human existence will no longer be constrained and repressed by constricting Enlightenment thought. In this argument, the sublime constitutes the apex of the tradition of negative critique, destroying the foundations and structures that dominate society but offering no constitutive hypotheses in their place.

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# كفافية الجليل في عصر ما بعد الحداثة: جان فرانسوا ليوتار نموذجاً

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## ملخص

كفافية الجليل في عصر ما بعد الحداثة: جان فرانسوا ليوتار نموذجا سجلت الفترة الممتدة بين نهاية القرن التاسع عشر وبداية القرن العشرين غياباً بارزاً لمفهوم التسامي النصي من الحلبة الثقافية. إلا أن هذا المفهوم النقدي الفلسفي عاد ليسجل حضوراً بارزاً في منتصف القرن العشرين مع صعود نجم حركة ما بعد الحداثة. ففي سلسلة من الكتابات أكد أبرز منظري ما بعد الحداثة أمثال جان فرانسوا ليوتار وفردريك جايمسون وجان لوك نانسي على الجوانب التغريبية والمدمرة للتسامي النصي والتي ترتبط بحالة انعدام إمكانية التمثيل النصي. فالتسامي النصي في سياقة ما بعد الحداثوي كتغاير تفكيكي ينشا من التناقضات وفقدان النص الثقة بنصيته والهستيريا وانفصام الذات وهي بذلك تؤشر لحالة التشظي وفقدان الإشارة لمرجعها السيمائية التي تتصف بها ما بعد الحداثة كنظام عولمة. تؤشر ما بعد الحداثة للحظة تاريخية ضاع فيها إي شكل من أشكال التوافق الاجتماعي وانتهى الإنسان بوصفة فردا فهي النهاية الماحقة التي طالما ما بشرت بها البشرية نهاية الألفية. وعليه فان من الطبيعي أن تكتسح فنيه التسامي النصي الإطار الفكري لأنطولوجيا ما بعد الحداثة مزيحة الفكرة التقليدية للجماليات إلى الهامش.

**الكلمات الدالة:** ما بعد الحداثة، التسامي النصي، ما لا يمكن تمثيلة نصيا، التغاير التفكيكي، العماية، التشظي، الانطولوجيا..

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