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“The Question of the Appendix: The Kantian and the Inhuman Sublime,” *International Studies in Philosophy*, Vol. 35, Issue 2 (2003), pp.51-92

The major concern of Kantian aesthetics is to assert our free self-determination as human beings, and nowhere is this made more explicit than in Kant's notion of the sublime as a disclosure of our supersensible destiny and of our independence from nature both within and outside us. Why then does Kant insist that the analytic of the sublime is merely an appendix to the analytic of the beautiful? The reasons have to be sought in Kant's concept of the human being as a rational being that not only establishes but also applies laws of Reason. The application of these laws requires an objectively existing reality. Examining the significance of what he calls Kant's “determination of ethical substance,” Constantin Behler concludes that for Kant “the prime material of moral self-constitution is ‘practical reason’”(116). Thus, the ethical aspect of Kantian aesthetics is concerned with the *moral deliberation and action* of human beings. Since it is in the analytic of the beautiful that the reality of the objective world, and hence the possibility for moral action, is implicitly guaranteed, the sublime, even though it is the standard-bearer of our freedom (Reason), must be proclaimed secondary to the beautiful, since the latter provides the necessary conditions for Reason to *act*. Despite the openly declared privileged status of the beautiful, Kant continues, implicitly or explicitly, to valorize the sublime, and, in so doing, to separate it completely from the beautiful, in the judgment of which Reason does not play a part at all. For Kant, man is fully human—fully rational—in the experience of the sublime.

It is this separation of the two aesthetic categories, and the implied disparagement of the category of the beautiful as irrelevant to what is most essentially human (Reason), that provokes Lyotard's critique of the Kantian sublime sentiment as a strategy for asserting our self-sufficiency, a strategy threatening to alienate human beings from the world, Reason from Nature. From Lyotard's point of view, Kant analyzes nature (the beautiful) only to suppress it once again and to affirm Reason's superiority over and independence from it. The analytic of the beautiful turns out to be secretly an appendix to the analytic of the sublime, which celebrates the triumph of subjectivity. The Kantian

sublime is constituted as the demand for active intervention, which Lyotard criticizes as incongruous with the true idea of what he calls “passability” to the event.<sup>1</sup> In the Kantian sublime, “[n]ature is ‘used’, ‘exploited’ by the mind according to a purposiveness that is not nature’s” (*The Inhuman* 137). The mind becomes ‘passable’ to the event when it allows that which the mind is *not* to give or donate itself to it. In Kant’s description of the sublime experience, however, the mind does not accept any donations, but, instead, reason adds itself to what it is not (nature), subjecting it to its own purposiveness. It might seem that as a preparation for the moral feeling the Kantian sublime is ethically unquestionable: “The principal *interest* that Kant sees in the sublime sentiment is that it is the ‘aesthetic’ (negative) sign of...the transcendence of the moral law and of freedom”(136). However, Lyotard draws attention to a moral problem in the Kantian sublime, which he identifies as “the end of an aesthetics, that of the beautiful”(137). He explains that as “the sacrificial announcement of the ethical in the aesthetic field” the Kantian sublime is “not without some specific problems for the *ethical* evaluation of the sublime sentiment”(137). Because Lyotard is trying to rehabilitate that which has been sacrificed “in the interests of practical reason”(137)--the *beautiful* (which he expands into the *aesthetic*, juxtaposing it with the *sublime*, which is similarly expanded into the *ethical*)--his notion of the sublime, though sharing common ground with Kant’s, is, in fact, more akin to Kant’s notion of the beautiful. Lyotard is concerned with overcoming the danger of solipsism inherent in the Kantian sublime as a “*Geistesgefühl*, a sentiment of the mind”(137). The Kantian sublime experience is a state in which “the mind is lacking in nature [and] nature is lacking for it. It feels only itself”(137). On the other hand, Lyotard’s emphasis on the *quod* of the aesthetic object and on the addressee instance of the communication structure are elaborations of Kant’s notion of the beautiful as “a sentiment that proceeds from a fit between nature and mind”(137). However, the stakes in Lyotard’s aesthetic are higher. For Kant, at stake is the transcendence of the moral law, and the sublime merely reaffirms the already assumed hierarchy of the faculties of the mind. On the other hand, Lyotard regards the sublime as an attempt to ‘bear witness’ to the Being of beings: our being, rather than the determination of our destiny, is at stake.

Lyotard's critique of the Kantian idea of freedom is equally applicable to Sartre, who, like Kant, construes human freedom as demanding the suppression of the given i.e., of nature. Contrary to Kant, who posits natural beauty as the only source of sublimity inasmuch as it makes us aware of our supersensible destiny or our freedom (through our ability to ascribe totality--an idea of Reason--to nature, despite the imagination's failure to comprehend that which is big beyond comparison), in *What Is Literature?* Sartre contends that "our freedom is never *called forth* by natural beauty"(59). Since the order we observe in nature reveals no transcendent necessity—it is a finality without end—we are free to posit any kind of relationship between the things we observe. Thus, our freedom degenerates into mere caprice (59). Nature's finality without end appears real only if a human being interposes himself between nature and other human beings, to whom he offers his transformation of natural relations as a "gift"(60). As long as natural beauty appears unintentional, accidental, it remains unreal; it is only through human intervention that "a deeper finality"(61) comes to express itself. In fact, Sartre goes as far as to argue that the most realistic art—for example, Vermeer's almost photographic realism—is "closest to absolute creation, since *it is in the very passiveness of the matter that we meet the unfathomable freedom of man*"(62 my italics). The contrast between Sartre's idea of human freedom as demanding a certain "passiveness of the matter" (an idea going back to Hegel, who refused to grant nature the status of an object of aesthetic judgment on the grounds that nature is not free since it lacks self-awareness) and, on the other hand, Lyotard's notion of human freedom as a certain "passability to matter" is unmistakable. The goal of art, believes Sartre, is not to let the world express itself without forcing it to be the mirror of subjectivity—as Lyotard proposes—but, rather, "to recover this world by giving it to be seen as it is, but *as if* it had its source in human freedom"(63 my italics). Nature, therefore, can be the object of aesthetic joy (a term Sartre substitutes for the more commonly accepted "aesthetic pleasure") only if it appears to exhibit a certain finality or intentionality i.e., nature can be beautiful or sublime only if it appears *as if* it were not nature. Aesthetic joy results from the transformation of "the given into an imperative and the fact into a value"(65).

Lyotard tries to rehabilitate the forgotten aesthetic of the beautiful in Kantian aesthetics, but--and this is the interesting moment--his rehabilitation of the beautiful turns

into a reformulation of the notion of the sublime. He claims that Kant's emphasis on the aesthetic as a preparation for the ethical is itself ethically suspect as it compromises the purity of the category of the aesthetic. However, in his rehabilitation of the purely aesthetic, Lyotard not only does *not* circumvent the ethical but indeed carries Kant's aesthetic grounding of the ethical to the extreme, ontologizing the Kantian ethical law. While the Kantian sublime announces "You are a rational being!" Lyotard's sublime commands (without actually commanding, which is exactly what makes the command super-ethical) "You *are!*" or rather "You *must be!*" Thus, the Kantian *proto-ethical aesthetic* becomes, in Lyotard, a *proto-ontological aesthetic*, an aesthetic less, if at all, anthropocentric than Kant's. Because for Lyotard our development "has no necessity itself other than a cosmological chance" (*The Inhuman* 7), he deems it naïve to continue to view human beings as the ultimate source of "complexification." Lyotard's notions of the differend, the unharmonizable, the inhuman, and the sublime cannot be reduced to a human subject but are more global, indeterminate, not "attached to an Idea" (7), at least not to an idea of Reason in the Kantian sense. Lyotard claims that his aesthetic revives "the essential of metaphysics which [is] a thinking pertaining to [*impersonal*] forces much more than to the subject" (6 my italics). Kant's sublime, on the other hand, is a version of precisely that "anthropomorphism," which Lyotard wants to escape because he sees it as "a defeat for thought"(55). Although it might seem that the postmodern sublime, theorized by Lyotard (and exemplified in abstract expressionist Barnett Newman's art)<sup>2</sup> can be traced back to the Kantian analytic of the sublime, it is actually rooted in the analytic of the beautiful inasmuch as what is at stake in all three is the relationship of the mind to the world. The beautiful, Kant believes, implicitly affirms the relationship between mind and world, while the postmodern sublime is the wonder at the very possibility of such a relationship, which Lyotard formulates as a question: *Is it happening?* The Kantian sublime, by contrast, is an affirmation of our ability to think an object even if the relationship between the mind and the object cannot be proven .

A comparison of the Kantian and the Lyotardian sublime is made difficult by the fact that Kant does not really give a clear definition of the sublime in *The Critique of Judgment*. He specifies that the sublime is not in the natural world but only in our supersensible power, but it is not clear whether the sublime is that supersensible power

(reason as actually existing), the use to which this power is put, or the very the possibility of reason: “Yet this inadequacy [of the imagination] itself is the arousal in us of the feeling that we have within us a supersensible power; and what is absolutely large is not an object of sense, but is *the use that judgment makes naturally of certain objects so as to [arouse] this (feeling)*”(Kant 106 my italics). Here our consciousness of the sensible world’s inadequacy to our reason, our consciousness of the superiority of reason to nature, and reason itself, figure as competing definitions of the sublime. Kant suggests that reason *looks for* certain objects that will ‘provoke’ the feeling of the sublime, which will then make us aware of our superiority. It appears, then, that there are certain objects which allow or even encourage reason to apprehend them as sublime. Reason apprehends them as ‘naturally’ sublime either because they are inherently sublime or because reason itself is inherently sublime. The confusion stems from the difficulty of determining whether reason itself is sublime (reason as an attribute of human beings, as a *quid*) or the fact *that there is* reason is sublime (reason as a *quod*). Kant conflates the faculty (reason) with its being (the fact that there is reason) and with its function (reason as irreducible to the order of the sensible and as a reminder of our real vocation). One of Kant’s other definitions of the sublime (in fact, one he gives in the same chapter) is strikingly similar to Lyotard’s: “*Sublime is what even to be able to think proves that the mind has a power surpassing any standard of sense*” (106). Here Kant defines the sublime, as Lyotard does, in terms of privation: the sublime is that which is so difficult to think, so close to the unthinkable, that the mere ability to think it nevertheless is a source of pleasure and a proof of a higher purposiveness within us. Lyotard will go even further, arguing that the sublime *is the unthinkable* rather than our *ability to think* something despite the lack of a sensible presentation. The sublime does not belong to, or is not produced by, the subject, who, therefore, ought not be given credit for it. While for Kant what makes us human is what we can do, for Lyotard the human is what we have not done yet, what is lacking in us, ‘the inhuman.’

Lyotard distinguishes between two types of ‘the inhuman’. The first inhuman, which in fact, is not different from the Kantian notion of the human, stands for human beings’ emancipation (or the belief in it) as a finite process leading up to a result, a synthesis. The second inhuman is the resistance to the first inhuman--it is our debt to our

own humanity as something that “needs no finality” (7). Lyotard defines the human as a horizon, an expectation, a coming into being, a lack. The second inhuman, which marks our insufficiency, *makes* us human since it is an openness to the future, a promise that *It is happening*. The human is not a given but waits to give itself; it “heralds and promises things possible” (4). Just as Kant argues that only through the *inadequacy* of the imagination do we become aware of our supersensible vocation, for Lyotard it is only through our *insufficiency*, our inhumanity, that we are human. In both cases the human is defined negatively, in terms of a certain deficiency, but whereas Kant attributes the deficiency to one particular faculty (imagination), thus exalting another (Reason), Lyotard defines deficiency as a more general insufficiency signaled by tension, terror, and conflict. The second inhuman, “the unharmonizable” which must be preserved, is the sublime as the locus of terror and conflict *par excellence*.

The postmodern sublime still remains the standard-bearer of freedom but it is no longer Kantian freedom. Lyotard’s critique of “telegraphy” (‘telegraphy’ or ‘inscription’ are implicitly identified with ‘subjectivity’) suggests that the mind’s freedom depends on the preservation of what Lyotard calls “an ‘initial’ reception,” “an empirical or transcendental mode whereby the mind is affected by a ‘matter’ which it does not fully control, which happens to it here and now” (50). While the Kantian notion of freedom consists in the mind’s independence from and control over nature, the sublime being merely an occasion for the mind’s superiority over nature to manifest itself, for Lyotard the absolute control of the mind over that which affects it creates the danger of simulacra, the danger of making even “initial reception” “telegraphable.” (I will return to the question of the place of the image in the discourse on ‘telegraphy’, ‘simulacra’, and ‘subjectivity’ in the next two chapters when I examine Jean Baudrillard’s work and then Gilles Deleuze’s notion of a time-image.) The mind has to free itself by giving back to itself the lack of full control over what affects it. Not to be fully in control is to preserve the unthought. The mind is free only if it lacks absolute control, if it can be *affected*. Only a truly free mind foregoes absolute freedom.

In its affirmation of the mind’s ability to be affected, the Lyotardian sublime harks back to Kant’s notion of the beautiful as an implicit confirmation of the link between mind and world. Kant’s definition of the sublime as the revelation of the

superiority of reason over nature within us (time-consciousness) and outside us (matter), points to the failure of the judgment of the sublime to remain a purely reflective judgment. Reflective thought, Lyotard argues, is thought that proceeds without rules but wants to find them. Reflective thought, then, is not rational. However, the Kantian judgment of the sublime is a presentation, though negative, of reason. Hence the paradox: in judging aesthetically or reflectively Kant ‘falls back’ on reason. From Lyotard’s point of view, the Kantian judgment of the beautiful would be the only purely aesthetic judgment inasmuch as the judgment of the sublime is still, in a certain sense, a rational judgment, even though it does not involve concepts. Although the conflict between reason and imagination in the judgment of the sublime remains unresolved, Kant’s explicit hierarchization of the two faculties suggests a *quasi*-resolution. The conflict has a *Resultat*—the mind’s awareness of its superiority over nature.

Kant’s prioritization of reason is the target of Lyotard’s critique. For Kant “to be able even to think the given infinite without contradiction” (Lyotard 111) is a proof of our supersensible destiny, while Lyotard thinks it is no longer a question of *what* the mind is able to do (think the infinite) but a question of *that* the mind is able to do it at all. Thus, on a formal level, Lyotard privileges the quod (thought *is*), while Kant privileges the quid (*what* is thought). For Kant it is sublime that the mind links to the world in a *certain* way: by adding totality to the object the mind becomes superior to, and independent from, it. Lyotard, however, thinks it is sublime that the mind links up at all, that there is something onto which the mind can link, that there is something Other than the mind, that thought can never exhaust itself because it can never contain the whole of itself. Kant believes that there is an infinite only because there is a mind to think it, the infinite serving as an occasion for distinguishing between mind and world, whereas Lyotard asserts that the infinite is what makes thought possible in the first place. The Kantian sublime is *a negation* (of world), *which affirms* (reason); Lyotard’s sublime is *an affirmation that preserves negation* (in the unthought). Kant goes as far as to claim that reason as such is sublime: “But the mind feels elevated in its own judgment of itself” (Kant 113). Yet reason itself cannot be sublime: we have reason whether or not we judge aesthetically or whether or not there are objects that we can judge aesthetically. Similarly, the fact that we have reason cannot itself be sublime since it is not only in aesthetic

judgments that we become aware of our supersensible vocation but in moral judgments too. There is a touch of smugness in the Kantian notion of the mind growing enamoured with, and hypnotized by, its own superiority over the sensible world. In this sense, the Kantian sublime experience provokes a self-congratulatory feeling. Kant takes measures to disguise his claim that what is sublime is the *status* our reason confers on us, but all he can accomplish is a rather transparent false modesty: "But by a certain subreption (in which respect for the object is substituted for respect for the idea of humanity within our[selves, as] subject[s] this respect is accorded an object of nature" (Kant 114). Thus, the sublime becomes a kind of denial, an uneasy suppression of human narcissism: reluctant (to the point of coyness) to admit that we are ourselves sublime, we make the sublime an *object* of our judgment. The confusion over whether the sublime is attributed to the object of judgment, to the judgment itself, or to our capacity for such a judgment stems from the failure to disguise completely this mechanism of denial. In Lyotard's notion of the sublime, on the other side, the Kantian respect for human beings' supersensible destiny is replaced by a respect for the object of aesthetic judgment.

This shift from the *agent* to the *object* of judgment--a shift foreshadowing the new conception of the sublime as *event*, as something *impersonal*--is accompanied by a shift in the universal validation of the aesthetic judgment. Lyotard's definition of the judgment of the sublime as one interested in the *quod* of the object, although seemingly incommensurable with Kantian disinterestedness, does not depart from it in a radical way. The interest in the object's *quod* is different from that in the object's existence: the *quod* of the object belongs to volition, while its existence belongs to cognition. Lyotard's aesthetic object remains within the general Kantian formulation since as an object of the will it does not represent a cognitive interest and, therefore, leaves us free. But it also leaves us unfree because, as Kant has noted, "[a]ll interest presupposes a need or gives rise to one and...it makes the judgment about the object unfree"(52). The postmodern aesthetic object remains unfree insofar as it originates in the desire to resist the terror of not happening; it is born out of the *need* to resist privation. But if this privation--the impossibility of nothing happening--is itself a lack of freedom, then postmodern art's resistance to it, although arising out of a need, is not unfreedom but a struggle for freedom. Kant privileges disinterestedness, which is assumed to be hard to attain since



we are normally interested in the world. For Lyotard, however, to have an interest in the world is precisely what is most difficult to attain. 'Interestedness' now stands for 'a sense of being' while disinterestedness becomes synonymous with apathy, lack of resistance, lack of critical thinking, absence. Disinterestedness is unethical rather than a proof of one's objectivity. From Lyotard's perspective, Kantian objectivity or disinterestedness renders the aesthetic judgment unethical, because, by taking for granted the existence of the object of judgment, the judgment neutralizes the object. Kant evaluates the purity of an aesthetic judgment by the degree to which it manages to forget its object. Lyotard, however, searches for the minimal conditions of possibility not of the judgment but of the object of judgment. The question Kant asks--*How is this judgment possible?*--prioritizes the judging subject over the object of judgment. Lyotard's reformulation of the question--*How is this object possible?*--seeks to affirm the possibility of the object of judgment as something independent from the judging subject.

The shift from subject to object, however, does not do away with the Kantian notion of purposiveness. For Kant what makes a presentation sublime is "its own inadequacy and hence also...its subjective unpurposiveness for the power of judgment" (Lyotard 109). Works of art cannot be sublime because in them "both the form and the magnitude are determined by a human purpose"(109). Although the postmodern sublime work of art should be unpurposive--it should be the message rather than contain a message--it is not absolutely unpurposive. The artist and the work of art must bear witness to the quod. It is the work's obligation to be purposefully unpurposive--it must testify (purpose) to unpurposiveness (the quod). Just as one cannot *not* interpret a work of art (to say that a work *is, means* that it *is*), unpurposiveness cannot but be purposive. The unpurposiveness of the quod is purposive. It is a formal kind of purposiveness and thus somewhat similar to that associated with Kant's notion of the beautiful. The Kantian judgment of the beautiful is "based on a purposiveness of the [*mere*] form of the object"(110 my italics); the Lyotardian judgment of the sublime is based on a purposiveness of the *quod* of the object.

Kant's distinction between the beautiful and the sublime has curious implications for the nature of interest and for the proximity of our different faculties to the objects of judgments over which they preside. Kant suggests that what we like by way of our senses

we like indirectly, whereas what we like by way of our reason we like directly: “Sublime is what, by its resistance to the interest of the senses, we like directly”(Lyotard 127). It is odd to call “direct” an interest which derives from a resistance (the resistance to the interest of sense). If in our judgment of the sublime we like the object directly, then in our judgment of the beautiful—a judgment involving the senses--our liking must be indirect. In judging the beautiful we judge “without interest” (177)--this suggests that the senses represent an ordinary interest—while in judging the sublime we judge “even against our interest (of sense)”(127). By Kant’s logic, judging against our interest is more primary, more spontaneous than judging without interest since the first is direct, the second indirect. Resistance, then, is more ‘natural’ to us than disinterestedness. (This would mean that we should more often find things sublime rather than beautiful if it is true that normally we do what is most natural to us. In reality, however, we are far more likely to find an object beautiful than to find it sublime.) Resistance implies consciousness of that which is resisted. Since for Kant what is resisted is within us--the interest of sense, which fails to measure up to the command of reason—resistance implies self-consciousness. Translating this psychological analysis into a philosophical one, it becomes clear that Kant’s sublime as resistance points to a transcendental law that makes us like the sublime directly. In the case of the beautiful, however, there is no resistance, no conflict, no tension, because reason does not ‘add’ itself to the mere form of the beautiful object. The consciousness of an interest of sense arises only with reason, as an opposition to or a prohibition against this interest. The consciousness of interest arises exactly at the moment when interest is thwarted and the imagination proves itself inadequate. From this point of view, the Kantian judgment of the sublime has a privileged status since it provides an occasion for resistance, and thus for the Law, to declare itself. The judgment of the beautiful, on the other hand, is not particularly valuable since it does not activate or stimulate the mind. In judging an object beautiful we cannot be given credit for liking the object without interest since our judgment does not obey an *a priori* law. The judgment is disinterested merely because no interest can arise other than that which arises from the clash with reason. There is no interest without a conflict, without a Law. This is why for Kant the analytic of the beautiful is an appendix to the analytic of the sublime, despite his argument to the contrary. Lyotard’s critique of the unethical

nature of this disparagement of the beautiful challenges Kant's understanding of the moral as something for which we ought to be given credit, and reformulates the moral as our ability to *withdraw* from that resistance to the interest of sense, a resistance which Kant identifies as human beings' highest vocation.

At this point, let me recapitulate what I said about the relationship of Lyotard's sublime to Kant's analytic of the sublime and the beautiful. Lyotard's sublime is a hybrid of the two. The two key Kantian ideas Lyotard elaborates on in his own notion of the sublime, are, first, "mere form" (analytic of the beautiful) and second, the conflict between reason and imagination (analytic of the sublime). Lyotard's notion of the *quod* is indebted to Kant's analytic of the beautiful: both mere form and the quod cannot be subsumed under a concept. Lyotard's debt to the analytic of the sublime, on the other hand, consists in the idea of the shock-value of the sublime (insofar as shock implies conflict). However, whereas Kant considers the conflict internal--a conflict between the mind's faculties--Lyotard moves the conflict to the level of the quod itself. The law governing the Kantian sublime is the law of reason. The imagination obeys that law by proving its own inadequacy to represent ideas of reason. What is at stake in this conflict is the *manner* of presentation (hence questions of "adequacy" or "inadequacy"). To use Lyotard's terminology, the Kantian sublime poses the question of *types* of linking--how will the mind attribute totality or what is the law of attributing totality? In the Lyotardian sublime it is not the manner of presentation that is at stake but presentation itself or rather the object of presentation. The question now is: *is* there an object of presentation? The conflict is internal again but this time it is not so clearly situated 'within' the human mind. It is not, strictly speaking, a conflict since there is no interest involved. The conflict is within the quod; it is the mere possibility of the quod. The quod and the quid cannot really be viewed as two conflicting forces the way imagination and reason can. The only place where the conflict can be situated, under these circumstances, is in the relation between the mind and what is not mind (the infinite). Questioning the unethical nature of the Kantian subjugation of the infinite by reason, Lyotard insists on a *proto*-ethical, originary law, according to which thinking is possible at all only because there is an infinite ('the unthinkable') inaccessible to the mind, even to reason.

We have a determinate concept of the possibility of something other than the mind (the possibility of the infinite) but the infinite as such cannot be conceptualized. Thus, the infinite is a possibility that never becomes a necessity. That of which we have a concept is generally cognizable. However, the infinite or the unthought cannot be an object of knowledge, since we have no concept of it. Thus, paradoxically, we are able to cognize the possibility of being (*what* something is) but not being itself (*that* something is). The sublime, as Lyotard describes it, is not an object of cognition but of a special kind of feeling. The quid is an object of cognition but the quod is an object of feeling. We cannot know the event; we can only feel it. We can know the limits of our cognition but not what is bound within those limits. We know that our existence is possible without knowing whether we actually exist. We know that reality can be given but we do not know if it is given. The postmodern sublime emerges in this irreconcilable tension between determinate and indeterminate thought, in this self-perpetuating anxiety.

The sublime experience is both pleasurable and painful: the pleasure derives from the awareness that we do have a concept of possibility, the pain from the awareness that we have no concept of actuality (the actual cannot be conceptualized since it merely *is*). We can know the minimal conditions of being without knowing being. We know that which is further removed from existence (possibility as *meta*-existence) but not that in the midst of which we exist. Imagination can render sensible the concept of possibility (this concept includes both aspects of possibility—that something is *and* that it is not possible) through its presentations. What is unrepresentable is the quod, because we have no concept of it. We can present the question that haunts every possibility, the doubt, the fragility, the negation, but we cannot present the *that it happens*, despite or, rather, along with the possibility of it not happening. The sublime is what cannot be presented, not simply the quod, but the quod as a resistance to its quid. We present the threat of nothing happening, not the resistance itself. Kant's solution--to present *that* there is an unrepresentable--limits itself to presenting *that* there is a resistance, rather than presenting the resistance itself. The quod, however, cannot be presented except as a resistance, which, in turn, is never presentable as absolute positivity. The artist first presents the doubt (the quid) out of which this resistance springs forth.

Lyotard's notion of *anamnesis* captures the paradoxical nature of the quod, which is both fragile (since it is unrepresentable) and thus vulnerable to inscription, and, on the other hand, a strong resistance to what is already inscribed. Anamnesis is the recalling of that which has not been inscribed: "It makes sense to try to recall something...which has not been inscribed if the inscription of this something *broke* the support of the writing or the memory"(The *Inhuman* 55).<sup>3</sup> Bergson had declared *deja vu* the experience most accurately expressing duration or our very mode of being; now Lyotard, too, invokes *anamnesis* as our access to being. Both *deja vu* and *anamnesis* involve the recollection of something that has not been forgotten, because it is not part of one's personal past but belongs to a vaster ontological realm. The only thing that cannot be inscribed and that can break the support of inscriptions, of memory in general, is being. Being cannot be remembered because it cannot be forgotten. Being, Lyotard suggests, resembles a sort of false memory: we recall it but we recall it not because we had forgotten it; rather, we recall it precisely because it is beyond both forgetting and recalling. Although the Kantian sublime also involves a kind of recalling--the recalling of our supersensible vocation--this recalling does not 'break' anything. On the contrary, it reaffirms reason as a support. The Kantian sublime recalls a forgotten inscription—reason—and, because of that, it does not "pass beyond synthesis in general"(Lyotard 54), "miss[ing] the violence of the breaking"(55). Lyotard's sublime claims to be a more radical form of resistance insofar as it breaks even the support of reason, reason being just another inscription forcing an eventual synthesis.

However, the postmodern sublime is not that radical a resistance either, since it cannot completely dissociate the quod from the quid, it cannot save the quod from inscription. Lyotard wants to argue that "ignorance [of whether 'it is happening' or not] is the ultimate resistance that the event can oppose to the accountable or countable [comptable] use of time"(xvi) and to disclose the fragility of being as the only resistance to the interpretation (the quid or the *What is it?*) of the event. Supposedly, by making itself rare, dubious, suspect, the event guards against the projection of an interpretation that would predetermine it. However, by undermining itself, making itself scarce, the event actually achieves the opposite effect--it makes itself unreliable, surprising, unforeseeable, unpromised, indeterminate i.e., it valorizes itself. The quod becomes

overdetermined or inflated: the resistance to inscription is eventually inscribed, too. The fragility of the Lyotardian sublime as a testimony to the event follows from the very nature of testimony. Testimony implies the doubtfulness or forgetfulness of that to which one must testify. In the final analysis, the postmodern sublime, as theorized by Lyotard, might be less radical a resistance than the Kantian sublime, especially if it is true that, as Lyotard himself admits, the insistence on synthesis (the Kantian sublime as the ascription of totality) actually “refine[s] our anamnesis resistance”(Lyotard 55).

While Lyotard is intent upon saving the art work from any foreclosure, the Kantian sublime is exhausted by the idea of reason that remains unrepresented--the idea of totality. For Kant totality belongs to the first logical function of judgment, quantity. Quantity is an attribute, a quid. For Lyotard, however, totality does not fall under any of the four logical functions. It does not concern the power of judgment nor is it added to the object of judgment. It resembles form as a presentation of quality, but there is a radical difference: totality, for Lyotard, is a matter of form as time, not of form as space (as it is for Kant). Lyotard's quod is temporal, but not in the usual sense of temporality as time-consciousness. The postmodern sublime work of art breaks the support of time-consciousness and lets time be. For Lyotard, this is equivalent to letting being be insofar as he understands being as the ‘concentration’ of time. Since matter is only “confused thought,” since it remains matter only because it cannot concentrate itself sufficiently, cannot attract enough memory/time around itself, and because, on the other hand, the sublime work of art must testify to being, must approximate as closely as possible pure thought, pure energy, pure being (38-39), then in order for the sublime work of art to rise above mere matter, mere plasticity, and to become--in Barnett Newman's terms--*plasmic*, it must create a very intense physical sensation of time. Thus, the sublime work of art is expected to perform two mutually conflicting feats: first, it must strip itself of time (it must shatter time-consciousness), and, second, it must create “not the *sense* of time, but the physical *sensation* of time” (*Barnett Newman* 175). The quod is not the forgetfulness of time, but, on the contrary, its intensification or concentration. The sublime work of art must resist time not in the sense of defying it but for the purpose of being it. The attempt is to overcome time as excess, to prevent the work of art from being ‘delayed,’ from coming ‘too early’ or ‘too late.’<sup>4</sup> Time-consciousness must be overcome because it

considers the quod a given and does so precisely because it situates it beyond or outside itself. As long as we assume that the *that*-ness of things is atemporal, we cannot be shocked by being. It is only when we feel the quod as time itself that we are affected, that we experience sublimity.

Lyotard's determination of the sublime in terms of time rather than in terms of space makes totality unattributable to the sublime object since, to the extent that the sublime is *happening*, nothing can be attributed to it. This, in turn, changes the relationship between the sublime and the moral. From a moral point of view, the stakes in the postmodern sublime are higher than in the Kantian sublime. In the latter we are obligated to give up the sensible in the interest of reason. Reason is something we can fall back on after we have stripped ourselves from the sensible and feel vulnerable because of the failure of the imagination. But in the postmodern sublime the threat is even greater. The sublime work of art, as an *occurrence* or an *event*, requires us to strip ourselves not only of the sensible but also, in a certain sense, of reason. What we fall back on, in the Kantian analytic of the sublime--our ability to add totality to formlessness despite the failure of the imagination--is lacking in Lyotard's sublime, since we cannot add totality to the event. The work of art as an event is the initial difference that creates a split without, however, establishing a beginning or marking an end. Difference and totality are incommensurable. Reason wants to assimilate difference, to make it meaningful. Our consciousness has the capacity for synthesis because it is time-consciousness. Only that which is distended can be synthesized or totalized. The Kantian dynamical sublime, for example, is possible due to a formal similarity between the spatial distension of nature (revealed in its might and magnitude), and the time-distension of consciousness. It is because of this formal similarity, because of the capacity for totalization of time-consciousness, that we are able to add totality to raw nature. In the case of the work of art as an event, however, there is no distension that would allow at least for such a formal similarity between the object of judgment and the consciousness that judges it. Occurrence as primal difference resists any totalization. Thus, Lyotard's sublime encompasses two failures. Not only does the imagination fail to produce a sensible presentation but reason, too, fails to apprehend the occurrence: reason comes 'too late.' It tries to account for the quod, to add totality to this primal difference, but this attempt

itself already suggests that there was something ‘before’ reason, which resists reason. The obligation one feels in the postmodern sublime experience is more intense or more rigorous than that in the Kantian sublime experience, where reason is at least sure of itself. The obligation is greater because the law is more impossible or because the doubt is greater. One must continually testify to the quod despite the fact that testimony is bound to remain insufficient, inconclusive.

Lyotard’s understanding of the work of art as an ‘event’ bridges the gap left behind by Kant’s analytic of the beautiful, the gap between the noumenal and the phenomenal that makes disinterestedness possible in the first place. The whole issue of interest is transposed to another level. Kant views the object as already *arrived*, already come into being. For him difference does not emerge or begin until ‘after’ the arrival. Difference marks the gap between what has started arriving (the noumenal) and what eventually arrives (mere form). Kant’s ‘mere form’ is a sort of a residue or a vestige of what started arriving, of Being. It is our only link to the world as a plenitude of being, as a totality, and, as such, it is privileged over the existence of the object. Mere form functions as an intermediary, by means of which we are able to be disinterested in the object’s existence. Since we know that mere form, as a ‘representative’ of Being, is privileged over the existence of the object, we are able to ‘forego’ the object’s existence (and our interest in it), having been ‘reassured’ by mere form. If we are reassured in a higher reality (mere form), we do not need to be reassured (and reassurance is, after all, the purpose of being interested) by a lower reality (the object’s existence). This is why the analytic of the sublime is merely an appendix to the analytic of the beautiful, which is concerned with mere form. The postmodern sublime, however, no longer asks what started arriving and what finally arrived. Instead, everything has arrived but it could have just as well not even started arriving. This transposition of the line of difference, which collapses mere form into the quod of the object, creates--in fact demands--a certain interest in the ontology of the object. The word ‘ontology’ is not very appropriate in this context as it connotes a positivity. It is because of the profound doubt in the object’s existence that its existence is recast as an occurrence. And it is because occurrence is so fragile and suspect that we take such an interest in it. Kant’s sublime has an epistemological or psychological function—the discovery of man’s supersensible



vocation—whereas Lyotard’s sublime has an ontological significance (it restores the reality of the world by eliminating the tyranny of totalizing subjectivity).

From the art of Barnett Newman, which Lyotard discusses as an example of the postmodern sublime<sup>5</sup>, any notion of subjectivity (agency, intentionality, meaning, purposefulness) has been eliminated.<sup>6</sup> While Sartre provides a detailed account of the nature of mental images as pre-reflective (pre-subjective) consciousnesses, Newman’s paintings illustrate the extent to which the trend toward desubjectivization or ontologization has come to dominate not only mental but even visual images, which also aspire to creating a sense of being rather than to representation. Like Sartre, Newman concerns himself with getting rid of any form of externality: the only trace of externality in his paintings that cannot be eliminated is the artistic medium itself, the paint. His paintings’ visual nature is completely sacrificed to the newly proclaimed ontological destiny of the image. The paintings’ sole *raison d’être* is merely to affect the viewer: the viewer must *feel* something (anything).

Newman’s paintings testify to the proximity between the Kantian beautiful and the Lyotardian sublime with their shared implicit emphasis on the linking of mind to reality. Discussing the failure of non-objective painting to deal with subject matter, Newman insists on the need to discover a new subject matter that will make contact with reality (*Barnett Newman* 91). Lyotard’s idea of the sublime as situated neither ‘in’ the human being nor ‘in’ Being but somewhere in-between goes back to Newman’s mysticism and his admiration for primitive art. Newman emphasizes the religious nature of primitive art, an art “preoccupied with the creation of gods, with the expression of forces, with numinous beings”(89). Religious feeling is determined by our perception of ourselves: when we see ourselves on a par with other living beings, we become interested in divine forces (93). While the Kantian sublime does not provoke a religious feeling, his notion of the beautiful, with its disinterestedness and its freedom from concepts, puts us on equal grounds with the world. Because we cannot cognize the beautiful object, we do not ‘possess’ it. The judgment of the sublime does not involve cognition either, and yet, inasmuch as the sublime is merely the site of reason’s annunciation, reason does conquer or possess the object of judgment. Thus, it is in the judgment of the beautiful rather than in that of the sublime that we have something approximating a religious experience. In

the judgment of the beautiful nature is transcended only in the sense that it is reduced to its quod. The transcendence of nature involves a transcendence of an attitude of sensibility toward nature:

Communion with nature is confused with love of nature....[A] concern with nature, instead of doing what it was supposed to do--give man some insight into himself as an object of nature--accomplished the opposite and excluded man, setting him apart to make nature the object of romantic contemplation. ...But the primitive artist...portrayed the phenomenon...as an expression of the *original noumenistic mystery in which rock and man are equal*. (Barnett Newman 109 my italics)

The postmodern sublime, like the Kantian beautiful, puts human beings back in the primitive state of “totemic affinity”(109). And, as I will show later, Deleuze’s notion of the time-image, in which the subjective point of view dissolves into a multiplicity of objects *as* points of view, is not too far away from this fantasy of “totemic affinity” even though it lacks explicit religious connotations.

Neither the Lyotardian judgment of the sublime nor the Kantian judgment of the beautiful attribute as great a significance to the subject as does the Kantian judgment of the sublime, because reason is not involved in either of them, which leaves the object of judgment unclouded by the *value* of the judgment. Lyotard’s awareness of the danger of solipsism inherent in the Kantian sublime manifests itself in the distinction Lyotard draws between reflective thought and what he calls “determinate [rational] thought” (*The Inhuman* 15). Reflective thought is “a thought that proceeds analogically and only analogically--not logically”(16). Determinate thought--thought that disregards or excludes time--is a somewhat poor analog of reflective thought. It is a kind of confused reflective thought, in the same way that matter is “the failure of thought, its inert mass, stupidity”(38). For Lyotard, reflective thought is the origin of thought. This becomes obvious in his definition of thinking. He defines thinking--supposedly, the *essence* of thinking rather than a *particular* kind of thinking such as philosophy--as “a type of emptying of the mind, an emptying that is required if the mind is to think” (19). But this is exactly a definition of reflective thought, of what is proper to reflective thought as a kind of thought. Reflective thought differs from determinate thought in that it is not “a selecting and tabulating of data,” but is just “the opposite of overweening, selective,

identificatory activity” (18). In reflective thought “the mind isn’t ‘directed’ [as in determinate thought] but suspended. You don’t give it rules”(19). Thus, when Lyotard writes that a certain emptying of the mind is required for the mind to be able to think at all, he implies that reflective thought is the beginning of thought, that philosophical thought makes all other genres of discourse possible. For Lyotard, philosophical thought is the *quod* of thought, the happening of thought, thought as event.

Lyotard considers reflective or indeterminate thought a sign of our freedom. The relations he posits between reflective thought, memory, and time bear a striking resemblance to Bergson’s argument in *Matter and Memory* that memory distinguishes mind from matter. Memory “allows the being to free itself from the rhythm of the flow of things and to retain in an ever greater degree the past in order to influence even more deeply the future”(MM 22). Consciousness is born as a result of the dissolution of cerebral disturbance into many possible responses and the delay of a particular response (30). This delay is made possible by memory, which is a sign of the indetermination of our will in the field of consciousness (65). Lyotard’s analysis of the distinction between different forms of energy is clearly indebted to Bergson’s work. Lyotard carries out a Bergsonian reformulation of the relationship between mind and matter, both of which are conceived as forms of energy differing only in the types of “transformers” that determine the reality of that energy: “The reality to be accorded to such-and-such a form of energy, and therefore of matter clearly depends on the transformers we have at our disposal”(The *Inhuman* 43). The reality of matter, and of the different modes of thinking, depends on the transformers involved in the respective judgment. Transformers delaying immediate reaction and complexifying the response, tend to increase the range of possibilities--all of them, except the one realized, remain “inscribed in a virtual state”(42)--and thus increase the indeterminability or freedom of the material world from subjectivity: “The complexification of the transformers, theoretical and practical, has always had as its effect the destabilization of the fit between the human subject and its environment. And it always modifies this fit in the same direction--it delays reaction...it *increases material liberty*”(44 my italics). At the same time, reflective thought leaves man free as it delays immediate response. Transformers which delay “complexify memory”(44). In fact, they can be said to *create* memory. Memory is “the influx...of other possible--but currently

ignored--paths which form memory” (42). Matter is forgetfulness, the absence of those other possible paths.

It would seem logical to suppose that matter (and those modes of thought that are closer to it in their forgetfulness of time, particularly “determinate thought”) should be the most condensed form of energy and thus the most real one. But condensation is impossible in matter or in determinate thought, simply because there is nothing to be condensed and there is no memory to do the condensing. Memory is the great condenser: “ ‘[M]emory condenses an enormous multiplicity of shocks, which appear simultaneously to us although they are successive’” (Bergson qtd. in *The Inhuman* 42). The only reason the human mind is more real than matter is that the human mind is a transformer, which delays and through this delay creates memory, which, in turn, condenses the delay and achieves a sense of absolute simultaneity, a sensation of time. Transformers that delay in order to condense are privileged over other kinds of transformers. Sublime art is such a privileged transformer because it delays the response *absolutely*--no response is possible except a feeling of *Voilà!*--and thus absolutely condenses information (time). As a movement toward the unthought, the postmodern sublime provokes contemplation, a mode of reception associated with the Kantian beautiful: “[W]e think of presence according to the exclusive modality of masterful intervention...[and as a result] contemplation is perceived as a devalorized passivity” (*The Inhuman* 118). This sublime differs from the Kantian sublime’s “masterful intervention” and is more akin to the passivity characterizing the Kantian judgment of the beautiful. Lyotard’s sublime is “a passability to lack,” an “ontological melancholy”(118)<sup>7</sup> provoked by the lack of a destiny (destiny=objective reality). The elimination of subjectivity from Deleuze’s time-image is, similarly, an expression of ontological melancholy, of a desire for the object, a desire which desperately realizes that it must eliminate itself.

The Kantian sublime is a threat to the event insofar as by privileging reason it “ratioanaliz[es] the given and neutraliz[es] the future” (*The Inhuman* 69), as a result of which “the present loses its privilege of being an ungraspable point”(65). It is exactly this sense of foreclosure that Lyotard wants to avoid. From Lyotard’s perspective, Kant’s sublime is not philosophical or not reflexive enough since it still clings to inscription—

inasmuch as the addition of totality to the object of judgment is an act of inscription--instead of “generat[ing] occurrences before knowing the rules of this generativity”(72). Kant’s sublime does not show itself as “accessible to the event”(73), because it involves too much security, stability, preparation—we are prepared to fall back on reason when the imagination fails, nor are we surprised that we can do that. It is sublime, for Kant, that we can still comprehend something even in the absence of a sensible intuition and/or concept, that we have a ‘back-up plan’. We only *seem to be* out of control. However, in the postmodern sublime experience, we are not prepared except prepared to be unprepared: “Being prepared to receive what thought is *not* prepared to think is what deserves the name of thinking”(73). Kant’s judgment of the sublime does not involve real thinking since it does not question radically everything, including itself. Kant did not consider the idea of totality “interpretation [that] will itself be interpreted as a message”(74) but declared it to be the final message, the end of time. To judge sublimity *a la Kant* is not to think reflectively and, perhaps, not to think at all, since reflective thought, for Lyotard, is the essence of thought. Kant’s notion of the sublime makes impossible the “passability” to the event because it subjects the event to the idea of totality. In the very act of ascribing totality to an object the mind, proclaiming itself as everything, makes the passage into the object as event impossible. If the mind encompasses everything, there is nothing *toward* which it could pass. From Lyotard’s point of view, Kant’s sublime would be the supreme arrogance of the mind, which presumes to declare itself “the witness or the guarantor of the event” (75), as if the event flowed out of the mind rather than the mind opening up to the event. Lyotard’s project is to strip the mind of its presumptuousness by situating the sublime outside the mind. The Kantian sublime, Lyotard suggests, compromises the purity of the aesthetic by identifying it with *a certain capacity of the mind*, whereas it ought to leave it undetermined as “the ungraspable and undeniable ‘presence’ of something which is other than mind and which, ‘from time to time,’ occurs...”(75).<sup>8</sup>

With his definition of sublimity as a state of privation, which however seems applicable to every existent, Lyotard actually compromises the event instead of saving it. One might ask: How are works of art different from any object that *is rather than not*? Lyotard might argue that only works of art make man present. However, their presumed

superiority over ordinary existents actually disparages them. If it is true that everything is rather than not, but only sublime works of art make us aware of that by letting the event happen, this means that they are overemphasizing that which should have been (but is not) self-evident—presence. By stressing it they are compromising it. Trying too hard to save the event they miss their target and instead render the event superfluous. This is a problem Lyotard himself recognizes in his discussion of Boileau, without realizing that it is a problem in his own aesthetic. It is the problem of distinguishing between, on one hand, “a hidden figure” or “a figure for the erasure of figures”(The Inhuman 95) and, on the other hand, what is not a figure. Although Lyotard’s sublime attempts to bypass the figure at all, it still has a meaning: *It is happening* means that *it means nothing else*, that it cannot be interpreted. A figure for the erasure of figures, the postmodern sublime is still a figure. What Lyotard claims to be a radical shift from “the didactic forms”(97)--poetics and rhetoric--to an ethical aesthetics does not seem so radical after all. If the old aesthetics is formulated along the axis poetics-figure-sender, and the new one along the axis ethics-erasure of figure-receiver, the second axis inevitably links back onto the first one because the erasure of figures is itself a figure. Shifting the emphasis from the sender instance to the addressee instance does not remove the figure i.e., the referent. The referent is preserved in Lyotard’s reformulation of the central question of aesthetics: “What is it to experience an affect *proper* to art?” (97 my italics). This notion of the sublime makes the event *proper* to art and thus *figures* the event.

Lyotard’s understanding of the role of art as compared to the role of human beings is another instance that betrays his compromising of the event. On one hand, Lyotard denies the monopoly of the human mind and the centrality of the subject. Thus, he refuses to grant us the power, authority and responsibility of main transformers, the beings who are the beginning of everything, the origin of complexification. We do not have “the monopoly of mind, that is of complexification, [and]...complexification is not inscribed as a destiny in matter, but as possible...[taking] place at random but intelligibly”(45). Hence, “creation is not an act performed by someone; it is what happens (this) in the midst of the indeterminate”(82). The human being is not the source of sublimity because the “*Is it happening?*” does not belong to us, does not emanate from us. We do not deserve to be given credit for it. We do not produce the mere positivity of

things, their eventfulness. We do not, by simply being, make the event possible. The event is not *our* obligation. On the other hand, however, Lyotard conceives art in ethical terms *as if* there were an obligation and *as if* it were ours. The postmodern sublime, Lyotard says, “is much closer to an ethics than to any aesthetics or poetics” (81). It is as if the monopoly, of which the mind has been stripped--it is not that *the mind* happens but rather *it (something)* happens to the mind--this monopoly, and the responsibility it carries with it, is displaced onto the work of art, which is now expected to testify to an obligation. The work of art obliges *more*, obliges *before* or *ahead* of the human being. By simply being, we are not the main or the sole initiators of complexification and we do not testify to the event. Lyotard privileges sublime art over the human being, because only art can testify to being. Art is a more sophisticated, more complexifying transformer than a human being. Being cannot testify to itself except through a detour. Art is this detour. The prioritization of art over ontology/being arises from the destabilization of being. The quod/quid problematic exposes the fragility of being and creates the need for testimony. But this, in turn, destabilizes it even further because that which testifies (art) inevitably becomes more important and ‘stronger’ than that which is being testified to (being). Emancipation or defense is always a form of justification, but justification is suspect. The event, once it has to be testified to, is victimized. No matter how hard postmodern art tries to remain poor, to ‘sink down’ to a minimal degree of meaning, its “poverty” cannot help preserve an element of intentionality. For instance, the ‘poverty’ of Newman’s paintings is superficial or superfluous. Yes, these works are “neither seductive, nor equivocal; [they are] clear, ‘direct,’ open and ‘poor’”(The *Inhuman* 83), but they are all these things *for a reason*. Newman’s art is not *naturally* poor; its poverty is meaningful. To use Lyotard’s own reasoning, just as the negation of a phrase is still a phrase, so the negation of a message is still a message. Poor art occurs in the context of the tradition it denies. We cannot let time be, because what is letting time *be* is exactly that which also prevents time from being: time-consciousness.

Lyotard’s attempt to testify to the event is a response to Kant’s resolution of the conflict between reason and imagination. From Lyotard’s point of view, in the Kantian sublime reason wrongs the imagination. That certain phrase regimens correspond to parallel faculties of the mind is a point Lyotard makes in *The Differend*: the regimen of

reasoning overlaps with reason, the regimen of knowing with the understanding, the regimen of ostension with imagination. In this context, when the mind encounters the sublime, the imagination's failure and the triumph of reason become the silencing of one phrase regimen by another. The impossibility to prove the reality of an event (for instance, the impossibility to prove the existence of gas chambers) corresponds (in Kant's analysis) to the inability of the imagination to produce a sensible presentation of an idea of reason. The imagination is wronged because it cannot testify to the wrong that has been done to it; it cannot produce a sensible presentation of the sublime. To testify in its defense it would have to produce as evidence exactly that which it cannot produce, and then it would not be justified in complaining that it has been wronged because it wouldn't be inadequate any more. Its very inadequacy deprives it of the means to prove the wrong: either it is inadequate and cannot prove the wrong or it can prove it but then it is no longer inadequate and the wrong is merely a "damage." This, then, is a case of the *differend*, "the case where the plaintiff [the imagination] is divested of the means to argue and becomes for that reason a victim" (*The Differend* 9). Furthermore, reason wrongs the imagination by imposing its own rules on it, the rules of logical inference: from the inadequacy of the imagination an inference is made about the superiority of reason. But inference is not the rule, under which the imagination operates; its rule is ostension. We might say, using Lyotard's terminology, that Kant tries to resolve the differend--the conflict between imagination and reason--as if it were a litigation. By ascribing totality to the object of judgment reason makes linking impossible. It claims that there is only one way of linking onto the event: by ascribing totality to it. Nothing in the Kantian sublime, however, proves the necessity of adding totality to the object of aesthetic judgment or the reality of reason's superiority. Totality cannot be judged as real or unreal, true or untrue. Hence, it is not at all the reality or the truthfulness of ideas of reason that makes them superior to the sensible world. That an object *can be thought* even without a sensible presentation does not mean that it is (or it appears) real despite the absence of a presentation to make it (appear) real. It is sublime that thought thinks in spite of, or against, the obstacle. It doesn't even matter so much despite *what*; what matters is this *despite* as a sign of resistance. Reason can be called 'superior' only if the imagination fails to do what it is, in principle, competent to do. To call the imagination's inability to



produce a presentation of the sublime a failure is to presuppose that it is its job to produce such a presentation. This, in turn, presupposes that the sublime (in Kant's case, raw nature) belongs, *a priori*, to the regimen of knowledge, which requires "the conjunction...of an ostensive with a cognitive"(*The Differend* 64). Thus, reason's superiority rests merely upon a wrong, unstated assumption—the assumption that nature, or the object of judgment in general, is always and by necessity an object of knowledge and, hence, that it falls under the regimen of knowledge. Collapsing the Kantian hierarchy of the faculties, Lyotard insists that it is possible to link to the event without ascribing totality to it. Yet Lyotard in his own turn seems to valorize one particular link--the link to the quod--as the only necessary or real one in postmodern sublime art.<sup>9</sup>

In the final analysis, Lyotard's project of circumventing speculative discourse compromises itself, partly because it refines the aesthetic of "superfine sensibility," which it scorns and wants to transcend. The postmodern sublime, as exemplified in the work of Barnett Newman, is not as innocent and self-evident as it declares itself to be: it can identify itself as a break from tradition only against the background of that tradition. For instance, Newman enthusiastically opposes modern American art, a "barbarian" art, to the Greek art of "superfine sensibility." Greek (and European) art is scorned because it adores the object, "the elegant column and the beautiful profile"(*Barnett Newman* 170). American art is, however, superior to the art of "superfine sensibility" because it disregards the object or exiles it: the artist in America "does not even have the objects"(170). Nevertheless, isn't it possible to develop a "superfine sensibility" for something that does not belong to the sensible realm? In fact, does not the appeal to Ideas of Reason, to thought or to Being--the subject matter of American postmodern art--require a sensibility even more refined than the Greek/European one? The harder an object is to grasp, the more refined our capacity for grasping it must be. Provided that thought, ideas of reason, Being, are harder to grasp, the art that presents them must refine our responsiveness or our "passability" to them. After all, isn't Lyotard's notion of "passability" the postmodern version of Greek sensibility? The objects of sensibility and passability inhabit different realms, but sensibility and passability themselves serve one and the same function, that of awakening or opening up the mind to what is Other than the mind. The continuity between Greek and American art is evident in Newman's

critique of Longinus, who “could not extricate himself from...*the problem of value*, so that to him the feeling of exaltation became synonymous with the perfect statement--an objective rhetoric”(171 my italics). Yet Newman’s and Lyotard’s wonder at the quod is a problem of value in its own right. The statement *There is something rather than nothing* is a statement of value: the quod is evaluated or valorized even though it is evaluated against non-existence (*rather than nothing*). There is no phrase that would not involve the value of what is being phrased: even Being is an object of value. What exactly is the meaning of phrases such as “the perfect statement,” “perfect form,” “ideal sensibility”? Newman assumes that “ideal sensibility” refers exclusively to the ideal, correct, symmetrical, perfect form of an object of the senses. However, “ideal sensibility” may refer not only, or not merely, to *the ideal nature of the object*, but also to *the ideal nature of the feeling* provoked by an object *and/or* idea. The postmodern sublime cannot circumvent this “ideal sensibility” or what Newman calls “the rhetoric of exaltation”(172) of Greek (and European) art, and, thus, cannot deny its debt to the Kantian analytic of the beautiful. “Rhetoric” poses the question of effectiveness, the use of “props and crutches that evoke associations with outmoded images, both sublime and beautiful”(173). Newman’s art is not purposeless because the command *Be!* has to be given in an effective manner. Having admitted that reality and Being are not *given* but must be *made to be*, this art claims to be “self-evident,” “real and concrete”(173) i.e., it wants to be signifying (reflective) and asignifying (pre-reflective, pre-subjective) at the same time. Postmodern sublime art cannot be ‘understood,’ for lack of a better word, without the props and crutches of aesthetic theory.

The ambition of postmodern sublime art to distinguish itself from the “pure rhetoric of abstract mathematical relationships” (173) rests on the assumption that these relationships, however abstract, are still recognizable, that they are means to an end (rhetorical strategies), whereas the images created by Newman’s art are, supposedly, unrecognizable and thus irreducible to the status of mere means serving a rhetorical end. (Similarly, Deleuze’s time-image is one that we cannot recognize or recall.) This kind of logic presupposes that only objects of sensibility and their abstract representations are recognizable, that there is a certain level or limit, to which an object can be reduced and still remain a potential object of rhetoric. Supposedly, Being is this limit. Newman

believes that Being cannot be reduced and that, therefore, it is outside the realm of rhetoric, is superior to abstract form, which itself is just as recognizable as sensible form. However, even if this were so, Newman's art has no other way of 'proving' this except by first undermining its own claim. If Being is unrecognizable, irreducible, and if Newman's art wants to testify to Being, this art must first *pretend* that Being is recognizable, in order to present the unrepresentable. Newman's art has to resort to rhetoric in order to allow itself to be unrhetorical. Another reason Newman may have for claiming that his art is unrhetorical is that it is an art addressed to the individual rather than to a social community. But "to reject the Sublime in the social sense" and to claim that "one experiences the Sublime or not, according to one's fate and character"(Motherwell 53) is merely to proclaim a new, private rhetoric in the place of the old, social one. The attribution of sublimity to one's personal reaction to art, rather than to the artist's intention or to the work of art itself, only shifts the stress from one instance of the rhetorical structure to another, from the sender to the receiver. Besides, the addressee's reaction itself can never be purely personal.

That Newman's art is not intrinsically unrhetorical, or that the reaction it provokes is not inherently unrhetorical, is evident in Lyotard's analysis or defense of "an aesthetic 'before' forms"(*The Inhuman* 150). The work of art is not a presence but we, the viewers, must make it so (or we must *let it be* a presence) by assuming a particular approach (a rhetoric of passability) to it: we must experience the work "without referring it to [its] supposed initial situation, in the studio, at the moment of the 'first' sketch, or even what might have been the artist's 'first' imagination of [it]"(150). We must be prepared to experience "as many states of freshness as what we might call disarmed gazes"(150). It is not the work that has overcome "plot [*intrigue*]"(150), but *we* are doing the overcoming as we make an effort to resist the temptation of letting ourselves 'conquer' or 'possess' and thus neutralize the work. We disarm our own gaze. Thus, the responsibility for the sublimity of a work of art is entirely ours; it depends on the sophistication with which we educate ourselves to disarm our gaze. Newman's art is even more deceitful than mimetic art since it claims that it does not phrase but merely *is*. (In *The Differend*, however, Lyotard shows that it is impossible not to phrase at all.) In mimetic art, that which is necessary to understand a painting is in the painting itself--the

entire tradition of painting--while in Newman's art, that which is necessary to understand the painting (to understand that we should not try to understand) is removed from the painting and hidden in the aesthetic theory behind it, without which it is impossible to understand the painting. The viewers are not immediately affected by the work (as Lyotard would like them to be) but must learn how to be affected, must forbid themselves to try to understand, let alone interpret the work. Resistance to understanding is not natural; it is cultivated. The work cannot become its own referent spontaneously or address the viewer directly in a natural way. The theory must first distribute the instances in the phrase universe. The referent does not fall out naturally but is *removed* by the theory.

Lyotard's notion of *Is it happening?* reflects a certain fear that the mind might close itself up, a fear of solipsism. The mind must be moved, the addressee must be affected, an opening or a space between the mind and everything that the mind is not must be preserved. Saving the honor of thinking means saving the mind from self-obsession, self-consumption, self-destruction. Lyotard's notion of the sublime is more akin to Kant's notion of the beautiful insofar as both are concerned with preserving the difference between the mind and what is not mind, and with linking these two without, however, collapsing them into each other. Unfortunately, the formulation of the problem of passability in terms of a project (the project of saving the honor of thinking) makes the result somewhat suspect. When we ask the mind to make itself passable to--, to make room for the remainder, we are already implying that there is no remainder but that the mind ought to create it, that the mind is not naturally, spontaneously accessible to--. Instead of revealing Being as the "donation" (*The Inhuman* 111), the mind is asked to become its own 'donor,' to donate a remainder--which it has extracted, as it were, from itself--back to itself. But if the mind creates that, to which it will be passable, how can it deceive itself: "[I]f what we are passable to has first been plotted conceptually [plotted because it is a project] how can it seize us?" (111). The attempt of postmodern art to make the viewer *be* is thwarted by a structural impossibility. After all, could we be the addressees of the question "Is it happening?" given that this question bears on our very ability to be present (inasmuch as we are not present but must be made so)? Lyotard

acknowledges this problem in his analysis of language: “[C]an you be the addressee of a question bearing on your ability to be the addressee of a question?”(129)

As an attempt to rehabilitate the aesthetic of the beautiful from the forgetfulness and the disguised disrepute into which it had fallen in the Kantian aesthetic, the postmodern sublime constitutes a critique of the danger inherent in the Enlightenment project of compromising what, in Lyotard’s view, is most essentially human--reflective thought. The Kantian sublime, conceived as a certain *capacity* of the human mind, rests on a notion of freedom as the mind’s superiority over objective reality. The Kantian judgment of the sublime is still partly a rational judgment, manifesting the teleological character of what Lyotard calls “determinate thought.” Since this judgment has a value beyond itself--the annunciation of Reason as our final destiny--it serves an epistemological function (the objectification of subjectivity) rather than a purely aesthetic one. As the judgment itself is considered valuable, the agent of the judgment is accorded greater importance than the object of judgment, but the neutralization of the object of judgment makes the latter ethically suspect. Lyotard, on the other hand, refuses to analyze the sublime in terms of what the human mind is capable of. Restoring the value of contemplation typically associated with the Kantian notion of the beautiful, he thinks freedom as the mind’s passability to the aesthetic object. The Lyotardian sublime remains closer to the Kantian notion of the beautiful (despite the fact that the later does not have an explicit ontological relevance) rather than to the Kantian sublime. The *quod* of the postmodern sublime object is more akin to the “mere form” of the Kantian beautiful object than to the Kantian sublime as an expression of the mind’s superiority and control over nature. Lyotard’s intolerance for subjectivity—which he shares with the other thinkers I am discussing here—comes forward in his theory of the postmodern sublime, whose task is to dethrone the agent of aesthetic judgment with a view to preserving the purity of a reflexive aesthetic judgment.

Lyotard’s idea of art making man present is based on his identification of presence with matter. This identification is in line with Bergson’s understanding of the difference between mind and matter, a difference in terms of rhythm, since Bergson conceives both mind and matter as vibrations. Mind differs from matter thanks to its greater capacity for retention i.e., its capacity for memory. Matter does not retain any

memories, cannot experience repetition, is free of inscription. In terms of time, matter is the *instant*: matter does not exist *in time* for it is the very *sensation of time*. To be present, for Lyotard, is to be “matter, by which [Lyotard] mean[s] matter in the arts, i.e., presence” (*The Inhuman* 138). “Passability to the event”---Lyotard’s definition of the sublime---assumes a mind lacking for itself (as opposed to Kant’s sublime, in which nature is lacking for the mind). In fact, the ideal state of aesthetic reception envisioned by Lyotard---a state requiring the dismantling of consciousness---bears a disturbing resemblance to the state of a material point obeying the laws of mechanics. Lyotard believes that our will is manipulated to such an extent that the only way we could receive anything at all—for example, receive/respond to a work of art--is not to will at all.

To be aware of our being, Lyotard suggests, we have to be deprived of volition, of consciousness. Art should not strive to reach our consciousness but actually to miss it. Art then is at its best—art is *sublime*—when it affects us *subliminally*. Lyotard goes as far as to compare the sense of being that sublime art provokes to the unconscious ‘being’ of automatic dolls. The sensation of time, the sublime experience of ‘*that there is time*’ (as opposed to the experience of chronological time) Lyotard compares to the mechanism puppets obey<sup>10</sup>:

[...] At least there is some precedent for it in an observation made to the narrator of Kleist’s *Puppet Theatre* by the maker of automatic dolls. Nothing, he explains, is closer to infinite grace than the mechanism these puppets obey. Deprived of all intention (I’d say, deprived of all capacity for temporal synthesis), the dolls merely place their limbs at the moment as they are ordered, following the law of gravity alone. ... The grace...Kleist writes about would be like the freeing of the mind from all diachrony, from all task of synthesis. ... [Sublime art]...[a]spires to exemption from syntheses, forms, becomings, intentions and retentions [i.e. memory], from repetition, in a word. Aspires to that unique pinch or to that ‘pinch’ of the unique in which the differentiation of the one and the multiple would not have place or time. (*The Inhuman* 163)

The passage suggests that *automatism* is the greatest *freedom* man could hope to achieve, but which he could never achieve since he is unable to reduce himself completely to matter or to what Lyotard calls “the pain of an impossible sainthood”(164). Nevertheless, sublime art can hope to make man sense his being by reducing the human to the being of a material point, whose uniqueness lies in that it *does not endure*.

Whereas the Kantian sublime ‘congratulates’ us for our ability to think an object even in the absence of a sensible presentation, the postmodern sublime is the wonder at the very possibility of the object of aesthetic judgment. This wonder, however, is not provoked by the mere absence of ocular proof but by the cognition of the equally valid impossibility of the object. This wonder and this impossibility have nothing to do with our ability to cognize the world. It is not a question of *our* possibility or impossibility, *our* triumph or failure; it is a matter of establishing an ontological fact or, rather, an ontological doubt. Although the postmodern sublime appears to be a descendant of the Kantian sublime inasmuch as both are determined in terms of privation--in one case, it is the absence of a sensible presentation, in the other, the absence of possibility--it is more akin to the Kantian notion of the beautiful in that it shifts the stress away from the subject and places it in the ontological realm, where the opposition subject-object loses relevance as it dissolves into the pre-ethical and pre-rational command: *Be!* Reason becomes just another inscription, whose support must be broken in order for us to link to the aesthetic object at all. Thus, while the Kantian judgment of the sublime establishes merely the necessity of a certain *type of link*--the mind linking to the aesthetic object by adding totality to it--the postmodern sublime, by problematizing the very *possibility of linking*, establishes a necessity even more originary than the Kantian one. Linking to the aesthetic object, and, in general, to what the mind is *not*, becomes an ontological law.

The Kantian sublime serves as the basis for Lyotard’s articulation of an aesthetics of privation, in which the greatest importance is assigned to that which can affect us despite the fact that it lies beyond sensibility, beyond representation and, thus, beyond the image, even beyond imagination. This is what Lyotard calls ‘event’: an everyday occurrence that remains hidden under a barrage of significations. Becoming aware of events demands a heightened sensitivity to “the ‘it happens that’ rather than to the ‘What happens,’ [and] requires...a high degree of refinement in the perception of differences...[which consists] in the power to be able to endure occurrences as ‘directly’ as possible without the mediation or protection of a ‘pre-text’”(Peregrinations 18). Bill Readings has rightfully pointed out Lyotard’s indebtedness to Kant’s idea of the sublime as something that “leaves us without criteria and requires *indeterminate judgment*”(Readings xxxi). The event appears throughout Lyotard’s work under different

names: “the figure of discourse,” “the unconscious,” “the sublime,” “the unthought,” “the intractable,” “the inoperable,” “the differend.”<sup>11</sup> Lyotard develops the notion of the event as a resistance to the metaphysical conception of subjectivity, which focuses on the spirit as a survivor and ignores the sheer possibility of things: “Birth itself, the beginning, is reckoned, through melancholia, as an illusion. What comes to life—the instant as event, emerging from nothingness—is already doomed to return to nothingness”(“The Survivor” 146). Against this metaphysical melancholy, Lyotard draws attention to “the enigma of appearance”(147):

Rather than nothing, being gives entities, instants, objects. Since being appears in ‘objects’, it gets forgotten. Yet it *gives* objects, something *happens*. Expressions like ‘yet’ are concessions to melancholia. But by conceding, of course, I am impugning; or, rather, I am emphasizing the impugment that exists in melancholia. What melancholia impugns is the fact that there is ‘nonetheless’ something rather than nothing... (147)

We recognize in Lyotard’s privileging of what is present--despite all odds--over the disappointment at the possible and perhaps inevitable disappearance of things, Bergson’s critique of negation. Bergson argues that what we designate as “absence” is merely our disappointment at finding something else present in the place of what we have expected or hoped to find. Lyotard contrasts metaphysical melancholy with a child-like openness to the indeterminability and irreducible non-discursiveness of the world. This image of childhood is not, however, entirely devoid of melancholic overtones, which has prompted some critics to regard Lyotard’s philosophy as “arrest[ing] the imagination in a nostalgic reverie” (Browning 157) and ultimately “climaxing in a melancholic reverence for what eludes human conception”(85).<sup>12</sup>

The indeterminate judgment to which the event gives rise proceeds by way of experimentation or invention rather than cognition, since it does not rely on any pre-given criteria for judging<sup>13</sup>:

Reflection supposes that we do not possess the rule. Consequently, we do not even possess the object since we are not yet in a position to signify or name it. We can just barely indicate it as ‘this,’ as a case or an occasion. ... [R]eflection is a disposition of the mind by which it judges without concept. ... We see that this reflection is not a bending of thought back upon itself, but rather a bending within thought of something that seems to not be itself since thought cannot determine it. Yet it is the bending of something that is



possibly more ‘inside’ thought than itself. This further inside is nothing other than feeling, *Empfindung*, or, as we say today, affect. (Lyotard, “On What Is ‘Art’” 174)<sup>14</sup>

The paradoxical nature of the event lies in the incongruity between the event’s *exceptionality*—the event is possible precisely because we are usually oblivious to the being of things, which remains buried under the various meanings we ascribe to them—and the alleged *universality* of the event—all things are potential events, but we simply do not notice them. Bill Readings rightfully draws attention to the problematic nature of the almost unavoidable reduction of the event’s resistance to discourse to a case of mere “*opposition* between the absolute meaninglessness of the event and the discourse of meaning. Paradoxically, all events would then be indifferently, interchangeably, *commensurably* meaningless”(104).<sup>15</sup> If we were capable of noticing the eventhood of all things, their quod (*that* something happens) would coincide with their quid (*what* happens). The event and the indeterminate judgment it provokes are possible only as the result of a “bracketing out” of the meaning of things. We cannot be surprised by or made “passible to” the forgotten materiality of things unless we have first “fallen” into signifying them.

The indeterminability or sublimity of the world demands that we first take a step back from determining or representing the world: the pure being of things becomes accessible to us only *after* things have become inaccessible to us i.e., after they have been signified. The movement from determination to indetermination, from meaning to being, can only be a *rhetorical*<sup>16</sup> and, ultimately, *sentimental* gesture. In *On Naive and Sentimental Poetry* Friedrich Schiller contrasts the Greeks’ naïve attitude toward nature with modern man’s sentimental attitude: while the Greeks feel *naturally*, modern man *feels the natural*. While feeling naturally presupposes a direct, intimate relationship with nature, feeling the natural signifies man’s relationship with himself, a relationship with one of his mind’s faculties. Similarly, insofar as the eventhood of events can be experienced or “noticed” only after one has purposefully refrained from representing them, the event is a *sentimental experience of being*.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Passibility to the event is the capacity to sense “something in excess of what the body can sense, of what is sensible as circumscribed by the (biological, cultural) institutions of the body. ... Sensation is not only the reception of useful contextual information, it is also in its immediacy the reminder of a threat. The body doesn't belong to you, it is sensible only insofar as it is exposed to the other thing, deprived of its self-distinction, in danger of annihilation. It is sensible only as lamentable.” See Lyotard, “Music, Mute” in *Postmodern Fables*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997), 217-233. Strangely enough, while the notion of “passibility” demands an openness to the world, Lyotard describes “affect” (the effect of passibility) as feeling enclosed within itself, a “‘pure’ feeling in the Kantian sense, pure in that it is not motivated by anything [not motivated by anything in the world].” See “On What Is ‘Art’” in *Toward the Postmodern*, eds. Robert Harvey and Mark S. Roberts (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1993), 164-175.

<sup>2</sup> Although in *The Inhuman* Lyotard offers Newman's art as an example of sublimity, in his later work *Postmodern Fables* (1993) he contends that there is no aesthetics of the sublime: “There is no sublime object. ... Nor is there some aesthetics of the sublime, since the sublime is a sentiment that draws its bitter pleasure from the nullity of the *aisthesis*” (“The Zone” 29). See “The Zone” in *Postmodern Fables*, 17-32. Instead, the sublime belongs to a “negative ontology” (“Anima Minima” 241). See “Anima Minima” in *Postmodern Fables*, 235-249

<sup>3</sup> Lyotard's idea of anamnesis—the recalling of that which has not been inscribed (which is different from recalling something one has merely forgotten)—is similar to Bergson's idea of *deja vu* or false memory, the recalling of that which does not belong to one's personal memory but rather to what Bergson calls Pure Memory. In both cases, recollection has an ontological significance as it enhances our sense of being.

<sup>4</sup> Lyotard conceives the time of the event as the event's anachronicity: the event happens too soon to be assigned any meaning and, at the same time, too late to be recovered (Readings 59). However, to say that the event is anachronistic implies that time is nothing else but the process of assigning meanings to things. If at the moment of their happening events do not ‘yet’ have a meaning, time must be the coincidence (always illusory) of things with their significations. Only from the point of view of this spectral or simulacral time can the event be characterized as “anachronistic.”

<sup>5</sup> For an illuminating reading of Newman's “version of a post-modern Kantian sublime” see Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime* (New York: Allworth Press, 1999), 50-58. Gilbert-Rolfe proposes an interesting interpretation of Newman's art in relation to cinema, comparing a Newman painting to a film frame rather than a picture frame, “the frame as the whole image rather than what surrounds it” (64-66).

<sup>6</sup> See Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996). Nancy demonstrates the extent to which art has been haunted by the Hegelian view of art as an image of the Idea, by a theory of imitation, a theological thinking of the visibility of the invisible. Nancy goes on to make the acute observation that even some modern art forms—minimalist, poor art (such as Barnett Newman's art)—remain Hegelian, an art of the residual Idea. That kind of art is motivated by a desire for purification—despite its refusal to signify, or perhaps precisely because of it, it still contains a desire for sense. *Residual* art is the opposite of *vestigial* art. (“Vestigial art” is a term Nancy coins to define art that has passed beyond representation but also beyond the intention not to represent.) The more art tries to purify itself, the more residual or Platonic/Hegelian it is.

<sup>7</sup> Is not Lyotard's notion of the sublime predetermined by the historical context to the extent that it is only in the *megalopolis*, where everything is *destined*, that we feel a nostalgia for that which lacks destiny, for the indeterminate? Is this sublime really an “ontological melancholy” or merely a historical one? Is an

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“aesthetic ‘before’ forms” really possible or is Lyotard offering us merely a *rhetoric* of “passability”? Does not the allegedly originary *event* still depend on the sophistication with which the viewer disarms his gaze?

<sup>8</sup> Lyotard does not offer any definitions of the unthought: the unthought, after all, is precisely that which cannot be grasped. The notion of thinking as an openness to the unthought is so fragile itself that the reader, used to reducing the unfamiliar to the familiar, is tempted to reduce the unthought to “the new.” However, “the new” is absolutely different from the unthought. “The new” is inscribed; we are prepared for it, we can recognize it. Thus, it becomes “an additional source of surplus-value” (76). It is superfluous because it merely pretends to be the same as the unthought. Fortunately, this confusion cannot do any real harm since the unthought’s violence can be mimicked only on the surface. The criterion for distinguishing “the new” from the unthought is whether or not it *breaks* the support of thinking. “The new” never does that. “The new” emerges out of combinations and permutations of the already inscribed. “The new” does not *happen*. It is *achieved, created*; it is a project, a goal. Yet, occasionally it is possible for the unthought to emerge *accidentally* from “the new.” Any form of experimentation--in the arts or in the sciences--can only attain “the new.” Experimentation *qua* experimentation is superfluous. It is only when we become aware that a certain experiment has broken the support of thinking that we are dealing with the unthought. However, we must resist the temptation to put the unthought in a dialectical relationship with “the new,” thus reducing it to a *moment* which is to be overcome, the way “the new” itself is overcome once it is inscribed in the series of the old and becomes the basis for another “new.” To argue that the unthought is possible only retrospectively is to make the same error, against which Bergson warns us in *The Creative Mind*, the error of confusing the possible or the virtual with the real. The possible, Bergson insists, is not merely a weaker version of the real, preceding the real and eventually actualizing itself in the real. Similarly, the unthought is not a shadow, an apparition; the unthought is not merely what is not *yet* thought but *will be*. Bergson argues that the possibility of things does not precede their existence. If that were the case, things “would be capable of representation beforehand; they could be thought of before being realized”(CM 117). Just as there is *more* in the virtual than there is in the actual (120), there is *more* in the unthought than there is in “the new.” Hence, the sublime is formulated as a question that does not guarantee a positive answer: “*Is it happening?*”

<sup>9</sup> That the attempt of postmodern art to make the human being *be* is not entirely successful can also be demonstrated from a logical point of view, a point of view Lyotard assumes in the analysis of the “phrase universe” in *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988). The postmodern sublime work of art is not self-referential. Self-reference is here situated on the referent instance. (By contrast, in a self-referential work the referent would be the work itself rather than the self-reference of the work.) Self-reference, then, is “the subject of the utterance”(34). Barnett Newman’s art illustrates the “conversion of a proper name from the position of ‘subject of the uttering’ to that of ‘subject of the utterance’ [or]...the displacement from the situation of addresser in the universe of a current phrase *p* to that of referent in the universe of a current phrase *q*”(34). The phrase *p* in Newman’s case is “The work is,” while the phrase *q* is “The work *means that it is*.” Validation procedures apply to the phrase *q*, not to the phrase *p*. Thus, in judging a work’s sublimity we do not judge its being (phrase *p*), but we judge if the work really *means that it is* (phrase *q*). We agree on procedures to present Being (present *that it is*), not on Being itself. This takes us back to the question of *techne*, to the idea that certain presentations are better (more effective) than others. We must agree on the most *effective* presentation of Being, not on Being *as such*. The call to continue to testify to Being is a call to testify to Being as a referent, not as an addresser. In fact, the very nature of testimony is to neutralize the addresser into a referent. If “the addresser of *p* becomes the referent of *q* when he is named”(35), all that the sublime work of art must do is name the addresser (and thus neutralize it). Here Lyotard falls into self-contradiction. On one hand, he says that the name need not be validated since it “is not a property attributed to a referent by means of a description (a cognitive phrase)”(35). On the other hand, however, the reason an addresser is named is that by becoming a referent, by being named, it is ‘ushered’ onto the level where procedures can begin to be established for validating it. There is a danger that the incorrect evaluation of its reality as a referent may lead to the annihilation of its reality as an addresser but, at the same time, it *must* be displaced from the addresser to the referent instance for validation to start at all. The addresser *cannot be* validated, but when it turns into a referent it *should not* be validated (since one cannot validate “the truth of a name”(35)). Perhaps the sublime is this tension between referent and sense, the tension between the phrase

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(referent and sense as instances only) and the desire for something beyond the phrase, an addresser outside the phrase, an obligation rather than a mere phrase instance. And yet, at one point Lyotard explicitly says that “[t]he addresser [Being] must be understood as a situated instance in a phrase universe, on a par with the referent, the addressee, and the sense”(55). Validation procedures must be (can be) established only for Being as a referent of a phrase, not for Being ‘outside’ the phrase.

<sup>10</sup> In *Postmodern Fables* Lyotard goes as far as to argue that what he calls “anima minima” (the minimum condition for an aesthetic experience) “exists only as forced,” its life “proceed[ing] from a violence exerted from the outside on a lethargy”(“Anima Minima” 243).

<sup>11</sup> See Bill Readings, *Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1991), which follows closely Lyotard’s elaboration of the idea of the event, starting with *the figural* (in *Discours, figure*) and ending with Lyotard’s political writings.

<sup>12</sup> However, in *Postmodern Fables* (1993) Lyotard himself admits that melancholy is an affect characteristic of postmodernity. See “A Postmodern Fable” in *Postmodern Fables* 83-101.

<sup>13</sup> Perhaps the interest in the ethical aspect of the indeterminate judgment can be traced back to Husserl’s method of phenomenological reduction, which Husserl describes as “a certain refraining from judgment”(Ideas 98, section 31). Lyotard defines the indeterminate judgment as one that proceeds through experimentation, in the absence of any pre-given criteria for judging, as a passability to things. Similarly, the epoche works through experimentation, through varying a thing in one’s imagination so as to reveal what is essential to the thing. See Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. W. R. Boyce Gibson (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 91-100 for a more detailed account of the epoche.

<sup>14</sup> Gary Browning criticizes Lyotard’s analysis of the Kantian judgment of the sublime for focusing too much on the indeterminate, reflexive nature of aesthetic judgment while ignoring Kant’s idea of nature’s objective teleology. See Gary K. Browning, *Lyotard and the End of Grand Narratives* (Cardiff: U of Wales P, 2000), 74-85.

<sup>15</sup> This is also the paradox of the Kantian aesthetic judgment (on the basis of which Lyotard develops his idea of the event): it is always a judgment of the particular (for example, a single flower) but it nevertheless requires a universal agreement. See “A Bizarre Partner” in *Postmodern Fables* 123-147 where Lyotard elaborates on Kant’s idea of indeterminate (reflexive) judgment and on the differences between the kinds of universality demanded by aesthetic and ethical judgments on one hand, and cognitive judgments, on the other hand.

<sup>16</sup> Lyotard’s idea of *aesthetic indeterminability* as a means of restoring the connection between man and the world was already developed by Friedrich Schiller in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, ed. and trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1982). The rhetorical nature of the aesthetic education Schiller advocates is unavoidable given that it is the education of man *after* he has attained self-consciousness, which makes Schiller’s definition of the aesthetic state as one of infinite determinability problematic. Before the mind is determined by sense impressions, it is in a state of “unlimited determinability”(AEM 129). In this originary state nothing “has yet been posited, and consequently nothing yet excluded either”(129). However, Schiller fails to draw a convincing distinction between the state of empty infinity and the aesthetic state, both of which are described as an infinity uninterrupted by any determination or selection. The only difference is that the inclusiveness of the aesthetic is not infinite but determined or conscious. Through perception “reality [comes] into being but infinity [is] lost”(129). Man becomes a subject through the loss of form as infinity and his mission is to recuperate that loss through the conscious creation of infinity. Since Schiller’s project is aimed at the aesthetic education of his contemporaries—the civilized “barbarians”—and not of man in the natural state, the famous “step backward” must be taken from the civilized state, not from the natural one. Yet Schiller wants to argue that the step is taken from the natural state, which is why he must distinguish between

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empty infinity (the state *preceding* man's determination by the senses) and "infinity filled with content"(145), the state man attains as a result of *having stepped back to empty infinity through this determination by the senses*, the state acquiring reality precisely because it has gone through the territory of the senses. Thus, limit (sense determination) is used to restore (or create) infinity. A lack of independence (sense determination) is turned into freedom (the aesthetic state). However, only thought can turn determination into infinite determinability; only the self-conscious man can make use of his determination and turn it into the ground of his freedom.