

Lyotard, Capitalism and the Sublime

... Right now the world is different from every other time there's ever been. And what if, just maybe, this is the first time money's ever become important for artists? And maybe for ever after this it will be. Maybe we're just at that point. Where money's an element in the composition.

Maybe it's just hard luck; I was born at the wrong time. This is what I do. You're a conduit from art to money. It's getting closer and closer and closer. And if money becomes king, then it just does. But there's a point where you've got to take it on.

Damien Hirst¹

Sublimity is no longer in art, but in speculation on art.

Jean-François Lyotard²

In my earlier discussion of Gene Ray's critique of Hirst, I have highlighted the fact that his notion of the sublime is drawn from Lyotard's essay "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde." It is to this essay that I shall now turn, to throw further light on the contemporary conceptions of the sublime which animate Ray's essay in particular, and discussions of sublimity around contemporary art in general. Lyotard has been the figure most associated with the revival of the notion of the sublime in contemporary philosophy, and although he has written somewhat prolifically on the notion³, it is this essay

¹ Damien Hirst and Gordon Burns, "The Naked Hirst (Part 2)," Guardian 6 October 2001: 138. online ed.

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/weekend/story/0,3605,564027,00.html>> visited 12/01/05.

² Jean-François Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," trans. Lisa Liebmann, Geoffrey Bennington and Marian Hobson, The Inhuman (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991) 106.

³ Lyotard's references to the notion of the sublime are too many to be worth listing in full here, however, for particular relevance, see the essay "An Answer to the Question: What is Postmodernism?" for his earlier comments on sublimity (published in Jean-François Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, Theory and History of Literature; V.10 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984) 71-82. The discussion of the sublime is pp.77-82) Although these remarks, due to the notoriety of the book, are perhaps even more cited (at the very least in the broader academic sphere) than those in "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," they are also much more brief, and "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde" can be understood to elaborate on them. Also perhaps centrally significant in Lyotard's corpus on the sublime is Jean-François Lyotard, Lessons on the

which has become such a central text in recent discussions of the aesthetics of the sublime in contemporary art. This would seem to be partially because it is the essay in which Lyotard treats of the sublime most explicitly in relation to contemporary and modern art, and also because the essay, appearing in the art magazine Artforum, was Lyotard's essay on the sublime which was aimed most centrally at *intervening* in the critical discourses around contemporary art.

Ray in particular draws on Lyotard's differentiation of the temporality of the sublime 'event' (an experience of the 'now') from the mere *frisson* of

Analytic of the Sublime (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994). In this, a detailed, if 'strong', reading of the section of Kant's Third Critique dedicated to the sublime, Lyotard gives his lengthiest account of the sublime. Coming somewhat later in Lyotard's career, and as a piece of abstract thinking, much less aimed at discourses on art, it has been less influential on these, and moves away somewhat from the concerns of the current essay. Also relevant, aside from the other essays in The Inhuman, the collection of Lyotard's work in which "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde" found its place, many of which also touch on the question of the sublime and modern/contemporary art, see Jean-François Lyotard, "Complexity and the Sublime," Postmodernism, eds. Lisa Appignanesi and Geoffrey Bennington, I.C.A. Documents; 4-5 (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1986) 19-26. In "Post-script to Terror and the Sublime," Jean-François Lyotard, The Postmodern Explained to Children: Correspondence 1982-1985, trans. Don Barry, Bernadette Maher, Julian Pfanis, Virginia Spate and Morgan Thomas, eds. Julian Pefanis and Morgan Thomas (Sydney: Power Publications, 1992) 81-86., Lyotard explores further the relation of the sublime to Kant's later political writings, questions of terror and totalitarianism, fascism and capitalism, and the work of the avant-garde's 'anamnesis', as not exactly a "politics of the sublime" but rather "an aesthetics of the sublime in politics" (p.85), as a resistance both to naziism and globalised capitalism. A further interesting take on the sublime is in the as-yet untranslated essay, Jean-François Lyotard, "La Peinture Du Secret à L'ere Postmoderne: Baruchello," Traverses 30-31 (1984): 95-101. Here Lyotard suggests the possibility, which for him is realised in the work of Gianfranco Baruchello, of finding an alternative sublime to that of the Romantics, and which will be more suited to a 'postmodern' era: one which can be understood in terms of a 'babbling' of images, rather than the Kantian prohibition of representation. Such a sublime, constituted by an infinite profusion of fragments, is rather more playful and less over-serious than the Romantic sublime of Newman and company, and, suggests Lyotard, might serve as a 'laxative' for philosophy. This essay, from a slightly earlier stage in Lyotard's work on the sublime, opens the way to an art of the ridiculous sublime, perhaps in opposition to the more 'serious' work on Newman, which would seek to place an altogether more constipated sublimity of the avant-garde in opposition to the bathos of capitalist culture...

the 'new' that the world of commodities provides us. It is to this distinction that I shall now return, in order to examine the ways in which Lyotard uses it to contrast the temporal logic of the avant-garde to that of capital itself. Does the opposition between the two temporal logics, set up (broadly) in terms of an opposition between high art and mass culture, sustain itself?

I feel impelled to ask this question of Lyotard's essay, not immediately for 'philosophical' reasons, but more because, on the level of its dealings with contemporary art – in its guise as art criticism and as art history – it seems to have a double blindness⁴. This double blindness is perhaps the mark of the essay's genesis as a 'tactical' piece of writing by Lyotard⁵, as a response to the particular situation of the growth in the eighties of 'transavantgarde' art (as it was dubbed by its champion, Bonito Achille Oliva). In Lyotard's writings, this movement, at the centre of a 'big bang' in the art market, seems to be understood as marking a retreat of artists from Adornian positions of aesthetic autonomy which might secure them a place as oppositional to 'capitalism', 'instrumental reason' and the 'culture industry'. With the transavantgarde, Adorno's worst fears about the absorption of art into the commodity and entertainment system might have seemed to have been realised, as their jettisoning of aesthetic autonomy

⁴ I use the term 'double' here (rather than suggesting that there are 'two' blindnesses) to suggest that what we are dealing with here are the two faces of essentially the same figure...

⁵ It has been noted by Meaghan Morris that Lyotard's writings always have this tactical and interventionist quality, and are always formulated as a response to a particular situation. Moreover, she argues, the very heterogeneity of stylistic and formal qualities that we find between Lyotard's works should also be understood as stemming from Lyotard's adaptation of each text to its context and aim. See Meaghan Morris, "Postmodernity and Lyotard's Sublime," *Art & Text* 16 (1984): 49.

coincided with their embrace of (and by) the burgeoning art market.⁶

However, Lyotard's tactical response is not merely a local critique of the transavantgarde in the context of the political and economic turns of the 1980s, but rather takes on the form of a more general philosophical polemic on the mission and legacy of the avant-garde, and on the very nature of discourse itself.⁷ This step beyond the particular and into the generalities of art and of discourse ends up one which is, furthermore, dogmatic and prescriptive: Lyotard is setting out – as a rule and in general – what (modern) art *should* be, and what it should not.

Since my criticism of Lyotard fundamentally springs from my sense of the two facets of what seems to me Lyotard's blindness towards contemporary art practice that I think result from this act of generalisation, I would like briefly to outline what I understand to these blindnesses to be, before going on to discuss the temporality of the sublime in Lyotard's essay.

First, there is the problem of what to do with an artist such as Damien Hirst, whose work is on the one hand undoubtedly the apotheosis of the kind of production most feared and disdained by Lyotard: it is highly accommodated to the market; it functions through the rehashing of old styles and cultural references mixed in with a certain 'shock' of the new – perhaps

⁶ For an book-length critique of the effects of commodification on the art of the 1980s, see, for example, Hal Foster, Recodings : Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics (Port Townsend, Wash.: Bay Press, 1985). As with Lyotard, the 'transavantgarde' gets short shrift. However, although both Foster and Lyotard are in accord in their criticism of commodified art and its ensuing harmonisation with the interests of the economic elite who invest in it, Foster's opposition to this is centrally undertaken in the name of an explicitly politicised oppositional art, rather than an autonomous one.

⁷ There is a certain irony that though Lyotard's essay argues so strongly for the (sensuous) particular, it nonetheless itself does this in the form of a universalisation.

borrowing as much from the 'conceptual' language of advertising as from 'conceptual' art; it is entertaining and spectacular, and blurs the lines between itself and popular culture; it is turned out on a production line, like – in Deleuze and Guattari's much quoted formulation – Ford cars or Prell shampoo⁸. However, I would assert that – in my experience at least – simultaneously, some of Hirst's work (in particular some of his early work) refuses to give me an experience which settles neatly into the known and knowable of my discourse, and continues to haunt me as irreducibly 'odd' and problematic. To note this is to raise the more general problem that Lyotard's polemic would seem to cut out any possibility of a moment of ambiguity of heterogeneity *within* the system of discourse of late capitalist commodity culture. (By the same stroke, such cultural products as pop music and Hollywood cinema would seem to be excluded from having within them the radical potential of the aesthetic that it is the mission of the avant-garde to preserve.) Even if we are to agree with Lyotard that capitalism (as we shall see in my explication of his argument) *tends* to a totalisation which would cut out anything heterogenous to it, are we also compelled to feel that this closure has *already* taken place, and that the cultural products of capitalism no longer foster within them *any* moment of heterogeneity, either (in Marxian terms) any trace of the answer to a 'real need', or (in more Freudian terms) any space in which a 'symptom' might return? Is it not, in fact, in precisely the most accommodated products of capitalist culture that we would expect to find such a symptom, to find the most uncanny – and for

⁸ See also Jean-François Lyotard, "Critical Reflections," Artforum International 29 (1991): 92-3. In this, Lyotard argues even more emphatically for a distinction between the properly aesthetic nature of art and the work that 'cultural' artefacts do.

a commentator who is interested in the nature of such a system, significant – return of what the system cannot entirely exclude?

The second peculiarity about Lyotard's essay, written as it is in the early 1980s, (it was first published in the April 1984 issue of Artforum⁹, translated into English), is that it is not *just* the market-oriented art of the transavantgarde which seems to become excluded by him from the proper continuation of the task of the avant-garde. By the logic of the essay, the 'oppositional' art of the moment, tied as it was to critiques of contemporary culture from marginalised positions (articulated around questions of class, gender, race, colony and sexuality, for example), with its specifically political and critical projects, also starts to seem somewhat excluded from the proper continuation of the tradition of the avant-garde. This was the very art which actually was at that moment actively setting itself in opposition to the logic of the art market and its depoliticising effects, and seeking alternative means of production and distribution that would allow a voicing of the concerns of those marginalised and erased by the very procedures of the expansion of late capitalism which Lyotard laments in the book The Inhuman.¹⁰ This

⁹ Jean-François Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-garde", Art Forum 22.8 (April 1984): 36-43. In what follows, quotations from the essay will be from the version which appears in The Inhuman, and in lengthier passages of exposition both of this essay and of others from this book, where the source is obvious, the page numbers will simply follow in brackets in the body of the text, rather than being given in a footnote.

¹⁰ It is in this book which his essay on "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde" was to find its place, and thus in a sense, it is these marginalised and erased people in whose name the essay seeks to articulate a critique of the totalising logic of late capital. Earlier in the book, in the essay "Time Today," Lyotard has written, of the violently self-totalising logic of late capital, thus: "When the point is to extend the capacities of the [infinitely expanding] monad [of late capitalism], it seems reasonable to abandon, or even actually destroy, those parts of the human race which appear superfluous, useless for that goal. For example, the populations of the

politicised art – in contrast to the ‘ex minimis’¹¹ formalism which Lyotard sees as proper to the avant-garde – was pursuing a line of action which involved processes of ‘deconstruction’ of the semiotics of capitalism, and the taking of polemical positions against it. It thus seemed to eschew the kinds of aesthetic practices, the attentiveness to the abstract aporia of the contentless [??] ‘event’ which Lyotard (as we shall see over the next few pages) seems to be espousing, and to be diving into more determinate procedures of ‘speaking’ discourse. These artists would seem, in Lyotard’s terms, to be engaging in what, in his essay “Critical Reflections,” he wants to define, in opposition to the aesthetic, as ‘cultural work,’¹² and thus confusing this with the “fundamental task” of the avant-garde in its aesthetic resistance to the rationalising forces of capitalism through “bearing pictorial or otherwise expressive witness to the inexpressible.”¹³

This double blindness starts to look even more odd if we consider the fact – one that will perhaps only seem paradoxical if we accept, *tout court*, Lyotard’s analysis that the sublime, as a disruption in the smooth functioning of capitalism’s rational calculus of profitability, is fundamentally subversive – that there is more interest in producing the kinds of effect of the ‘sublime’ (of the introduction of the ‘inexpressible’ into discourse, throwing us into the ‘now’) in a capitalist art such as Damien Hirst’s than in the work of those that sought to resist the totalisations of capitalism’s discourses. I am not bringing up this *interest* of capitalist art in the sublime in order to make a value

Third World.” Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991) 76-7.

¹¹ Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde,” 103.

¹² Lyotard, “Critical Reflections,” 92.

¹³ Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde,” 93.

judgement, not to suggest that any such capitalist art 'is' sublime, or that it 'does' achieve a Lyotardian rupture in the fabric of hegemonic discourse more effectively than left-politicised art, but rather simply to raise the fact that in the rhetoric of an artist such as Damien Hirst, this desire to 'blow us away', to place us in a contemplative state of speechless wonder beyond words is much more pronounced than in the works of the more solidly left-wing artists, at the very least in recent art history, who have tended to suggest that their aims are to return an audience to a critical and rational state. In this, there is a kind of *desire* for the sublime which is inscribed in the machinations of the art market, and such a desire is highly marketable¹⁴.

Lyotard's own essay is fascinating in the way that, although explicitly designed to exclude such a possibility, it does itself raise the spectre of a desire for the sublime in the function of the art market; it is only through tracing the contradictions of his presentation of this desire, as shall become the central task of this section of my dissertation on Lyotard, that the seeming paradox of Lyotard's double-blindness might start to dissolve.

Given this paradox, what finally makes me centrally suspicious of the conclusions which Lyotard comes to is, firstly, the way that his conclusions – involving such a privileging of the aesthetic over the 'cultural work' of art – might in the end line his essay up, despite itself, with the functions of an art market more interested in sublimity than the 'oppositional' art of the time.

¹⁴ An example of this in Hirst's rhetoric: in an interview with Gordon Burns. Hirst extols the virtue of art "that really knocks your fucking socks off" - and goes on to note that it is this art that will attract the collectors such as Saatchi... Hirst and Burns, "The Naked Hirst (Part 2)." Guardian 6 Oct 2001, online ed. <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/weekend/story/0,3605,564027,00.html>> visited 12/01/05

Such an accord with the conservatism of the eighties is further marked by the consequent marginalisation of such an oppositional art from his account, a marginalisation which itself seems to find itself in accord with those elements of the discourse of the right of the eighties which were seeking increasingly to close over the positions from which such oppositional art was being produced. In fact, Lyotard's account, in its alignment with a fairly orthodox Eurocentric (and also rather glib) version of the history of modern art, starts to seem itself to be closing over these artists and movements: there are, for example, no black or Asian artists in the genealogy of the avant-garde that he sets out (stretching from Cezanne to Buren), and no women; they are all artists from the developed West. This is of course, hardly coincidental; the politicised artists of the seventies and eighties who came from outside this tradition of the Western art world seem to have found the art world's introspective reflection on its 'autonomous' history useless – if not inimical – to the voicing of their concerns, and in return, they find their work written out of a canon of modern art which wishes to keep within the terms of such a tradition of Western art theory. In Lyotard's continuation of this tradition, he continues to write them out of its history. The possibility of what Hal Foster calls (in the preface to the collection of essays entitled The Anti-Aesthetic) a "critical" or "oppositional postmodernism" (in contrast to the co-opted, capitalist postmodernisms which have embraced the cultural logic of late capitalism¹⁵) simply disappears from Lyotard's account, along with the work of a generation (and more) of oppositional artists.

¹⁵ "...Postmodernism is publicly regarded (no doubt vis-à-vis postmodern architecture) as a necessary turn towards 'tradition'. Briefly, then, I want to sketch

It is these misgivings about Lyotard's conclusions, and about his engagement with the politics of the art which was contemporary to his essay, that lead me into the need for a reappraisal of the intricacies of the 'philosophical' workings of the essay, which are rich and seductive on so many levels. On the one hand, there is the philosophical richness of the essay: it is quite simply one of those essays whose claim to genuine thought is marked by a depth in the body of the text which goes far beyond any conclusions to which the essay comes, or positions which it takes up. But the essay also holds another kind of attraction through its leftist, post-Marxist politics, offering a chilling (but grand) vision of the evils of capitalism as a form of modern, instrumentalising rationality, and of a proper mode of 'resistance' through intellectual and artistic work, which can only be the more seductive to those – such as me – whose livings (and lives) are invested in such domains. It is perhaps at this level – at the level of a set of assumptions and desires which I find myself sharing with the essay – that the essay (and my own investment in it) most demands critique, a working-through, a brushing against the grain, and this shall be the job of what follows.

Lyotard and the temporality of the sublime

As I have already outlined briefly, in his essay Lyotard sets up the "new" and the "now" as two different and opposing temporal logics of the movement of

an oppositional postmodernism [...] In cultural politics today, a basic opposition exists between a postmodernism which seeks to deconstruct modernism and resist the status-quo and a postmodernism which repudiated the former in order to celebrate the latter: a postmodernism of resistance and a postmodernism of reaction." Hal Foster, ed., Postmodern Culture (London and Sydney: Pluto Press, 1985) xi-xii.

discourse. The 'now' involves a break in the flow of discourse, where it is forced to confront its other (in Lyotard's terms, something like the *différend*, what cannot be spoken, a muteness outside language) a moment in which the speaking and knowing subject is faced with the very aporia from which discourse comes into being: a moment of "Is it – is *something* – is *anything* – happening?" (rather than "Such-and such is happening," or even "Is *this thing* happening?").

The new, in opposition to this, which towards the end of the essay Lyotard associates with the working of discourse under capitalism, is associated with notions of *innovation* and *information*, and seems to involve a more sure-footed movement of discourse through the known, the already-knowable, and the already-speakable, a movement which seems to cover over, to colonise or erase the moment of doubt from which Lyotard suggests speech must (or should?) spring. The difference is essentially one which is familiar in the tradition of Romantic and post-Romantic aesthetics as that between the indeterminate judgement of the aesthetic, and the determinate judgements of the understanding as it subjects the particulars of sensory experience to the 'universals' of its concepts.¹⁶

¹⁶ This distinction, it hardly needs noting stems centrally from Kant's exposition of aesthetic judgement in the third *Critique*. However, Lyotard seems to be writing in particular within a heritage that reads Kant through Nietzsche and, in turn, especially through Heidegger's reappraisal of Nietzsche's reading of Kant. It is of course, Heidegger that Lyotard cites as his source for a notion of the aesthetic as an 'event', an '*Ereignis*.' For Heidegger, such an aesthetic event involves an ethical relation to the otherness of the world which will not submit it to the violences of conceptual and instrumental reason, to technology, and involves a kind of openness to and 'being with' (*Mitsein*) what we are not. See especially Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, trans. David Farrell Krell, vol. I: The Will to Power as Art (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1961) 107-14.

The essay, in its articulation of the nature of the sublime 'event' and its temporality, takes the form of a spiral, tracing the notion of the 'now' at each turn of its arm across a series of philosophical and historical contexts. Lyotard starts by opening the question up through an encounter with the work (both in painting and writing) of Barnett Newman, and the moment of presence-without-representation (of another, external time or place to that of the encounter of the artwork) which Newman theorises in his now-famous article, "The Sublime Is Now",¹⁷ and in the encounter which he stages in his paintings between the viewer and the direct materiality of the flat and non-representational surface of the picture. Lyotard then traces the philosophical and artistic provenance of this 'nowness', circling through a series of different moments or contexts, first discussing it in terms of a general theory of the temporality of discursivity and its confrontation with that which escapes it; then turning to a history of the emergence of a temporality of the 'now' in writings on the notion of the sublime, tracing forms of this 'now' as sublime through Longinus, Boileau, Burke, and Diderot to Kant; and then tracing the lineage of the 'now' in the form of the successive 'ex minimis' revolts of avant-garde art in the twentieth century against each formulation of the minimum requirements for artistic experience. He finally turns to the 'attacks' on this avant-garde tradition (as one which preserves the uncertainty of the

¹⁷ Barnett Newman, "The Sublime Is Now," Art in Theory 1900-90: An Anthology of Changing Ideas, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) 572-74. Originally published as Barnett Newman, "The Sublime Is Now," Tiger's Eye 1.6 (1948): 51-3. Newman writes: "We do not need the obsolete props of an outmoded and antiquated legend. We are creating images whose reality is self-evident and which are devoid of the props and crutches that evoke associations with outmoded images, both sublime and beautiful. We are freeing ourselves from the impediments of memory, association, nostalgia, legend, myth [...]" (Art in Theory, 574).

‘Is it happening?’) first by the totalitarian states of the first half of the century, and more recently (“ ‘directly’ ”)¹⁸ by “market economics” itself. It is in this final section that Lyotard most emphatically sets the temporality of the now against the temporality which he dubs that of the ‘new’, associating the former with the avant-garde, and the latter with the workings of capital and the culture industry. My first task in what follows, shall be an explication of this section, in order to tease out quite what is at stake in it, in particular with respect to the problem I have already raised as to the relations between the sublime (the event) and capitalist, commodified culture. In order to unpack what he writes at this point in the essay, however, I shall also need to then go back and place it in the context of the more general theory of the temporality of discourse’s confrontation with its other, which Lyotard sets up towards the start of the essay, mapping the last arm of Lyotard’s spiral, as it were, onto the first.

the temporality of the new

(As we have noted,) the logic of the ‘new’, suggests Lyotard, is one that can be identified with three terms: ‘*information*’, ‘*innovation*’ and ‘*capital*’; in fact, as his account develops, it becomes clear that for Lyotard, the temporal logic of the ‘new’ turns out to stem from the *conjunction* (under the socio-economic and technical conditions of the ‘system’ of late capitalism) of the three.

¹⁸ Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," 104. Lyotard places the word in scare quotes.

But Lyotard's account takes a further step, not merely suggesting that the three things are linked, but can also to an extent, under this temporal logic, be equated. Or, better still: that the nature of the link between these terms is their incorporation into a system – at once 'cybernetic', economic and communicational – within which information, innovation and capital have become *exchangeable* for each other.... We find, then, at the heart of the regime of the 'new', a single temporal logic which ties together flows of capital, information and (scientific, technological, linguistic, artistic, etc.) innovations. Not only do these things flow in a similar way, but they flow together, stimulating each other and serving to exchange for each other.¹⁹

For Lyotard this temporality is precipitated by the development, under the conditions of late capitalism, of an information economy, as "work becomes a control and manipulation of information" and "the availability of information becomes the only criterion of social importance" (p.105). 'Information' and economic value have become inextricably linked, inasmuch as information itself has become a form of capital – a form, perhaps the primary form, of value – in late-twentieth-century society.

Within such an economy, 'information' is bound to newness by the brevity of its life: it is 'information' only for the brief moment of exchange in which it is unknown to its recipient; as long, in other words, as it is not that which can be taken for granted, an "environmental given". (p.105)

¹⁹ See also, Jean-François Lyotard, The Differend : Phrases in Dispute, Theory and History of Literature ; V. 46 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988) 173 passim., where Lyotard makes it clear that capitalism is to be understood as the hegemony of the phrase 'genre' of economic exchange: everything is to be reduced to its exchangeability, all phrases are to be subjected to this law of exchange.

Therefore in a (capitalist) information economy, in order to preserve one's investment in information – in order for one's investment not to evaporate along with the novelty of the information –, that information, in its brief lifespan, needs to produce further (new) pieces of information, which can in turn be invested.²⁰ The time of information is thus not simply that of a unique event, but of the dynamics of the movement between one piece of information and the next. The stakes here are that movement from one piece of information to the next must proceed quickly, and with maximised certainty of a result.

What is at stake in this movement of information – and the nature of the intimacy between capital, information and innovation – becomes clear in Lyotard's account of the burgeoning art market of the 1980s, which seems to have produced a 'formula' for profitable innovation, a formula which Lyotard understands in terms of just this kind of information theory.

Under this regime, in order to be a "success" (p.106) art must strike a balance between providing some form of "innovation" and giving the audience something familiar through which to start to make sense of this 'new' thing. In Lyotard's informational terms, the artist must mix " 'Strong' information", which is irreducible to the audience's "code" with that which is familiar and manageable within that code. He writes: "The secret of an artistic

²⁰ It is, of course, here that Hirst's shark is an apt image. A number of commentators on the image have noted the now almost-conventional equation between the shark, which needs to be in constant movement to keep living, and the nature of capital itself, the value of which would also collapse if it were to come to rest. An economy based on investment needs to give a return; it must necessarily be an economy of perpetual growth; it is condemned to the perpetual restlessness of the mythical shark; a restlessness whose uncanny reminder we are faced with as we walk around the faces of Hirst's huge tank producing the illusion that the shark is momentarily set in motion...

success, like that of a commercial success, resides in the balance between what is surprising and what is 'well-known', between information and code.” (p.106) Lyotard goes on to use this to account for the eclectic, citational nature of the art of the transavantgarde: “This is how innovation in art operates: one re-uses formulae confirmed by previous success, one throws them off balance by combining them with other, in principle incompatible, formulae, by amalgamations, quotations, ornamentations, pastiche.” (p.106)

What starts to emerge here is an image of an art which has become reduced to a kind of speculation in the realm of images or artistic gestures. There seems to be a certain 'investment' in the images of the past, and also in artistic 'innovations' which will provide the novelty which will (hopefully) guarantee the success – the profitability – of the new product.²¹ It need only produce the movement, the flow (of dollars, images, information and innovation) which capital with its logic of investment – and information with its brevity – demand.

Lyotard's description of such a logic, and the appeal that he makes to 'cybernetic', 'information' or 'systems' theory in order to make it, also needs

²¹ What is perhaps frightening about the image with which Lyotard presents us is that for this art, as a kind of system of investment – a machine to produce and increase value through the circulation of images, signs, information, novelty, and of course capital – its 'content' or 'substance' can be entirely arbitrary. Though it might be well to note that it was not perhaps merely the 'arbitrariness' of such an art that caused left-leaning critics problems with it. In Hal Foster's *Recodings*, for example, he makes it clear that the kinds of sign that come to the fore in such affirmative forms of the 'postmodern' art and architecture of pastiche are precisely those of Western hegemonic tradition: a resurrection of national myths (in an unpleasant echo of fascistic art), primitivism, gendered stereotypes, etc.: in short, expressions of all of the hegemonic ideologies of the Conservative world view that supported the Reagan-Thatcher revolution... In fact, as we shall see, it is also perhaps not quite just this arbitrariness which Lyotard seems to find problematic, although at this point, Lyotard's opposition between 'noise' and “ 'strong' information' ” might seem to suggest such a position.

to be put in context of the broader project into which it fits. Although first published in the art magazine Artforum, marking it as an intervention into the critical discourse around contemporary art and its production, the essay also found its place in the book The Inhuman, which collects together a series of Lyotard's writings from this period (mid-to-late eighties) which, although they are in the main each a response to a particular invitation to speak or write, gather themselves together through a shared concern with the possibilities of resistance to the 'inhuman', ('cybernetic') system of late capitalism and to what Lyotard understands as its increasing power and drive to reduce everything to its terms and its ends, either annihilating or erasing anything which does not fit into its 'project' of infinite expansion.

This 'system' has obvious overtones of Adorno and Horkheimer's seminal analysis of a 'dialectic of Enlightenment'²², in which the development of 'reason' (especially the techno-scientific, 'instrumental' reason developed in the Enlightenment period) in order to conquer nature and 'liberate' humankind from the thrall of its necessity also, however, operates by a symmetrical subjugation of humankind's 'inner nature' and ends up subjugating what is truly human in us to the new necessities of its own imperatives: efficiency, control, productivity, and so on.²³ Under the reign of

²² Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno and Max Horkheimer, Dialectic of Enlightenment, trans. John Cumming, Verso Classics; 15 (London & New York: Verso, 1999).

²³ This account is, of course, itself a reworking, in Marxist terms, of Freud's argument in "Civilisation and Its Discontents," of the increasing demands of repression which civilisation requires of us, demands which increase in proportion to the growth of the complexity of society, and in particular in proportion to the demands industrialisation. Sigmund Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents, trans. David McLintock, The New Penguin Freud (London: Penguin, 2002). Lyotard himself nods back to Freud in his introduction to The Inhuman, noting that "Discontent grows with this civilisation" (p.2), and going on to discuss the tyranny of the system

such a system of ‘instrumental’ reason, human beings become themselves mere instruments. In Lyotard’s account, this system of instrumental reason, under the auspices of late capitalism and its development of information technologies, has only become the more inhuman, taking on the terrifying guise of a cybernetic organism; hence the appeal to theories of information and cybernetics to account for its flow.

For Lyotard, then, humanity has been “pregnant” (p.65) with this monstrous cyborg-child of capital and its “techno-scientific apparatus” (p.67), which he describes, in Leibnizian terms as “the most complete monad” (p.65): “Leibniz could have said of this process that it is on the way to producing a monad more complete than humanity itself has ever [been] able to be” (p.64).²⁴

in terms of castration. (p.4-5). Paul Harris has, for example, gone as far as to suggest that The Inhuman might have better been titled “Thought and Its Discontents.” See Paul Harris, “Thinking @ the Speed of Time: Globalization and Its Discontents or, Can Lyotard’s Thought Go on without a Body,” Yale French Studies 99 (2001): 133. In thus dubbing it, Harris suggests perceptively that Lyotard’s essay’s innovation in the reiteration of this theme is to make ‘thought’ primary to this process of repression and discontent, rather than ‘civilisation’ or ‘capitalism’ (*etc.*) It is emphatically a (philosophical) form of thought or discourse which is centrally the problem and which causes a violence which is centrally also a violence on thought itself.

²⁴ It is worth noting already, since this is something to which we shall return, that the fictional form on which this image of monstrous technological birth rests takes us back to the Gothic horror of Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein. Gothic fiction – and perhaps in particular Mary Shelley’s Gothic imagination – provides the imaginary on which Lyotard’s book repeatedly and insistently rests. In an echo of the apocalyptic visions of another of Shelley’s books, The Last Man (Mary Shelley, The Last Man (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965).), Lyotard sets this up from the outset of The Inhuman (in the chapter entitled “Can Thought Go on Without a Body”) with the scenario of the end of the world and of the human, which the cooling of the Sun would seem to make inevitable. (This precise scenario would situate the work even better as a descendent of Byron’s 1816 poem “Darkness,” – available in The Poetical Works of Lord Byron (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1945), 95-6 – which also imagines the end of humanity in the guise of the death of the solar system.) In Lyotard’s narrative, such an end is then collapsed into the figure of Frankenstein’s monster, since it will involve the birth of the monstrous technological monad of thought without a body. Such a collapse of the figure of the monster and of the end

Furthermore, the purpose and functioning of this monad are no longer at the service of the human; it proceeds by a logic neither of whose 'aims nor origins' are properly ours any more. This monad is a "monad in expansion" (p.67) - its logic is to grow, to totalise itself and to bring itself to the point where it can completely master the future. To do this such a monad must master time, setting up a distinctive relation between present and future, which Lyotard identifies (pp.65-6) as that same logic in capitalist exchange whereby a good or service is provided to another only on the understanding

of the human is itself enacted in the imagery of The Last Man, which (as Vijay Mishra notes) repeats a series of motifs from Frankenstein, (see Mishra pp. 175, where he notes that the connections between the two novels is "much more direct and explicit than hitherto made out by critics", and the following pages where he notes, for example, similarities between Frankenstein's dream on creating the monster and Verney's dream in The Last Man of an "empty, plague-ridden city." (Mishra, p.175.)) Mary Shelley, however, also makes the link more explicit, calling the plague that will destroy mankind an "invincible monster" (The Last Man, p.160, cited by Mishra, p.182). In Mishra's analysis, the monster and the end of humanity are, for Mary Shelley, united in a logic of Gothically sublime, 'decreation', an inhuman annihilation of the purposes and faculties of the human which reveals our insignificance and contingency within a vast and awfully indifferent nature, and an expression of an Oceanic death-wish present even within humanity. Mishra's essay is also useful in sketching out further a lineage of such apocalyptic Gothic imaginings, including for example Jean-Baptiste Cousin de Grainville's Le Dernier Homme (1805), and John Martin's The Last Man paintings, and stretching back through William Godwin's speculations in his Enquiry Concerning Political Justice (1793) and even to James Thomson's The Seasons. See Vijay Mishra, The Gothic Sublime, S.U.N.Y. Series on the Sublime (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994) 157-86. Such apocalyptic imaginings were supported both by the growth throughout the eighteenth-century of a popular sensibility towards the time-scale of the rise and fall of civilisations, and can be placed within the larger Romantic genre of the Ruin, but also firstly within the larger (Copernican) shift to Newtonian understandings of infinite space and time, which fostered a sense of the smallness and marginality of the human within the Universe, and secondly by the growing awareness, in the wake of Burnett's Sacred Theory of the Earth and subsequent developments in geology, that the history of the Earth has, in any case, been characterised by repeated catastrophic upheavals and extinctions. The influence of these changes in our awareness of our place in the Universe on the growth of the notion of the sublime has been brilliantly documented in Marjorie Hope Nicolson, Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory : The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite, Weyerhaeuser Environmental Classics (Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, 1997). [these points may seem a little tangential at the moment, but are in any case of vital importance!]

that a reciprocal transaction is *certain* to happen in the future, “to such a point that it can be considered to already have happened.” (p.66) Such a relation involves a collapse into the present of the future; but it also means the development of a system of ‘information’ by which the monad can already know and control the ‘future’ as fully as possible; it must invest the resources of the present into prediction in order to foreclose the contingency of any ‘event’ that might cut out its control of the future. As Lyotard writes: “the more complete the monad, the more the incoming event is neutralised. For a monad supposed to be perfect, like God, there are in the end no bits of information at all. God has nothing to learn. In the mind of God, the Universe is instantaneous.” (p.65) It is such a God-like, omniscient and precognisant being that the “monad in expansion” seeks to be.

For Lyotard, the price which ‘humanity’ must pay in the present (or perhaps, rather, which another form of the inhuman, one directly opposed to the ‘inhumanity’ of the cyborgian monad, an inhumanity similar to that which Freud identifies as the *id*,²⁵ must pay) is awful: Lyotard asks:

Where can [the imperatives of the monad in expansion] come from, if it is true that these results are not always profitable to humanity in general, nor even to the fraction of humanity supposed to benefit directly from them? Why do we have to save money and time to the point where this imperative seems like the law of our lives? Because saving (at the level of the system as a whole) allows the system to increase the quantity of money given over to anticipating the future. This is particularly the case

²⁵ See esp. p.2 *passim*. Lyotard writes that there are “two sorts of inhuman. It is indispensable to keep them dissociated. The inhumanity of the system which is currently being consolidated under the name of development (among others) must not be confused with the infinitely secret one of which the soul is hostage [...] [, an] unknown guest which is agitating [thought], sending it delirious but also making it think.” The purpose of Lyotard’s introduction is to oppose the ‘inhumanity’ of the ‘system’ whilst escaping a humanist rhetoric, and thus it is that it is another inhumanity which is pitted against it... The logic of humanist arguments, for Lyotard, has itself been transformed (or turns out to always have secretly been) the means by which the ‘inhumanity’ of the system propagates itself...

with the capital invested in research and development. The enjoyment of humanity must be sacrificed to the interests of the monad in expansion. (p.67)

Indeed, as Lyotard notes a few pages later, “When the point is to extend the capacities of the monad, it seems reasonable to abandon, or even actively to destroy, those parts of the human race which appear superfluous, useless for that goal. For example, the populations of the Third World.” (p.76)

The project which gathers together the essays in The Inhuman, then, is on the one hand an analysis of this totalising temporality of the ‘monad in expansion’, and the ways in which it forecloses and destroys that which does not harmonise with its function. It is also – in the name of the *id*, human enjoyment, and people such as those of the Third World – to identify and preserve that which opposes or resists this logic of the techno-scientific-capitalist monad. Thus in his introduction, Lyotard notes that, “I do not like this haste [of the monad’s form of discourse, which hastens to determination]. What it hurries and crushes, is what after the fact I find I have always tried, under diverse headings – work, figural, heterogeneity, dissensus, event, thing – to reserve: the unharmonisable.” (p.4)

In the context of such a project, we can understand the art market’s imperative towards investment in artistic ‘innovation’ as something which also ensures the expansion of the art system as a whole, and which functions by just this totalising, expanding logic of the ‘monad in expansion’. The difference for Lyotard between the haste and sureness of result involved in the movement of artistic statements under its regime, and those which might be properly avant-garde, is perhaps best expressed by that between two

modes (determinate and indeterminate) of thought's relation to the future coming-into-sense of its material, which Lyotard suggests in the introduction: this is the distinction between "a senseless difference *destined* to make sense as opposition in a system" and one which is "*promised* to the becoming-system." (p.4, emphasis Lyotard's)²⁶ The art of the 'new' is thus art which is not merely destined to come into meaning, but which is promised to the system as meaningful. It is calculated in advance, in terms of the certainty of its future value, and the certainty that it will produce 'new' artistic statements after it, if not precisely within the same code (for innovation in the code remains part of the programme²⁷) but within the same rules of the 'language game' of altering the code to create new meanings, new conjunctions of signs. ("innovating means to behave as though lots of things happened, and to make them happen." p.107)

²⁶ But how secure *is* the difference between that which is destined and that which is promised? Between something which serves as opposition *to* a system, and an opposition which plays a part as opposition *within* such a system? Is the shakiness of the distinction (evidenced by the rather emotive terms 'promise' and 'destiny') what comes apart somewhat in Lyotard's account of discourse at the start of "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde."? The answer, which is rather outside the scope of the present analysis, would revolve around Lyotard's earlier work, in particular *Discours, Figure*, where, in less emotive or colourful language than 'promise' and 'destiny', he opposes the 'differences' we find in the world to the set of 'oppositions' that signification imposes on them. For a summary of these arguments, see Bill Readings, *Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics*, Critics of the Twentieth Century, ed. Christopher Norris (London and New York: Routledge, 1991) 13-17.

²⁷ the new is not simply interested in following given rules (as with Greenberg's 'Alexandrianism' in Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford and Malden: Blackwell, 1992) 530.) - instead, it *must* produce new products. But this imperative towards the new means that it must set up some *procedures* which will produce these new products, or new forms. (We are talking then, not the 'codes' of a semiotics, but the (pragmatic) 'rules' of a language game). The economic (and cybernetic) stakes of the system are that it cannot afford to fail to produce the new; it cannot afford the risk of nothing happening. It must thus close over the aporia of the 'Is it happening?' This places it in opposition to the now, where this aporia is welcomed...

In opposition to this logic of the 'new', Lyotard would like to set up the logic of the 'now', the logic proper to the avant-garde. Thus as Lyotard moves to wind up "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde", he sets the two apart, in opposition to each other. The logic of the avant-garde, of the now, of the aesthetic moment, turns out to be an instance of the 'unharmonisable', an important moment which must be preserved: "The occurrence, the *Ereignis* has nothing to do with the *petit frisson*, the cheap thrill, the profitable pathos, that accompanies innovation." (p.106) The logic of the 'now', in opposition to the 'new', is that this system of onward movement is halted. Something occurs which is not determinable in advance; the speculations on the future of techno-scientific, informational capital are endangered. Lyotard further underlines the difference:

Through innovation, the will affirms its hegemony over time. It thus conforms to the metaphysics of capital, which is a technology of time. The innovation 'works'. The question mark of the '*Is it happening?*' stops. With the occurrence the will is defeated. (p.107)

Such an event involves an opening onto the heterogeneous, space for the return of what the 'system' might exclude from coming to representation, that which is heterologous to it.²⁸

²⁸ It is also worth noting that in this, Lyotard is proposing the art and the aesthetic of the sublime as a model for philosophical thought, which is also faced with the ethical imperative to attend to the aporia of the event, to the unspeakable and unharmonisable. The essay, then, has a double function: both as an injunction to artists with regard to the form of art they should produce (and, in extension, to critics, with regard to how they should judge art), but also to philosophers with regard to the kind of philosophy they should practice. This latter function of the essay would seem to be the prominent one, when we consider that it is on the level of 'thought' that Lyotard seems to locate the nature of the inhuman system and the resistance to this - thought which either ossifies into self-perpetuating, sealed systems, or which welcomes the event. For an account of Lyotard's placing of 'thought' at the centre of the problem of capitalism, see for example, Harris, "Thinking," 129-48. On the central stake of Lyotard's essay being a *philosophy*

Is the 'new' the new 'now'?

But Lyotard himself has to acknowledge – it would seem in spite of his own argument – that the differentiation which he sets up between the temporality of the new and the now (in other words, that of capital's temporal logic of techno-science and that of the avant-garde) is inherently unstable. There is a peculiar, ambivalent “collusion” (p.105) between the two, and Lyotard notes that “The correlation between [market economics] and the sublime is ambiguous, even perverse.” (p.105)²⁹ For Lyotard, modernist art, with its pursuit of the sublime, may stand in opposition to the instrumental and “positivist” rationality of techno-scientific, post-Enlightenment modern thought; however, in a number of places, even as he attempts to expound the differences between the two forms of thought, the two categories seem to start to slip and slide into each other.

Lyotard himself notes a first reason for this: the form of thought proper to the avant-garde is in fact entirely reliant on the economic, social and cultural form of capital. To break away from an Alexandrian obeisance to an

which takes the aesthetic of the sublime as its model see Wilhelm S. Wurzer, "Lyotard, Kant, and the in-Finite," *Lyotard: Philosophy, Politics, and the Sublime*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman, Continental Philosophy (New York and London: Routledge, 2002) 201-12. (esp. 201-3)

²⁹ Of course, to note the ambivalent relation between the avant-garde and the bourgeoisie, or capital is hardly a new thing; it is something of a commonplace in Marx-influenced criticism to note, as Greenberg does in “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” that the avant-garde is tied to the bourgeoisie by the “umbilical cord” of money (Greenberg, "Avant-Garde," 533.), and that as a result there is a certain complexity in their social function: as both rebels against the rational order of modern life, who keep alive the ‘promise of happiness’ which remains a utopian image to counter the unfreedom of the present, and yet who are also producers of (the ultimate) luxury commodities (ultimate because they have no use value, only exchange value) for the bourgeoisie, and, in Bourdieu's terms, who serve to provide them with the “cultural capital” which serves to reinforce their hegemony through the appearance of the naturalness of their superiority.

eternal set of ‘rules’ of art, the avant-garde relies on the “force of scepticism and even destruction³⁰ that capitalism has brought into play” (p.105), and it is this that encourages in artists “a willingness to experiment with means of expression, with styles and with ever new materials.” (p.105)

Without wishing to reduce the one to the effect of the other, it could also be noted that, furthermore, these very characteristics of what in the broadest sense could be termed ‘avant-gardist’ art – experimentation, scepticism, heterodoxy – are those which are fostered within the shift away from a system of patronage towards a ‘market’ economics of art, an economics in which the artwork is a commodity and the relation between buyer and seller is impersonal and abstract. This severed the ties which held the work of art in the thrall of tradition and of a stable order of things.³¹

³⁰ I wonder if this mention of ‘destruction’ as a principle motive force and operating principle of capital nods towards Bataille’s theory that behind what appears to be the ‘restrictive economy’ of liberalist economic theory, which is ostensibly oriented towards growth and production, lies a ‘general economy’ in which the ultimate destiny of all activity is not the stockpiling of energy, but its discharge; not production but consumption. See Georges Bataille, The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy, trans. Robert Hurley, vol. 1: Consumption, 3 vols. (New York: Zone Books, 1988). esp. Part 1, “Theoretical Introduction”: 19-41. As this section of my essay develops, Bataille’s account will become central in my attempt to understand Lyotard’s vision of capitalism.

³¹ The transformation of British art in response to its new economic conditions, the new audiences opened up for art by these transformations in the eighteenth century, and the new conception of the ‘public’ that accompanies them can be understood to be the subject of David H. Solkin, Painting for Money : The Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century England (New Haven: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 1993). Solkin understands the central dilemma for eighteenth-century art as how to reconcile this notion of the ‘public’, constituted by the market, with a notion of it as a political or national ‘public’ (or in other words with the notion of the ‘public’ expressed in phrases such as ‘the public good’.) He traces the permutations of eighteenth-century British art’s different solutions to the way that these two can be reconciled or opposed to create an art within a commercial culture which plays a political (usually nationalist-ideological) function. In these terms, the new conditions of capitalism and economic imperialism (nationalism) are generative of a profusion of new forms of art and of its display throughout the eighteenth century – a profusion of forms, which, if we extrapolate from Solkin’s more historically focused account, might be understood as culminating, as the nineteenth

Commodification is in fact very much the other face of art's 'autonomy' itself.³² Such commodification, such a logic of the new, is, in this sense, the precondition of the emergence of the concern for the 'now' in modern art.

century develops, in, amongst other things, the separation of 'serious' art from increasingly spectacularised entertainment cultures, each with their own resolution of the antinomy between the two notions of the 'public', and each of which only resolves the contradiction through its difference to the other... Solkin's account is obviously indebted to the classic formulation of the notion of the growth of a 'public sphere' by Jürgen Habermas (in Jürgen Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society, Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought (Cambridge: Polity, 1989).). The interest of Solkin's account for me lies precisely in the way that the double notion of the public (as individual consumer and as collectivity) becomes so apparent in it. Habermas himself, when discussing the 'public' of art, seems to downplay any connotations of the public as consumer, in order to privilege the constitution of the public as critical, political entity. (see esp. Habermas, Structural Transformation, 34-43). In his idealisation of the public sphere, and of the eighteenth-century notion of 'public', Habermas also seems to dissociate it somewhat from the almost-ubiquitous nationalist function of the term. Although Solkin perhaps over-stresses the notion of the invention of the 'public sphere' (*à la* Habermas) as a radical break with past artistic practices, this question of the way that eighteenth-century thought had to negotiate as one of its fundamental ideological contradictions this figure of the 'public' as both constituted by a political collectivity with its ethical demands, and by the collection of individual interests, is also given further weight by the parallel to De Bolla's tracing of this question in writings on the skyrocketing national debt during the Seven-Year War. For De Bolla, the question of the sublime and the logics of discourse that were unleashed in thought about the sublime – logics of affective, discursive and economic excess and of the marking of the place of the modern 'individualist' subject by this excess, and questions as to how these excesses are to be managed, channelled and contained – are centrally involved in this discourse. Peter De Bolla, The Discourse of the Sublime: Readings in History, Aesthetics and the Subject. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989) 103-41 [this note is obviously somewhat tangential at this point, but these issues will be important to my overall argument later in the essay]

³² I make this – perhaps over-grand – claim in the face of the tradition of (post-) Romantic aesthetics, which has consistently from Kant onwards understood artistic autonomy or freedom largely as a freedom or autonomy in regard to the realm of labour and the marketplace: see for example the definition of art as 'free' as opposed to handicraft (or 'industrial art') which is made for profit in §43 the Third Critique. It is, however, just this passage from which Derrida starts in "Economimesis", an essay in which he teases out the way that covertly the political and economic ideology of liberalism animates Kant's discourse. If ostensibly fine art (or free art) seems to be a point beyond the economic and outside economic calculation and its labour relations, in fact it is the lynchpin of a complex ideological justification of the notion of freedom which guarantees the subject of bourgeois exchange... The essay starts: "Under the cover of a controlled indeterminacy, pure morality and empirical culturalism are allied in the Kantian critique of pure judgements of taste. A politics, therefore, although it never occupies the centre of

In this case, the phenomenon of the commodification of art is hardly new with the transavantgarde, and is in fact inherent in the earliest forms of 'modernist' and 'avant-garde' art. An account (as well as an instance) of this logic of commodification, and of the 'new', inherent in the novel forms of literary production which were already coming to be called 'Modern' is to be found at least as early as Pope's satirical poems. Furthermore, in Pope we already find an expression of the unease that such novel forms of poetry might foster corrosive powers of scepticism, and of the fear that in their quest for novelty they are finally going to throw us into that state of chaotic de-differentiation which might now be termed along with Lyotard, 'entropy', but for Pope was called "Dulness," and "bathos": the death of thought under the totalising logic of market economics.³³

It is thus hardly accidental that Lyotard himself (perhaps in spite of the argument he is setting out to make about contemporary art) sets the question up on this historical timescale, in tracing the development of the notion of the sublime from Boileau through to Burke and Kant, and from there to the roots of twentieth century 'avant-garde' practices. In suggesting that in this history the stakes were "the destiny of classical poetics", which "were hazarded and lost [...] [A]esthetics asserted its critical rights over art [...] [R]omanticism, in other words, modernity, triumphed." (p.92), Lyotard is equating the

the stage, act up[on this discourse [...] Politics and political economy, to be sure are implicated in every discourse on art and on the beautiful." Jacques Derrida, "Economimesis," *Diacritics* 11.2 (1981): 3. See also esp. pp

³³ For Pope's equation of the Modern and creeping, destructive powers of scepticism in the *Dunciad*, see James Noggle, "Skepticism and the Sublime Advent of Modernity in the 1742 *Dunciad*," *Eighteenth Century Theory and Interpretation* 37.1 (1996): 22-40. For Pope's *Dunciad* as at once criticism and embodiment of the cultural logic of (early) capitalism see Laura Brown, *Alexander Pope*, Rereading Literature, ed. Terry Eagleton (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985) 128-58.

development of (Romantic) aesthetics and the birth of the avant-garde, as a break from the Neoclassical concern with art as essentially a rule-bound and regular activity. It is equated with the appearance of a particularly modern sensibility and subjectivity, a subjectivity that can only, within the logic of his own account, be identified with the unleashing of the aforementioned forces of scepticism, destruction, and experimentation which mark the birth of 'capitalism' and its discursive, cultural and economic logics that brought to an end the stable order of the *ancien Régime*.

It is only because he wishes to *oppose* the historical avant-garde to the logic of the new – which he wishes anachronistically to associate more strongly with the transavantgarde and the conditions of 'late' capitalism – that the links between commodification and the avant-garde become somewhat submerged in his account, taking on a mysterious appearance. This is why Lyotard seems to make the peculiar move of only attributing the emergence of the logic of the 'new' into the sacrosanct realm of high art to the present day, and not to a much longer history of art.

It seems to me that it is because of this mystification, and because of Lyotard's continuing denial of what he opens up regarding the intimacy of the avant-garde and capital, that there are other slippages in the essay's attempt to set up a stable opposition between the temporality he wishes to be associated with the avant-garde and that associated with the commodity. For example, when Lyotard attempts to account for the difference between market-led artistic innovation and genuinely avant-garde artistic practice, to do so he is forced to bring in the distinction between two kinds of

interruption to the stable ‘code’ of discourse: (mere) “noise” and “ ‘strong’ information.” However, he almost immediately collapses the two into the single term ‘information’, as if within the terms of his argument he cannot clearly distinguish between the two sorts of interruption of discourse, whilst still maintaining both as actually being interruptions within it. If the ‘new’ does involve something which cannot be reduced to the terms of the known and knowable, the already-spoken and already-speakable (and the notion of information as that which is not already known to and speakable by the recipient would suggest that this is so), what does distinguish it from the ‘now’?

Because of the spiral form of the essay, the place to look for Lyotard’s answer would seem to be close to its start, where Lyotard has gone through some of these questions already, though in a different register. Just as Lyotard describes capital as a particular form – and a particularly extreme or exemplary one – of a ‘cosmic’ process of discourse,³⁴ in this final passage of his essay he has returned, in terms of the particularity of capital, to what he has already discussed more generally towards the start of the essay in terms of a general theory of the “event’s” relation to the flow of discourse. In this

³⁴ There is of course a Freudian metaphysics here, which goes beyond Adorno and Horkheimer’s formulation of a more general pattern of the development of instrumental human reason embodied in modern society. Whilst Adorno and Horkheimer’s account leans heavily on Civilization and Its Discontents for an account of the increasingly repressive nature of technologically advanced society as it borrows libidinal forces from the individual in order to keep its ever-more elaborate structure organised, Lyotard adds to this a cosmicised vision of entropic and negentropic energetic forces borrowed not just from thermodynamics, but also from Freud’s accounts of *eros* and *thanatos*. Furthermore, once again, it is worth noting the echoes of Bataille’s attempt to understand capitalism in terms of a cosmicised economics of energy.

early section of the essay, Lyotard contrasts two kinds of movement of discourse.

The first of these is a movement which, from the perspective of the last passage, can be identified with the temporality of the 'new' and with capitalism. It is one which seeks "to determine that which has already been thought[, ...] in order to determine what hasn't been[. ...] One can determine this something by setting up a system, a theory, a programme or a project – and indeed one has to, all the while anticipating that something." Lyotard contrasts this form of discourse to another form of thought, one which "imagine[s] the remainder, and allow[s] the indeterminate to appear as a question mark." (p.91)

The former kind of thought, our "daily bread", institutionalised discourse, sets up rules for the movement from one statement to the next (whether these statements be in the form of writing, painting, or music). This is the kind of certain movement of thought which Lyotard's "monad in expansion" (and hence the art market) must ensure, a movement which must be certain of producing further statements, because rule-bound. Lyotard notes the violence of this form of thought: if it is our "daily bread", it is also "the bread of war, the soldier's biscuit." (p.91); it is a "thought which must be disarmed" (p.90), since this is the thought of the inhuman monad which seeks to eliminate everything which is outside its project or which might interfere with it...

The violence of this form of thought and its self-closure against the event, expressed in all these military metaphors, is understood later in the

essay in terms of the homology between capitalism and the totalitarianism of the early- and mid-twentieth century: capitalism is in fact simply a more 'direct' form of the totalitarianism of thought. What they both share is a need to annihilate otherness, annihilate that which doesn't fit within their totalising vision, their 'project'. Both, then, would seem to rest on an exclusion of the *différend* of the 'event' from discourse, which also involves the exclusion of the other. Both are, in a sense, the expression of a fear of the *différend*, and hence both have been deeply inimical to the art of the avant-garde. Lyotard goes as far as to characterise both as an *attack* – as a continuation of the same attack – on the thought preserved in avant-garde art, and an attack on the avant-gardes themselves. (p.104-5)³⁵

In opposition to this mode of thought, Lyotard posits a form of thought which welcomes in the anxious indeterminacy of the "Is it happening?" This

³⁵ What still needs to be explored somewhere is the way that questions of identity and subjectivity are at stake in this fear of the 'doubt' harboured in the event. Lyotard suggests that the violence of the totalitarian regimes of the twenties and thirties towards any appearance of differend was driven by the destabilisation of (national) identity which such doubt creates. Such regimes sought to replace the indeterminacy of the question mark posed by the avant-garde with a more determinate question. No longer, "Is it happening?" but "Is the *Führer* coming?", etc. – questions which would re-interpolate a stable subject in national and class identities. In this sense, the effect of the Lyotardian sublime might be understood to be a de-subjectifying force, opening out the subject (or, in de Bolla's Terms, an "eversion" of the subject - see De Bolla, Discourse of the Sublime 48-53.) and disrupting its stability. But if twentieth-century totalitarianism can be understood as a force aiming to keep subjects strictly in their proper place, can the same be said for the consumer culture of a globalised economy, which seems much more posited on the ontological uncertainty of the slippery subject? Are we dealing here simply with the difference between the repressive and repressive desublimation? In this case, we are certainly still at the least dealing with two quite different 'economies' of the subject and its desire.

is a form of thought which, according to Lyotard, resists the closure of systematised thought, opens it to the heterologous.³⁶

But in spite of the seemingly radical difference between a form of thought which is a process of opening outwards, and one which is a closing-down movement, there remains throughout this account a kind of intimacy between the two kinds of thought which would seem to belie the opposition, and it seems to be the description of this intimacy between the two modes, rather than its argument for their simple opposition, that is the achievement of the essay. All thought, Lyotard reminds us, even that “of Schools, of programmes, of projects and ‘trends’ ” (p.90), depends on the “agitation” caused by the fact that “something remains to be determined, something that hasn’t yet been determined.” (p.91) The *différend*, the abyss in thought of the “Is it happening?”, is thus entirely immanent to ordinary, determinate thought, as a moment within its movement, even if this is a moment that determinate thought repeatedly closes down, whilst the ‘indeterminate judgements’ of aesthetic thought keep this abyss open.

There are therefore, unsurprisingly enough, further hints within this passage that in Lyotard’s account the two forms of thought might not quite stand stably as opposites. It might seem as if the indeterminate was destined to become determined either way, and as if the aesthetic can only hold open indeterminacy for so long, and that there is not so much difference after all between the ‘destiny’ and ‘promise’ of a difference to have its place in

³⁶ Is there a question to be asked here? If such a moment is only one of waiting, what is it that ensures that anything more than more-of-the-same will occur after the anxious moment of wait... Why is it that we might expect that all those things which Lyotard opens this abyss up in the name of – the people of the third world or the drives of the *id* – to be able to assert their heterologies here?

discourse. It might seem as if, in fact, the aesthetic moment of indeterminacy is an essential part of the process of determination, and not its opposing other. Lyotard himself, in “Newman: The Instant,” only proposes the event as a temporary break in the discursive order: “Occurrence is the instant which ‘happens’, which ‘comes’ unexpectedly but which, once it is there, takes its place in the network of what has happened.”³⁷

The inevitability of the return of a state of indeterminacy to one of determination – and the intimacy of the two temporal modes of discourse which Lyotard proposes – is also inscribed in Lyotard’s own account of the history of the avant-garde (pp.102-4). Each generation of avant-garde artists, proceeding ‘ex minimis’ (p.103), sets up anew an art which breaks the codes of existing art to confront the viewer with an indeterminacy which cannot be reduced to the certainty and sense of that system; but each generation in turn finds its efforts codified and absorbed into an ‘artworld’ and this

³⁷ Lyotard, *Inhuman* 82. This essay is the one which (although post-dating it chronologically) precedes “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde” in the chapter-organisation of *The Inhuman*. Note also that here, again, we are dealing with a long history of the notion of the aesthetic. In Kant, the indeterminate judgement of the aesthetic is just such a judgement in suspension, where the Understanding does not intervene to supply a concept to which the presentation of the Imagination will be subjected; rather, there continues a ‘free play’ between the Imagination and the Understanding, in which neither dominates the other. This is taken on in particular in J.C. Friedrich von Schiller, *Letters Upon the Aesthetic Education of Man*, August 1998 [1794], Fordham University, Available: < <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/schiller-education.html>>, January 2002. (esp. Letter 26), where he proposes the aesthetic as involving an experience of freedom, and suggests a ‘play’ instinct at work at the centre of aesthetic – the ludic movement of the imagination unrestrained by (any heteronomous) law. Strands of the legacy of this move through twentieth century European aesthetics, with on the one hand Heidegger championing the aesthetic as an ethical relation to alterity which does not seek to impose on it the violence of determination and the instrumental, and on the other hand Adorno championing the autonomous play involved in art (the freedom of the imagination) as an image of the freedom which is denied us in contemporary society. These two strands of the legacy of Idealist aesthetics are gathered together in Lyotard’s reading of the sublime, and its role in the project of his account of ‘the inhuman.’

necessitates further avant-garde ruptures in order to recapture an experience of indeterminacy. This would seem as close to the temporality of the new as that of the now. This is also a version of the history of art which, far from supporting avant-garde art as a viable and continuing ‘resistance’ to capitalism or modernity, would seem to point up its failure as such; even if the ‘indeterminate’ is to be kept open as a resistance to capital, the ‘ex minimis’ procedures of the avant-garde are not (or are no longer) an adequate way to do this. Lyotard has to admit, after all, that “There isn’t an enormous amount of difference between an avant-garde manifesto and a curriculum at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts.” (p.91)

Seen in this way, we might seem to be dealing, in the case of the new and the now, with a difference not so much of quality as of quantity, with the relative speed or slowness of discourse, and the length of the pauses that can be inscribed in it, a relative rather than absolute difference of opening or closure. And it might be that even the discourses of innovation involve a kind of opening into the heterogenous which, if relatively more managed, is not as *radically* different from the irruption of the Lyotardian sublime as Lyotard would want to argue. If the indeterminate and determinate are ultimately moments within the same movement of discourse, then it is perhaps as much as anything else a matter of the angle from which we look at it, and the emphasis we give on either moment within it, that determines how a given discourse can be seen³⁸. What are the moments of opening, of indeterminacy

³⁸ See for example also “Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts,” in Thomas E. Crow, Modern Art in the Common Culture (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1996) 3-38 Crow makes a similar kind of argument about the dynamics between mainstream culture and ‘resistant’ subcultures, and their mediation through

within it? And how does it close back down again?³⁹ Seen in this way, the monad already starts to look rather less monadic, already starts to look more heterogenous. Is its movement in fact to be characterised by such an alternation of opening and closing moments?

The problematic of the nature of the event, and the difficulty that Lyotard has in marking it as a different kind of irruption into discourse from that involved in novelty is embodied in the repeated metaphor (esp. pp.90-2) which he uses for the irruption of the event: that of the *point d'interrogation*, which is both, of course, the 'question mark', and also the point where the question emerges. The 'event' appears in Lyotard's text as being like a question mark, then, rather than a question; it is a questioning awaiting a question, an absence under the sign of the question from which the question will appear. But this can also start to make it seem, in its immateriality, something like a moment of *punctuation* in thought; a mere momentary halt in its flow, a gap across which thought makes a quantum leap, rather than, as Lyotard would seem to wish to propose, a locus from which a question can emerge. A lot in the essay seems to hinge on the something that the nothing of the question mark might be, and the enigma of how from this nothingness an autonomous thought might emerge, one not determined by the system of discourse into which it will enter, but from outside that discourse, from its others; on the mysterious simultaneity of this nothingness

various moments of modernist art. This involves a circling between rupture and reabsorption, and Crow stresses that this process looks different to different critics according to which of these two moments they privilege or focus upon.

³⁹ We might also stress the role of a mode of approach. The experience of the artwork or cultural product is not entirely determined by its form, but by the kind and quality of thought and attention which we bring to it...

as on the one hand punctuation, and on the other as something like a Platonic (or Kristevan)⁴⁰ *chora*. Lyotard does not answer this question explicitly here; perhaps it would be very much against the logic of the essay that we might be able to know this unknowable point in discourse, in any case. .⁴¹

If it is anywhere, the answer to this lies elsewhere in Lyotard's corpus, and the question, perhaps slightly tangential to my current undertaking, is too large to do full justice to here. However, it is perhaps worth briefly noting a few things which point to what Lyotard's answer might be.

⁴⁰ "We borrow the term *chora* from Plato's *Timaeus* to denote an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral stases. We differentiate this uncertain and indeterminate *articulation* from a *disposition* that already depends on representation." Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984) 25. (Kristeva's emphasis). Lyotard often seems to be imagining something like the *chora*, a world of indeterminate, pre-representational (largely libidinal, though also perhaps physical) forces underlying and agitating the more regular movements of discourse and structures of language.

⁴¹ What his essay perhaps does do is mime out the mode of thinking that this 'question mark' might demand. If my attempts here to 'deconstruct' some of the oppositions set up in Lyotard's essay have had any measure of success, it is only because the essay itself is very much an exemplary piece of Lyotardian thought. Its movement is not reducible to that of a single logic, an argument, a 'project', towards a set of conclusions that he wishes to draw, the determinate end of his essay, towards which, in his own terms, he ends up rushing a little too hastily towards. Rather, it follows through from an *aporia* (a pathlessness), and holds within it a series of tensions which it attempts to let appear and unfold. For an account of the role of *aporia* in Lyotard's work, and of the imperative of always philosophising in search of the rule by which one philosophises (rather than starting with an assumption that one knows the 'rule' and can proceed from it), which Lyotard draws from Kant's account of reflective judgement, see Richard Beardsworth, "On the Critical 'Post': Lyotard's Agitated Judgement," *Judging Lyotard*, ed. Andrew Benjamin, Warwick Studies in Philosophy and Literature (London: Routledge, 1992) 43-80. Beardsworth, in this essay considers how the demand of an *aporia* which lies at the heart of Lyotard's conception of the (Kantian) sublime informs his ethics and politics, and the ethics and politics of writing or thinking itself. In this sense the aesthetic judgement – for Lyotard, just as for Kant – is an exemplary form of thought which, if not itself an ethical judgement, should teach the subject an ethical form of judgement itself.

“The Sublime and the Avant-Garde” can be understood to be part of a move in his late philosophy away from a kind of ‘metaphysics of presence’ of the Freudian drives⁴² In this earlier work, typified by the book Libidinal Economy, he attempts to critique the mechanisms of discourse as ‘representation’, as involving the introduction of a depth (the depth of the ‘theatre’ of representation) or absence (the absent signified, which he terms the ‘Great Zero’), through which the drives, in their immediacy and intensity are captured and regulated. Against this he holds up and privileges a model of the body – the foundation of all such representation, but a foundation such representation must repress – as a flat surface, a depthless ‘libidinal band’ around which affective intensities run. The political (?) project of such early work is the liberation of such intensities from the sublimating but de-intensifying alienation of ‘representation’, a celebration of a polymorphous perversity which might amount to a kind of (both Nietzschean and schizophrenic) eternal present of the most intense affect. For the early Lyotard, any such a return of pure, unmediated desire would ‘transgress’ the alienating ‘systems’ of representation which function by mediating and organising them.

The problem with such a position (aside from the fact that it is ‘pure metaphysics’) is that in the very name of their sensuous particularity, all

⁴² in one late essay, Lyotard accuses his earlier work, and its reliance on a Freudian metapsychology of ‘pure metaphysics’: “I have tried, for some fifteen years, to drown out the thesis of the unconscious in the deluge of a general libidinal economy. This was pure metaphysics, and consequently parodical and strongly nihilistic, despite being clothed in a cheerfulness and an affirmativity adorned with the name of Nietzsche.” Jean-François Lyotard, “Emma: Between Philosophy and Psychoanalysis,” trans. Michael Sanders, Richard Brons and Norah Martin, Lyotard: Philosophy, Politics and the Sublime, ed. Hugh J. Silverman, Continental Philosophy (New York and London: Routledge, 2002) 25.

affects, all intensities start to appear – as ‘opposition’ to ‘the system’ – as interchangeably transgressive, irrespective of their ‘content’ (if I can call it thus), their very particularity. Furthermore, because of this, Lyotard ends up, in a curious embrace of capitalism itself, singing the praises of the suffering of factory workers, their bombardment with deafening noise in the workplace, as a form of the heightening of intensities unknown in pre-modern society.⁴³

The movement in the later work towards Kant and the aesthetics of the Third Critique, and towards a temporalising rather than spatialising metaphors, can be seen as Lyotard’s attempt to readdress some of these issues in a more satisfactory way. Thus in the ‘event’ we have something which aims much less at the ‘purity’ and presence which the demand in the earlier work for the unmediated appearance of drive, energy, intensity or affect would seem to entail; with the event, as it is developed in the late work, we are no longer faced with a ‘pure’ alterity or externality to discourse; rather, we have something which is at once, ‘blocked together’ (as one might express it in Lyotard’s earlier parlance; ‘overprinted’ if you like), the “Is it happening?” and the entry of this “Is it happening?” into discursive structures, structures which both capture the event, and which are also moved (agitated) by it. In this sense, the “event”, like the Freudian body in the

⁴³ We might also add the suspicions that Deleuze and Guattari open up around questions of capitalism and transgression. If they are right in understanding capitalism as functioning through the perpetual transgression of traditional boundaries – a movement of deterritorialisation which is followed by the reterritorialisation onto the body of capital – we also need to be profoundly sceptical of claims as to liberatory effects, under a system of capitalism, of attempts at ‘transgression’... If the late twentieth century has taught us anything, it is surely that desublimation can be as repressive as sublimation... See Brian Massumi, *A User’s Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari* (Cambridge, Ma. and London: MIT Press, 1996) 106-41.

earlier work, is at once the grounding condition of discursive systems, but also that which they try to forget, and which, in its particularity, they can never grasp. It is what gives the lie to their pretensions to totality and to closure.

In this body of late work, the nature of the 'event' is also further explored, and, although it is perhaps not brought to the fore in "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde", in Lyotard's late corpus the temporality of the event is fundamentally one of 'anamnesis'⁴⁴. Anamnesis is not simply a remembering; it is the recovery of that which was never thought in the first place, what Lyotard terms the 'immemorial', that which cannot be remembered, and yet also cannot be forgotten. It is to a conception of *Nachträglichkeit* that we are turned. Affect, the traumatic event, is never in the first place recorded, and can only be recovered by the *Durcharbeitung* through which it enters representation. Thus time, once again, finds its way into the equation. Affect (the affect that marks a *différend*) is no longer simply something present, in the present, as in Lyotard's earlier work, but leaves a trace, lingers, returns, has a delayed action, and it is this that returns in the choric space of the *point d'interrogation*. This is the something that the nothing of punctuation might be.

We might further extrapolate from "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde", using The Differend as a guide. What appears in this space, motivated by the affect – if we understand it as *différend* – is also an 'other'

⁴⁴ An account of the work of serious thought as being like the process of psychoanalytic anamnesis is given in Lyotard, "Emma," 23-45. For the work of the avant-garde and their invocation of sublimity as belonging to this duty of thought, see Lyotard, Postmodern Explained to Children 85-6.

phrase, the phrase of an other. Hence there is an added ethical import to the event. It is only by keeping 'faith' with the event, allowing it to happen, not rushing to determinate judgement by the rules of the system of our own discourse, that there can appear in it space for the phrases of others – whether this be the otherness within us, the otherness of 'nature', or the human others alongside whom we must live.

This, of course, makes a strong case for the importance of forms of thought which preserve such a space, and against those economic pressures in capitalist society which exert themselves to close down such a possibility. If there is a final answer to why capitalism is inimical to the event for Lyotard, it is also not to be found in "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde", but in The Differend. In this, Lyotard makes it clear that the time that thinking takes is also placed under the law of the temporality of capitalist exchange. In this analysis, the time between statements must be increasingly reduced – quite simply since time is money, the time money or debt takes to accrue interest – and so the time between phrases, the time between transactions, the time taken by production and exchange must be reduced as much as possible. When this law is applied to professionalised philosophers and artists, the time which must be open for the event must be eradicated as much as possible.⁴⁵ This, still, however, it must be noted, only pushes a relative and not an absolute difference between high art and popular culture, a relative

⁴⁵ See Lyotard, The Differend : Phrases in Dispute. Esp. e.g. the "Address" on pp.xv-xvi, and .para. 252, p.178. An example from the news just this week makes this clear: when EMI announced that their profits would be reduced this year due to delays in the release of pop band Coldplay's forthcoming album, shares in EMI dipped, and investors lost millions. See Chris Martin, "Coldplay Attack 'Evil' of Profits," Evening Standard 18 May 2005: 7.

difference in their autonomy from such pressures, and must also be weighed against the paradoxical secret reliance of even capitalist discourse on the noble agitation that the event causes for it.⁴⁶

Before moving on to discuss Lyotard's notion of capitalism further (which is central to the concerns of this essay), I do feel that it is important to look briefly at what might be a shortcoming in the ethics of Lyotard's aesthetics, especially given the peculiar disappearance of 'others' from his own art-historical account. This is something I can only skim the surface of here, but which I feel needs to be noted.

Lyotard's turn to Kantian aesthetics takes its place within the context of a general turn in Lyotard's late writings towards questions of ethics and justice, as exemplified centrally in his longer works, Just Gaming and The Differend. In both of these, the kinds of indeterminate judgement that Lyotard values in the experience of art become central to the ethical task of thinking. In these works, thought as the site of arbitration between different 'phrase regimes' or 'language games' must proceed without a set of fixed rules, for to fix a set of rules in advance, to judge determinately, is to impose a particular way of phrasing, a particular set of possibilities of meaning, on the discussion between the two sides – a set of possibilities which moreover can never be universal and will always be a silencing of at least one of the parties,

⁴⁶ It is worth noting, against Lyotard, that even a band as bland and commercial as Coldplay made it clear that they did not care primarily about the fortunes of EMI's investors. Lead singer Chris Martin told reporters at a press conference, "I don't really care about EMI. I think shareholders are the great evil of this modern world." (Martin, "Coldplay," 7.)

whose complaints takes place in different 'phrase regimes' or 'language games'.⁴⁷

Thus aesthetics – the aesthetics of the sublime in particular – becomes for Lyotard, with its mode of indeterminate thought, a model for ethical thought, and the true stake of the aesthetics of the sublime in fact turns out to be not art at all but a mode of philosophy and of justice which would take the aesthetic as its model⁴⁸. As with Kant, the aesthetic, though not itself quite a mode of ethical thought itself⁴⁹, serves as a model which will teach us the *form* of ethical thought.

⁴⁷ A good illustration of this is given in Readings, Introducing Lyotard 118. Readings discusses Werner Herzog's film Where Green Ants Dream, which narrates a legal battle over land rights in Australia between an aborigine group and a mining company. In this, the court is an inadequate tribunal; it enshrines a discourse of 'property' which is entirely alien to the aborigines, and its finding in favour of the colonisers is inevitable. The complaints of the aborigines, which belong to a quite different genre of phrase, are reduced to silence in the legal discourse of the West, where they are quite simply un(re)presentable. Thus a double violence is done upon them: they lose their land, and they are further robbed of the power to articulate the wrong that has been done to them. The only kind of tribunal that would be able to adjudicate over such a *différend* between two utterly alien genres of phrase would be one that judged indeterminately, without fixed rules.

⁴⁸ See for example, Wilhelm Wurzer, who writes, that in Lyotard's Kant, "it is a matter of [...] organising philosophy around an aesthetics of the sublime, not another philosophy of art, but a certain manner of judging itself." Wurzer, "Lyotard," 201. For an extended account of the role of 'judging' (indeterminately) in the ethics and politics of the late Lyotard, and the role of his turn to the aesthetic of the sublime in articulating this, see Beardsworth, "The Critical 'Post'," 43-80. Beardsworth discusses this as an answer to Habermas's theories of 'communicative reason', and a way to posit communication as a form not of consent, but of 'dissensus', the envisioning of a community which is always only 'still to come.' More combatively, Eagleton attacks Lyotard's attempt to base ethical and political action on the aesthetic as a sign of postmodern failure, one open to the dangers of "intuitionism, decisionism, consequentialism, sophistry and casuistry," if not a downright fascistic 'aestheticisation of politics'. Terry Eagleton, The Ideology of the Aesthetic (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) 398.

⁴⁹ Though we might note that the line between the aesthetic and the ethical in Lyotard becomes something a lot more diffuse than in Kant, because what appears in art for Lyotard is precisely some kind of 'otherness', a *différend*, just as within ethical confrontations...

It is because of this Kantianism which insists on art taking merely the *form* of an ethical mode of thought, rather than in fact being properly a site for ethical judgements itself that leads to the insistence on a kind of formalism in art itself (even if this formalism is the formalism of the formless) in Lyotard's writing on art, and motivates his exclusion of 'content'-based, political art.

It's here for me that a worry opens up about the function of Lyotard's notion of the sublime. Although he calls it a *différend*,⁵⁰ it would nevertheless be a peculiar and particular kind of *différend*. It would seem, from his examples, and from the privileged place the abstract works of Newman take up in his genealogy of the sublime, to be a *différend* quite emptied of the particular plaints and complaints of suffering people, an entirely formal *différend*, in which no concrete 'cultural' or political work should be done. The sublime, that is to say, in spite of being an aesthetic category which is based on a *différend*, is not a category which might be suited to the *différend* which lies between, for example, Australian aborigine discourses on or attachments to the land and the discourse of property and land-ownership enshrined in Western legal discourse. Again, though in a different register,

⁵⁰ In Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime, for example, he calls the sublime "the feeling of a differend." Lyotard, Lessons 1. Lyotard expands on this, for example on pp.151-2 of this work. He also argues something similar in Jean-François Lyotard, "Judiciousness in Dispute, or Kant after Marx," The Lyotard Reader, ed. Andrew Benjamin (Oxford and Cambridge, Ma.: Blackwell, 1989) 326-8. Lyotard writes: "To judge is to open an abyss between the parts by analysing their *différend*; this act is marked by the camera obscura of that complex feeling Burke called 'delight'." (p.326) (Burke's 'delight' is the technical terms for the 'negative pleasure' constitutive of the feeling of the sublime.) Lyotard goes on to describe the Kantian sublime in terms of the feeling caused by the *différend* between the faculties: "Two phrases from heterogenous regimes, here, imagination and reason, do not succeed in agreeing about an object" (pp.327-8), and arguing that it is this disharmony that causes, or is at least marked by, the feeling of the sublime.

I'm led to wonder what the something that the nothing of the 'event' of the sublime might be, and what is at stake in the difference between the event as it occurs in properly legal and properly artistic discourses. This is also to say that although in his ethical writings, Lyotard is forming a way of thinking through the relation of the event with its 'Is it happening?' to the 'what' that happens as it enters discourse, in his aesthetic writings, the event still seems conjured up as if it can have a pure 'eventhood' not subject to its coming inscription into discourse, and as if the discourses of art were not themselves a contested political realm in which power is exerted to uphold what particular ways of speaking are allowed or demanded and what are not. The sublime seems to me in Lyotard's work to function as a category which in fact (paradoxically given that Lyotard wants to make art the shelter of the *différend*) cushions art from the political and ethical practicalities of (all) discourse, by allowing it to remain merely formal.

In this sense, it would seem possible to rephrase Lyotard's sublime to allow in a more directly political or ethical form of sublime art, an art in which the feeling of the sublime as Lyotard describes it (the anxious yet quickening affect which marks the *différend*, the feeling of incommensurability, of that which is unrepresentable, the possibility that nothing may happen, etc.) may be in fact involved in work which explores very real meetings and *différends*. In this sense, the work of a film-maker such as Chris Marker might be reimagined as the true face of the Lyotardian sublime. In Sans Soleil, repeated confrontations are staged with unknowable others – other peoples, other languages, other animals, nature, time, death, technology, the density

of language and visual representation themselves – which are staged precisely in their unrepresentability, and in order to stage the ethical relation of such a (non-)meeting, rather than in the more conventional genre of the anthropological or zoological document, where the other is laid out as an object of scientific (determinate) knowledge for the gaze of the knowing, Western subject. Perhaps the archetypal moment of this version of an ethico-politicised Lyotardian sublime occurs in the passage of the film where Marker presents us slowly, frame by frame, with the film he takes of a woman from Bissau, looking for the precise moment, only as long as (or less than) a twenty-fourth of a second, in which she returns the camera's gaze, a moment which is stopped, stilled, and in which she takes on a density, an unknowability in which the representational mechanism of the cinematic breaks down, becomes opaque; we are left with her image as a rebus, an 'event' the content of which we cannot determine, and we are thrown into a reflectivity which is both that of our thought as viewers, and that of cinematic representation itself. Marker repeatedly stages such opacity in representation, perhaps most obviously at the points where the cinematic image is processed by video-games software to the point that it dissolves into a play of flat colours, and the materiality of the image takes over from the represented subject [am I right in remembering this as the image of riot police at a political demonstration?], but also throughout, in the slowness of his pacing, his constant stilling of the image, the disjunctions between narration and image, and in the many ellipses. But it is no longer simply the abstract opacity of sensation which Lyotard finds in Newman that is at stake.

Now the 'presenting' of the medium (of film), and the testimony that is paid to the fact that there is an unrepresentable, has become the presenting of a whole cinematic apparatus with a history and a social usage, an apparatus which is, moreover, an apparatus of representation, an apparatus bound into a history and a (global) politics, a medium in which the *differénds* between different cultures and peoples (and different people), between genders, and all the *différends* which are less directly 'political' but are inscribed in our relations to our bodies and to our environment (the forces of internal and external nature) are all at stake.

There is, however, something still problematical, in this attempt to imagine a Lyotardian ethics of the sublime opening into a kind of postcolonial art. Marker is, of course, still a white, European man, and the gaze that we encounter in his films remains one which looks out from this traditionally central locus at the world which Europe once dominated; it constitutes a sort of bracketed (*sous rature*) repetition of this colonialist visual trope. Its enactment of this in the mode of the sublime might point us to the continued afterlife of such colonial attitudes within an ethics and aesthetics of the Lyotardian sublime. If we are to look for an alternative 'post-colonial' form of the sublime, where the 'post' in question is configured rather differently from the melancholy repetition of empire that we meet in Marker, we may find that we have to turn towards work such as Isaac Julien's True North (2004), which he describes as involving a 'contaminated sublime'. In the film, the figure of a black woman wanders through a harsh but ravishing arctic landscape to the accompaniment of a voice retelling the true-life story of Matthew Henson and

Robert Peary's expedition to the North Pole. (Henson and Peary were a black and a white man respectively.) The narrator's voiceover focuses on an incident that Henson was to account years after the event: as they neared the pole, Henson realised that he, the 'servant' would be the first man to the pole, rather than Peary, the 'master'. Becoming fearful for how Peary might react, he unloaded the rifle they carried and buried the cartridges in the snow. (On return, of course, it was Peary who received the accolades for being 'first man to the pole', even though Henson had preceded him.) The work thus emphatically returns the question of race to the arctic landscape, a landscape usually imagined as silent, empty and sublime, the search for 'true north' amongst the pure white and deadly snows being one of the key figures of a colonialist-exploratory imagination. Julien insists on the landscape as a place – and the sublime as a figure – which is already haunted by 'others'. The sublime landscape is not empty: it is always-already raced and gendered, populated with alterities. Julien's arctic pole might, after all, be a rather good figure for the Lyotardian sublime or *différend*: it can seem on the one hand a figure of uncanny and terrifying, pure, virginal blankness, as that which discourse has not spoken and cannot (yet) speak; but in fact it is a zone of alterity always already 'contaminated' and occupied by a plurality of othernesses. Lyotard's sublime risks reducing the latter to the former. It could be imagined as having been the project of a number of black British artists working with the 'postcolonial' – Julien for one, but we might add in Keith Piper's raced technosublime, or Steve McQueen's terrifying geo-

historical sweep in *Carib's Leap/Western Deep* (2002) – to reinhabit and reinvest the landscape of the sublime with these pluralities.

Lyotard's Capitalism.

Given that my interest in Lyotard's essay stems centrally around the question of his articulation of the notion of the sublime around, and in opposition to, the workings of capitalism, the final area of the essay which I wish to hold up to question is the vision of 'capitalism' itself that Lyotard posits. If the opposition between the new and the now seems to break down somewhat, and they are, as I suggest above, intimately involved, what implications might this have for an understanding of 'capitalism' itself?

Towards the start of this essay (to recap), we have already noted some of the characteristics of capitalism, as described by Lyotard. We have met it in the guise of a 'monad in expansion', a system which 'seeks' to close itself off to contingency and to that which is other or external to it, to totalise itself. Its temporal mode of being, according to Lyotard, is to collapse the future into the present, to make it entirely knowable and calculable in the here and now, to subject it to present will, and to eliminate that in the present which might make the future less determinable. I have also noted that it is an account of capitalism which owes much to Adorno and Horkheimer's notion of a dialectic of Enlightenment, and in turn to Weber's pessimistic vision of capitalism's rationality as an alienating and dominating mode of thought.

In fact, drawing from this tradition, Lyotard goes as far as to propose a model of capitalism that might be thought to be somewhat Idealist.

Capitalism is discussed as a form of thought itself: elsewhere in The

Inhuman, Lyotard writes that “Capital is not an economic or a social phenomenon. It is the shadow cast by the principle of reason on human relations.”⁵¹ I am somewhat wary about this idealism. It seems unlikely to me that capitalism (or for that matter capital) should have an ‘essence’, an inner truth which determines its shifting appearance in the world of social, economic and political phenomena. I am even more wary about the suggestion that such a ‘truth’ of capital might be a form of ‘thought’, a ‘logic’, ‘the principle of reason’ itself.⁵² This would be a move which would seem to reduce social and political reality – history – to an expression of this essence in an inverted, dystopian Hegelianism, where the dialectic progress of *Geist* towards full consciousness and self-realisation starts to look like the monstrous, devouring force of *Thanatos* on a cosmic scale. It would furthermore seem to me that the varied forms that ‘capital’ has taken belie the existence of such an essence, and that all that could be posited is a group of ‘family resemblances’ that at any point a particular ‘capitalism’ might or might not share.⁵³ Furthermore, although under ‘capitalism’ (and

⁵¹ Lyotard, Inhuman 69.

⁵² To the extent that Lyotard makes capitalism a mere example of this kind of cosmic process, it loses its own particularity. At this point we might ask what the point of this as an analysis of ‘capitalism’ (and even more, of ‘contemporary’ capitalism), rather than just of ‘discourse’ in general might be...

⁵³ The protean nature of capital is once again affirmed in the current boom of the liberalised Chinese economy, which is throwing up ever-new, strange variations. For example, there is the appearance of a strange form of “shareholder feudalism”, (dubbed by the authorities “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” but hailed by Bill Gates as “a new form of capitalism”) where whole villages, such as Huaxi, “officially the country’s wealthiest village”, are floated on the stock market and achieve geometric rises in share price (and in the case of Huaxi, a combined village turnover of over \$640 million in 2003), but where the occupants, still officially registered as ‘peasants’, will, although they receive a yearly bonus of \$10,000 and dividends of \$25,000, have their lives regulated, to the finest detail in order to ensure their productivity and work-ethic, have to reinvest eighty-percent of their dividends back into in the village, and will also lose almost everything if they either sell up or

under a regime of quantifying, technological, scientific 'reason' which is clearly at least in a mutually dependent relation to the institutions of capital and its economical calculus), exchangeability and measurability exert powerful normative forces on discourse, it would seem reductive to seek in them a single cause or essence of contemporary social forms, or of social ills. Our current system of globalised capitalism is obviously, although a precondition for them, not a sufficient cause of recent phenomena such as the rise of the fundamentalist religious right in America, or, in Britain, a creeping paranoia about outsiders and others which finds its expression in phenomena as varied as the vilification of women, other races, the sexually 'different', immigrants, the unemployed, drinkers, 'hooligans', and youths (not to mention even liberals, artists, leftists, anyone with different ideas...) in the tabloid press at home, the war on terror, the geometric rise of legislation (of sexual, political, and public conduct) under 'New Labour' that enforces a social and moral normativity; nor does it fully explain the rise elsewhere the return to genocidal nationalisms and religious intolerance. The particular state of the world is not entirely explained by recourse to the notion of

move away from the village. Here, in a strange mix of pragmatism, ancient feudalism, Maoist socialism and market economics, the village owns them as much as they own the village. Such a situation is hard to account for in terms of Marx's classic articulation of the plight of the proletariat under capitalism, without quite some modification... See Jonathan Watts, "In China's Richest Village, Peasants Are All Shareholders Now - by Order of the Party: Model Community with Spectacular Industrial Growth Owes as Much to Feudalism as to Communism," [Guardian](#) 10 May 2005.

‘capital’, the phrase-regime of economic exchange⁵⁴, as a master discourse.⁵⁵

I’m not entirely alone in having such reservations about Lyotard’s vision of capitalism. Wilhelm Wurzer, for example, notes that “Lyotard manoeuvres laboriously with the notion of capital”⁵⁶, and Paul Harris notes that “Lyotard’s ‘complexification’ is a monolithic category, but in practice the ‘complete monad’ of techno / scientific / economic (and even aesthetic) globalisation is not monolithic and never takes shape as a totality.”⁵⁷ Indeed, in “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde,” Lyotard himself admits, when he raises the spectre of capitalism and the growth of an information economy, that his “observations are banal, ” (p.105) – and this in spite of the fact that the cultural politics of the essay (and the politics of its aesthetics) rest so heavily on them.

However, we can read Lyotard’s account against itself, marked as it is throughout by slippages of the logic of the new and the now. When we do

⁵⁴ Lyotard, The Differend : Phrases in Dispute 173-79.

⁵⁵ See also Anthony Giddens, The Consequences of Modernity (London: Polity Press, 1990) 55-63. Giddens describes ‘modernity’ as irreducible to a single institution (capitalism) but amounts to a coming together of a series of different (new) institutions (capitalism, yes, but also industrialisation, nationalism, colonialism, beaurocracy, urbanisation, militarization, and Foucault’s ‘disciplinary’ complexes such as surveillance). These institutions we find differently in different times and places within ‘modernity’, and although they synchronise with each other to create a whole that may seem more than its parts, none of these institutions, in Giddens’ account, provides an ‘essence’ which determines the others. It might also be useful here to also gesture to Althusser, at the very least as presented by Jameson in The Political Unconscious, in that if he suggests a ‘totality’ of ‘capitalism’, he avoids positing this in the terms of a traditional base-superstructure model. It is not the absent cause (either an ‘indexical’ cause of which the phenomena of daily life are the trace, nor a ‘transcendental’/ideal cause of which they are the expression); rather, ‘capitalism’ (or perhaps better ‘modernity’?) would be the name for the (immanent) totality of these relations...

⁵⁶ Wurzer, "Lyotard," 208.

⁵⁷ Harris, "Thinking," 144.

this, even this logic of capitalism at points starts to appear a more contradictory and interesting phenomenon, secretly based as it is on the 'agitation' of the event, than the account of capitalism-as-monad would bear.

We start to see the effects of this 'agitation' on capital (and on Lyotard's account of it) when he writes that "there something of the sublime in capitalist economy" (p.105). There is a gulf between its Idea of absolute mastery, and the fact that there can be no example of such a power empirically demonstrable. This desired level of control is in fact impossible, and the capitalist economy finds that, "in making science subordinate to itself through technologies, especially those of language, it only succeeds, on the contrary, in making reality ungraspable, subject to doubt, unsteady." (p. 105)⁵⁸

For me, *this* is the hinge on which the interest of Lyotard's essay hangs: the opening of the rather enigmatic question of what it might mean that capitalism turns out to have "something of the sublime".

How are we to understand the paradoxical situation Lyotard draws of a system which 'attempts' an absolute mastery, but in fact produces the

⁵⁸ This version of capitalism's rationalism, in its attempts to manage and control the future, as creating a chaotic and increasingly unpredictable world is supported by the more 'empirical' thought of the human sciences. For example, Anthony Giddens suggests that 'risk' is a fundamental concept in capitalist/technological attempts to 'colonise' the future, but that such attempts to control 'external' risk (the risk caused by nature, etc.) end up creating new 'manufactured' risks which, because they create new conditions, and thus cannot be calculated through statistical analysis based on previous conditions, are much more incalculable than the external risks which they seem set up in order to manage. If we judge capitalism and rational, technological management by its results rather than the claims of its discourses or the 'intentions' of its operators, it is a system productive not of a future which is increasingly collapsed into the present, but a future which is increasingly unknowable, uncontrollable, unimaginable. For a summary of Giddens argument, see Anthony Giddens, Reith Lectures: Runaway World. Lecture 2: Risk, 1999, online transcription of radio broadcast, BBC, Available: <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/reith1999/lecture2.shtml>>, 4 April 2005.

opposite, an increasing lack of mastery? What kind of *agency* is involved? Where are we to locate this desire for mastery? Is the 'monad in expansion' itself to be imagined as having a subjectivity? Does it have a desire? a will? intention? a consciousness, perhaps? even an 'unconscious'? Is Lyotard guilty, in his personification of capital in such a monad of a peculiar form of anthropomorphism, of Ruskin's 'pathetic fallacy'?

Lyotard's account itself opens these questions through its decentring of agency from the human in the Copernican turn involved in the proposition of an 'inhuman' monad as an agency expressing itself through human action (in Lyotard this agency is not just the *id*, as it is in Freud, but the demands of both an economic and a cosmic process). The proposition of this agency, embedded in but separate from human will, and in fact sometimes quite inimical to humanity, is a proposition that suggests that agency is something inherently plural. Agency is something, in Lyotard, (as with Freud and Lacan) which is always not where we think it is, and which thinks where it is not.

Can we, in this case, pose the question of the agency of the 'monad' in the same way as we can pose the question of the agency of the human being? If the monad acts secretly through the human agent, what else acts through the monad, that it might actually produce not a closure of the future, but an increasingly uncertain one? If we see the 'monad' in these terms, it starts to look much less like a monad.⁵⁹ If there is some form of 'agency' in

⁵⁹ See Harris, "Thinking," 144. Rather than a monolithic, global monad, and its others, which appear at the level of the local, Harris proposes that in contemporary, globalised culture, there are complex interferences between global and local processes, and that thus 'resistance' is not simply expressed at the local but often, in interactions and resonances between various localities, on the level of the global itself. In making this critique of Lyotard, Harris makes a further pertinent observation

capitalism which aspires to be monadic, to close itself off, there is also an agency through which another, quite different end is served – perhaps as a result of the ‘agitation’ which nonetheless drives this process. A rather differently ‘inhuman’ principle is also at work in its actions...Again, seeing things in this way might seem to shed light on why the tensions between the ‘new’ and the ‘now’ might not mark so much different forms of discourse, but different forms of ‘agency’ in the one and the same movement of thought.

The spectre who seems to haunt such questions – one I think conjured not incidentally by Lyotard in raising this problematic around a notion of double purposes in the sphere of the economic, an author who has been influential in particular in Lyotard’s early work – is Georges Bataille.⁶⁰ It is, in particular, the ghost of Bataille’s understanding of the relation between a ‘restricted economy’ and a ‘general economy’ that seems to be at work in Lyotard’s account.

In The Accursed Share, Bataille argues that the fundamental error of conventional forms of political economy – the error of a ‘restricted economics’ – is to treat the economic sphere as a realm cut off and separate from the ‘general economy’ of energy in the biosphere. He argues that even if

on Lyotard’s account of resistant thought. For Lyotard, this resistance seems to happen at atomised points. Thought is something very like an individualistic affair, in that we have little sense from him of the ‘parallel processing’ of thought as it takes place in a community. (p.147)

⁶⁰ For an account of Bataille’s enormous influence on Lyotard, and on the milieu in which Lyotard’s work developed, see Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, eds., Bataille: A Critical Reader (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998) 7, 16. Botting and Wilson note that “It was to Bataille that both Baudrillard and Jean-François Lyotard turned in their seminal critiques of capitalism and socialism’s complicity with capital.” (p. 16) They identify the book in which Lyotard had turned to Bataille so centrally and explicitly, to develop an understanding of capital as Jean-François Lyotard, Libidinal Economy, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (London: Athlone Press, 1993). It is via this book that Bataille continues to haunt Lyotard’s description of capitalism in The Inhuman.

we can treat a simple task such as changing a car tyre as a self-contained act with impunity, this is not the case with the calculations of the running of a complex system such as the economy, a system which aside from its complexity is implicated in a larger cosmic process. Bataille argues that even if conventional economics treats automobile production (for example) as part of the larger whole of an economy, it has a blindness in that it treats the economy itself as if it was a self-contained whole, closing it off from a 'general economics' of global energy, in which its economic activity must nonetheless take part.⁶¹ Bataille writes:

“economy is never [usually] considered *in general*. The human mind reduces operations, in science as in life, to an entity based on typical *particular* systems (organisms or enterprises). Economic activity, considered as a whole, is conceived in terms of particular operations with limited ends. The mind generalises by composing the aggregate of these operations. Economic science merely generalises the isolated situation; it restricts its object to operations carried out with a view to a limited end, that of economic man. It does not take into consideration a play of energy that no particular end limits: the play of *living matter in general*.”⁶²

This, for Bataille, is an error which can rebound in disastrous ways on those who make it, since “Beyond our immediate fulfilment, man’s activity in fact pursues the useless and infinite fulfilment of the universe.”⁶³ The logic of the fulfilment of this purpose expresses itself through and determines our actions whether we intend it to or not, and, put simply, if we do not take control of the implications of this fact, they will take control of our destiny. This, of course, mirrors the way that in Lyotard, there are ‘cosmic’ imperatives and a ‘cosmic’ subject at work in human activity. For Bataille, it is particularly disastrous to forget the consequences of these inhuman

⁶¹ Bataille, Accursed Share Vol I, 19-21.

⁶² Bataille, Accursed Share Vol I, 22-3.

⁶³ Bataille, Accursed Share Vol. I, 21.

imperatives that work through us, since their central principle or end is the useless expenditure of energy and wealth: destruction and death. If we do not pay heed this destructive principle, it will be ourselves who will be destroyed:

An immense industrial network cannot be managed in the same way that one changes a tyre.... It expresses a circuit of cosmic energy on which it depends, which it cannot limit, and whose laws it cannot ignore without consequences. Woe to those who, to the very end, insist on regulating the movement that exceeds them with the narrow mind of the mechanic who changes a tire.⁶⁴

We might not embrace Bataille's argument as to the nature of the imperative embodied in the 'general economy' - Lyotard certainly doesn't seem to in his account of the cosmic processes which seem to be animating the actions both of the human being and, on a larger scale, human economic systems –, however the question of such a relation of the restricted to the general economy, and the doubleness of function or agency⁶⁵ that can be seen to be

⁶⁴ Bataille, *Accursed Share* Vol I, 26. The ellipsis is Bataille's.

⁶⁵ Bataille, deals, I think, neatly with problems of intention and teleology, resisting an anthropomorphism that Lyotard treads dangerously close to. It would seem to be in the *effects* (rather than the 'intentions') of a discourse such as economic theory that we might locate the imperative of a local system to closure and totalisation. It is not so much that the texts of political economy treat the economic as a part of a larger world which they implore us to try to close off from the rest of it. Rather, in treating the economic as *already* a separate and distinct entity, which can be predicted and analysed according to its own, already-observed and regular behaviours – in the *forgetting* of its interconnectedness with other realms –, it causes us to act *as if this was naturally true*. In doing so, it serves to *carry out* a closure in the discourse of economics, and in the intentions of economic actors, whose purposes and methods become determined in such a discursive closure, a closure of the frame of reference for human purpose (mankind reduced to *homo oeconomicus*). Such a discursive closure will lead, then to that which is external to the system being experienced as a threat to the calculability of the actions within its sphere, and thus an interference to be eliminated or at least minimised as much as possible; discursive closure leading to an actual closure of a sphere of activity, according to its demand for calculability and control. This logic, suggests Bataille, might be true for a range modern discourses ranging from psychology to geology. ("...a problem that still has not been framed as it should be, one that may hold the key to all the problems posed by every discipline concerned with the movement of energy on the earth – from geophysics to political economy, by way of history, sociology biology. Moreover,

in operation in any action can still be taken up. Indeed, such a vision seems to be behind Lyotard's own cosmological vision of capital as negentropic complexification (a system with an end beyond the ken of, and yet also the animating principle of, human activity). It is also, however, at work when he raises the problem that although capital might seem to tend to closure and totality, its effects are quite the contrary: here we are dealing precisely with a situation in which a sub-system would seem to tend to self-closure, but is actually in a dialectic relation with a larger system into which it feeds, and which feeds back into it, which interferes with this closure, a situation which creates, despite the local pressure to closure and self-ordering, an increased effect of chaos and complexity.

Lyotard and George Gilder: two visions of capitalism that are not as opposed as they might at first seem?

What might highlight some of the problems of Lyotard's critique of capitalism and its reliance on Bataille is to briefly explore some of the surprising echoes we find between it and the visions of the apologists of 'postmodern', neo-liberal (neo-conservative) economics that Lyotard would seem, at first, to be

neither psychology nor, in general, philosophy can be considered free of this primary question of economy." Bataille, *Accursed Share* Vol I, 10.) The thing that makes economics similar to many other fields of modern practice or theory is what Bataille characterises as the calculated management of a complex system. To the extent that geology is a discourse involved in the management of geological events or the calculation of their risk to human endeavour, and that psychology is a science devoted to the managing of mental illness or neurosis, and of human behaviour in general, there is a similar tendency to closure. The discourse of psychology, with its emphasis on the individual mind, plays a role in the drive to individualism in modern society, according to the imperative of treating the human being increasingly as a closed psychological system, and managing him or her on that level, just as the conception in discourse on economics of the economy as a closed system leads to its actual closure.

writing in opposition to: the champions in the sphere of economics of what Lyotard elsewhere dubs the 'slackening' prevalent in late twentieth-century thought.⁶⁶ It is thus to George Gilder (Ronald Reagan's favourite author)⁶⁷ that I shall turn.⁶⁸

In pointing me towards Gilder, I am very much indebted to Jean-Joseph Goux's essay "General Economics and Postmodern Capitalism", which is an attempt to look at the possible fate of Bataille's criticism of capitalism under changed 'postmodern' economic conditions. Goux's argument is that Bataille's conception of capitalism has started to look somewhat dated. Bataille conceives it, very much in Weberian-Adornian-Freudian terms, as a rationalising system which, with its Calvinist imposition of a work ethic at the service of the demand to accumulate, stifles the playful, libidinal and 'expending' side of (in-human?) nature. Goux notes that Bataille claims that any residual playfulness in the world under the reign of capitalism is only the 'effect of a relative lack of power [of the capitalist system]. Capitalism would avoid play if it could'. Bataille suggests that, in his terms, capitalism is a primarily a 'project' and thus fundamentally opposed to play.⁶⁹ I hardly need do more than gesture towards the similarities between this and Lyotard's own conception of capitalism, as I have been discussing it so far.

⁶⁶ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*.

⁶⁷ I draw this snippet of gossip from Jean-Joseph Goux, "General Economics and Postmodern Capitalism," *Bataille: A Critical Reader*, eds. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, Blackwell Critical Readers (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998) 200. The following account is very much indebted to Goux's use of Gilder in order to examine the possible fate and use-value of Bataille under 'postmodern' economic conditions.

⁶⁸ The text I shall be drawing on is George Gilder, *Wealth and Poverty* (London: Buchan and Enright, 1982).

⁶⁹ Georges Bataille, *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970-88) VII: 219, cited in Goux, "General Economics," 204.

Goux goes on, however, to note the way that capitalism may not appear to require quite such a rationalist, repressive, Calvinist form of society as it might have seemed to in the 1930s, when Bataille was developing his criticism of capitalism, a time of characterised by an economic crisis of overaccumulation – a time moreover historically closer to an age of ‘Victorian’ values and one in which capitalism tended to be understood both by its opponents and champions, its economic theorists and its industrialists, in terms of rationality, efficiency, and productivity (the time which brought us ‘Taylorism’ and ‘Fordism’)

Goux notes that we live in quite a different form of capitalism now, or at the very least a capitalism that understands itself and its ‘ethic’ in quite a different way, a capitalism that requires from its apologists quite a different ideological articulation. It would now seem strange to characterise the consumption-orientated, spectacularised capitalism which has been growing since the 1930s as requiring from us any kind of ‘Calvinist’ libidinal repression – a capitalism in which what is traded is the sign-value of brands, as much as material products with use-value, a form of capitalism which seems to mobilise human desire for its own ends, rather than repressing it:

[I]t is quite clear that today’s capitalism has come a long way from the Calvinistic ethic that presided at its beginning. The values of thrift, sobriety and asceticism no longer have the place they held when Balzac could caricature the dominant bourgeois mentality with the characters of Père Grandet or the usurer Gobseck [...] [H]asn’t contemporary society undergone a transformation of the ethic of consumption, desire and pleasure that renders the classical (Weberian) analyses of the spirit of capitalism (to which Bataille [and, we might add, Lyotard] subscribes) inadequate? [...] No society has ‘wasted’ as much as contemporary capitalism.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Goux, "General Economics," 199.

Such a wasteful, libidinal form of capitalism starts to look paradoxically like just the form of society that Bataille was championing. This is, of course, not to suggest that today's consumer capitalism is 'a good thing'. Neither Goux nor myself would subscribe to this position, and I imagine Bataille would be just as horrified by today's capitalism as he was by the capitalism of his own day. Capitalist society is still – in my mind quite obviously – inherently unjust: a system which inevitably condemns a unacceptable proportion of the planet to political muteness, abject poverty, exploitation, to economic and social instability, the threat of war, starvation, and to countless other forms of violence. Capitalism, I would contend in opposition to its apologists, (who are unsurprisingly without exception from the minority that capitalism in fact serves best) is not a system that 'works', which brings dynamism and prosperity, but one which for many is a continual, unabated catastrophe. To note that capitalism no longer demands a 'Calvinist' repression from at least that proportion of its subjects who serve as its consumer base is instead to ask whether this kind of analysis or understanding of 'the spirit of capitalism' is any longer adequate as a basis of the criticism of (today's) capitalism.

We might add to Goux's analysis that if Bataille's vision of a society of sacrificial and wasteful expenditure ends up seeming to resemble in some ways the capitalism that developed in the years following Bataille's theorisation of it, this similarity might spring from the fact that both Bataille's utopian fantasy and late-twentieth-century forms of capitalism can be understood to be responses to the same crisis of overaccumulation.

To bring the point home, Goux turns to the arch-Reaganist George Gilder, noting that Gilder's attempt to produce an ethics for neo-liberal or 'postmodern' capitalist economics, although seemingly unaware of Bataille, retreads almost exactly the same ground as him: Mauss and Levi-Strauss; the potlatch and the gift. For Gilder, (contemporary), neoliberal capitalism owes its dynamism and its 'goodness' not to Weberian rationality, but rather to irrationality, the irrationality of the entrepreneur's investment in the future, which according to Gilder – and quite in contradistinction to Lyotard – involves not the calculation and the reduction of the unknown to certainty, but a heroic leap into the incalculable.

For Gilder, it is precisely this irrationality which sets capitalism aside from socialism, which he does see as rationalist in its embrace of a planned economy. For Gilder, capitalism and socialism have quite different conceptions of human desire:

The capitalist, by giving before he takes, pursues a mode of thinking and acting suitable to uncertainty. The socialist makes a national plan in which existing patterns of need and demand are ascertained, and then businesses are contracted to fulfil them; demand comes first. One system is continually, endlessly performing experiments, testing hypotheses, discovering partial knowledge; the other is assembling data of inputs and outputs and administering the resulting plans.

Socialism presumes that we know most of what we need to know to accomplish our national goals. Capitalism is based on the idea that we live in a world of unfathomable complexity, ignorance and peril, and that we cannot prevail over our difficulties without constant efforts of initiative, sympathy, discovery, and love. One system maintains that we can reliably predict and elicit the result we demand. The other asserts that we must give long before we can know what the universe will return⁷¹

What is striking here is the extent to which for Gilder, the capitalist transaction embodies an aporetic confrontation with the unknown which

⁷¹ Gilder, Wealth 35.

resembles the ethics which Lyotard associates with those things which stand in opposition to capitalism: avant-garde art and (true) philosophy. At the same time, what Lyotard identifies as the logic of capitalism turns out in Gilder to seem to be the logic of an anti-capitalist, planned, socialist economy.

It is thus in the name of the same 'irrationalist' critique of Enlightenment reason that both Lyotard and Gilder proceed, the one attempting to justify contemporary capitalism, the other to critique it.⁷² Where Lyotard sees the aporetic as a disruptive force, for Gilder, it is precisely the source of the energies of capital, For him the poles of capitalism and the avant-garde that Lyotard's essay tries so hard to pull apart entirely collapse into an identity.

Because nobody knows which venture will succeed, which number will win the lottery, a society ruled by risk and freedom rather than by rational calculus, a society open to the future rather than planning it, can call forth an endless stream of invention, enterprise and art.⁷³

Indeed, the model of art, of avant-garde artists, with their 'creativity' (which turns out to in Gilder to run to the principle of 'leap before you look') turns out to be key to Gilder's account.⁷⁴ When we consider the role that they play within this highly ideologised account of capitalism, we might perhaps be a little more suspicious of claims such as Lyotard's about the oppositional

⁷² Gilder at a number of points develops his argument against state socialism explicitly in terms of a criticism of Enlightenment. Of Adam Smith's version of rational self-interest, Gilder writes: "A rational calculation of personal gain would impel an individual above all to avoid risk and seek security." This would in turn lead to a 'sterile', 'ever-expanding' welfare state (Gilder, Wealth 256.) - one strangely reminiscent of the 'monad in expansion'...

⁷³ Gilder, Wealth 243.

⁷⁴ Gilder, Wealth 251.

nature of the avant-garde's logic of the 'now'. With its entry into an uncharted territory in order to bring back goodness-knows-what, even if not run to an explicit programme of calculable gain, it can start to look – as it does explicitly in Gilder's repeated metaphors of capitalism as a process of adventurist exploration – disturbingly like a colonial trade mission, mapping out the unknown and unknowable for future exploitation. In fact, to put it a little less metaphorically, the avant-garde starts to appear, in Lyotard's picture of things, as part of the 'research and development' wing of capitalism. Its welcoming of the unknown, in spite of possible failure, ends up being something that in the long run, on a larger scale, 'the system' will capitalise on, recuperating even its losses and failures (whether the mad expenditure of the avant-garde, or the folding of an unsuccessful business idea) as these are transformed into new forms of knowledge.

Moreover – and hardly surprisingly – an *almost Lyotardian* vision of the sublime starts to crop up in Gilder, though without being explicitly named as such, a sublimity now associated with the mad risk of the entrepreneur. As the book winds towards its quasi-mystical concluding vision of a 'providential' Universe of divine, productive chance on which capitalism draws⁷⁵, the risk of the entrepreneur is figured repeatedly and ever-more emphatically in terms of the figures and words traditionally associated with sublimity. The incalculability of the risk of the entrepreneur involves an encounter with "realm of dark transcendence where can be found all true light and creativity". Gilder goes on: "All men, however, shrink from this

⁷⁵ By p.256, Gilder is drawing on St. Paul, and writing that "All human pioneers, from poets and composers in their many epiphanies to scientists on the mystical frontiers of matter where life begins, are essentially engaged in devotion."

awesome contact with cosmic mystery and power,” since it is a “plunge into darkness”⁷⁶, It’s not hard to see this in terms of a Lyotardian experience of privation, the feeling of terror evoked by the risk that ‘nothing might happen,’ and of the wonder that something, after all, continues to happen.⁷⁷

At this point, I start to wonder whether Lyotard is attacking the *wrong* capitalism, and whether in fact his attempt to resist its logic ends up profoundly in harmony with, if not perhaps the actual functioning of capitalism itself, then at least the ideological pictures which allow it to function by ensuring a series of behaviours and actions by certain of its citizens.⁷⁸ Lyotard’s theorisation of capitalism might thus be understood to ignore profound changes in capitalism – or at the very least in the ideological picture of itself that it needs.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Gilder, Wealth 253.

⁷⁷ In fact these short quotations only start to scratch the surface of the extent to which Gilder’s vision of the entrepreneurial moment is centrally reliant on (or born within) a scenario of the aesthetic of the sublime, this very passage calling further on a vaguely Jungian concoction of the “collective unconscious” to image the entrepreneurial gesture as a kind of ‘becoming-one with the cosmic mind’. See also, however, his whole contrast between socialism and capitalism (pp.247-51), which develops through a comparison of their supposed abilities to deal with vast natural disaster. Here, Gilder conjures global catastrophes (in which nature is imagined and celebrated in its terrible guise) and dying civilisations into his discourse in a manner which places it securely in the tradition of the Gothic, ‘last man’, Ozymandias-esque fantasy and of Kant’s discussion, in his account of the dynamical sublime, of the human power of transcendence over such of nature’s powers, a tradition that we have already noted Lyotard’s Inhuman takes part in. (see footnote 24, above)

⁷⁸ Goux makes it clear that what we have in Gilder is not something valuable as an accurate description of capitalism, but an example of the kinds of ideological, mystificatory picture that this ‘new’ capitalism throws up around itself to ensure its functioning. These values - of the aporetic, of the necessity for blind risk - are essential to the justification of late capital and its imperative to consume...

⁷⁹ I perhaps need to add a word of caution here. I am certainly not claiming that capitalism really ‘is’ as Gilder makes it out. His account is centrally an ideologised version of capitalism, and is interesting, as Goux notes, precisely for what it tells us about not so much transformations in capitalism’s exchange structure itself, but in the Ideologies that capitalism seems to need to function. Thus I would be somewhat sceptical about the idea that capitalism really had undergone a radical change from an oppressive production-centred system to a libidinal consumption-centred one. In

Lyotard, Gilder and the Ideological picture of capitalism

Lyotard's adherence to a Weberian/Adornian/Freudian image of repressive capitalism, however, can be read in at least two ways. The first of these, which I have just raised, is that Lyotard is simply taking aim at an outdated target, a repressive capitalism that simply no longer exists. The more generous reading is to understand it as a refusal of the ideological pictures of capitalism that Gilder and his ilk were drawing. Lyotard is telling us in his essay that capitalism is not in any real sense, even if it may seem to be, or claim in its self-ideologisations to be, any more open, creative or free than it ever was before: under the glittering surface of 'the Spectacle' still lies a machinery of domination and destruction. A third answer lies somewhere between the two: Lyotard, in his haste to refuse the new ideological pictures of late capitalism, falls into the false solace of the familiarity of another false picture of capitalism, no less produced by mistaking its reality for one of its ideological self-images; this time, the workings of capitalism being seen as the embodiment of a Victorian morality, in which the 'good' of the commonwealth is served by disciplined, industrious production. In doing so,

fact, consumption and production in a contemporary economy are very much two sides of the same coin. Consumption produces production, and vice versa. Perhaps this will also, perhaps, point to the fact that capitalism was never quite so purely Weberian as it has dominantly been theorised by left-wing theorists: a glance at the start of the eighteenth-century, and all the anxieties that the energies of capital released, and which we find expressed so strongly in its literature – Pope for example – as to the chaotic new energies and previously illicit desires that capital seemed to be unleashing might also help persuade us of that. Understanding the shift from the Protestant ethic of Victorian capitalism described by Weber to the libidinal ethic of expenditure in contemporary capitalism as a shift in necessary ideologies, rather than directly as a shift in the nature of capitalism itself might suggest that this change was necessary in order for capitalism to adapt to the 'crisis in overaccumulation' that it saw during the mid-twentieth century.

he also ends up getting his critique of capital tangled with 'new' capitalism's own 'new' forms of ideologisation.

It would seem useful, however, to hold open for a moment longer the critical angle on contemporary ideologies of capitalism that can be found in Lyotard, by tracing some of the differences between him and Gilder, to emphatically show the mystifications involved in the work of the latter, and to lead us to a slightly different image of capitalism than those we find in either Lyotard or Gilder. The resulting counter-image that I shall paint of 'capitalism', is of course, somewhat speculative, and in Lyotard's terms, 'metaphysical': I can claim neither economics nor social history my area of expertise, and I am, moreover, wary of the generalisations which I am myself proposing; it is meant, however, as an image, a counter-mythologisation, to trouble the equally 'metaphysical' accounts which both Gilder and Lyotard give.

As we have already noted, the fundamental opposition between Lyotard and Gilder in their understanding of the nature of capital is involved in the contrast between the temporalities they propose in capitalist exchange. For Lyotard this exchange demands absolute certainty, the envelopment of the future by the present through knowledge. For Gilder, such an exchange is, on the contrary, an incalculable risk, and capitalism opens onto absolute uncertainty.

Gilder attempts to back this up, repeatedly, with the statistic that nearly two-thirds of new businesses fail within the first five years. He claims, again and again, that the entrepreneur – that central ideological figure of

1980s capitalist folklore – does not and can not calculate the risk he undertakes:

The idea that businesses buy knowledge like any other factor in production, until its cost exceeds its yield, that businesses can safely and systematically assemble facts until the ground ahead stretches firmly before them, misses the radical difference between knowledge and everything else. It is the leap and not the look that generates the crucial information; the leap through time and space, beyond the swarm of observable fact, that opens up the vista of discovery.⁸⁰

This picture may seem rather counterfactual when we remember all the apparatuses that do exist in capitalism for the prediction of the future, apparatuses which help, if not eliminate uncertainty, then at least reduce it. Industry never ceases to set up models of consumer demand, of human desire. It sets into motion an elaborate machinery of focus groups, market surveys, consumer psychology, demographic classification, electronic feedback systems linking points of manufacture and consumption, and projecting profits and losses: a whole machinery of science and pseudoscience... This is a whole machinery that Lyotard gestures towards, and which Gilder does not mention... We might also draw further on Lyotard's vision of the homogenising powers of capitalism. Gilder would like to sketch the consumer age as providing a vast proliferation of choice as entrepreneurs seek to innovate and open new niches in the market. But as contemporary social commentators such as George Ritzer remind us,

⁸⁰ Gilder, *Wealth* 251. I hardly need point out here the colonialism inherent in the metaphor, but note the imagery of sublime landscape that it evokes, a movement of the expanding imagination confronted by the broad vista, just as Addison describes it in, for example Joseph Addison and Sir Richard Steele, *The Spectator, in Four Volumes*, 14 April 2004 [electronic version of Henry Morley's 1891 edition], online e-text, Project Gutenberg, Available: <<http://www.gutenberg.net/1/2/0/3/12030/12030-h/12030-h.htm>>, May 2004. See issue 412 (23 June 1712).

successful large-scale business has explicitly largely run on the principles of ‘McDonaldisation’, principles such as predictability, controllability, calculability and repeatability. The start-to-finish management of the processes both of production and consumption in McDonalds’ restaurants, claims Ritzer, have been taken up as a model throughout both industry and the public sector, and have resulted in a widespread ‘mallification’, and cultural homogenisation which would seem to be the fulfilment of Lyotard’s worst nightmares.⁸¹

That this forgetting occurs in Gilder is, I think, essentially a symptom of the repression which occurs in the privileging of Gilder’s heroic figure of the entrepreneur, of the small businessmen starting up their new businesses, who have such a high chance of failure. Such a reduction of the capitalist or entrepreneurial system to the scale of the individual, the small-business owner – the fundamental repeated gesture of 1980s capitalist ideologues⁸² – ignores the question of what proportion of the economy is comprised in such figures and what proportion of the economy is made up of enormous, trans-national corporations.

Such corporations, even if they do not have the power of absolute control of the future (to which Lyotard suggests they aspire), do have at their disposal all these mechanisms of risk-reduction which I’ve described above.

It’s also at this scale that we start to see Lyotard’s and Gilder’s accounts

⁸¹ See George Ritzer, *The Mcdonaldization of Society: An Investigation into the Changing Character of Contemporary Social Life* (London: Pine Forge, 1993).

⁸² precisely, of course, the ideology which the entrepreneurial Goldsmiths artists, Hirst foremost among them, exploited to get their careers off the ground, coming in the meantime to serve as a kind of version of the ‘myth of the artist’ for Thatcher’s yuppie generation! Freeze as a re-enactment of the myth of the *Salon des Refusées*, in modern dress, and set in London’s Docklands regeneration zone...

come back together to an extent. Gilder, in his attempt to explain the dynamism of capital, pictures it in terms of a sacrificial expenditure at the scale of the individual which is recouped at the larger scale of the system. Failure, seen at the level of the system, is capitalised as knowledge which can then re-circulate in the system, and it starts to appear as the investment in research and development which Lyotard understands as the system's investment in warding off future uncertainty.

If, however, it is enormous corporations that are predominantly trading, rather than small individuals, then these corporations get to play the law of averages within themselves, risking something in one enterprise that if unsuccessful will likely enough be recuperated elsewhere in the company's balance sheet by another risk that *has* paid off. Hence stock-market speculators will not invest everything in one mad gamble (as Gilder's account of the heroism of the capitalist would suggest) but will organise shares into portfolios which balance out risks, taking advantage of the fact that what is unpredictable in its particularity, on the molecular level, if you like, can often lead to a high level of predictability in its generality, on the molar level. Where a certain number of shares may well go down, as long as the investor is fairly canny, these can be balanced out by other shares that will go up. It is Lloyds of London that is perhaps the archetypal capitalist venture, where risk is balanced through insurance. In the formation and rise in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of the key institutions of modern capitalism – joint stock

companies, banks, *etc.* – it is this mechanism of scale and of the spreading of risk which is crucial.⁸³

The term, then, that both Gilder and Lyotard tend to elide in their accounts, though in opposite directions, is that of *probability*, which is perhaps the central mathematical tool of capitalist speculation on the future. In Lyotard, these calculations seem to collapse into calculations of *certainty*.⁸⁴ In Gilder, we are no longer quite dealing with probability, since in his imagination the capitalist *calculates* nothing, but instead *risks* everything. We are faced with a version of ‘chance’ (or rather as it increasingly becomes figured towards the end of the book) a divine ‘providence’, which as a metaphysical cosmic principle that the capitalist embraces, possibly even to their own destruction, ends up looking more like the notions of ‘destiny’ or ‘fate’ we would expect to find in pre-modern Europe, a destiny which the entrepreneur must seize like a classical hero.

It would seem then that if modern capitalism has a character (and I’m not convinced it does), it would lie neither in the embrace of absolute chance⁸⁵ nor in a movement towards absolute certainty. Its constant sucking

⁸³ It is worth emphasising already – given the argument that will follow about the link between sublimity and the rise of both paper currency and the national debt – that these key institutions of the liberal capitalist economy are rising at precisely the same time as the discourses of the sublime...

⁸⁴ Hence in Shannon’s founding text of the mathematics of ‘information theory’ it is always *probability* and never absolute *certainty* which is at stake. Shannon, in his more philosophical remarks stresses just this point. As soon as prediction of information becomes certain, it is no longer ‘information’. See Claude E. Shannon, *The Mathematical Theory of Information* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1949).

⁸⁵ Giddens, for example, emphasises that notions of ‘risk’ develop in contrast to older conceptions of ‘fate’ and ‘destiny’; they are a consequence and a means of emplotting ourselves in a changing history, a world which transforms itself through time, rather than pre-modern, eternally stable or circular cosmic orders, in which there is nothing really to be risked or gained, since everything is just as it is and always will be. Giddens, *Risk*. It is in the light of this account that Gilder starts to

into and harnessing of the unpredictable energies of the ‘general economy’, which it deals with through ‘risk management’ and ‘probability theory’ would seem to characterise it as an economy (and society) of managed risk, a society which both needs but also must contain a certain level of instability and unpredictability⁸⁶. Capitalist speculation – the very possibility of profiting from capitalist exchange and investment – needs this (only) relative mastery of the world which probability theory affords. Just as the capitalist benefits from the exploitation of other differentials, in our information economy it is also from certain *differentials* of information and control that the capitalist can ‘get one over’ on his competitors, his employees and those from whom he profits through reselling their goods. It is by having a better grasp of the probabilities involved than these people about, for example, the probabilities of a product’s success on the market, that allows him to take chances that they will not, and it is in this sense that information becomes not just commodity but capital. At the point when everyone knows it, it is no longer information, and is no longer capital to be invested.

Such a description might go some way, then, to an image of capital which makes more sense of some of the tensions which appear in Lyotard’s own description of capital in The Inhuman, between his image of capital as a drive to predictability, and its paradoxical effects of destabilisation, as it

look peculiarly ‘pre-modern’; it perhaps reveals that the ideological function of his account is actually to reject the possibility of change, to picture capitalism as part of a stable and inescapable cosmic order, a Fukayama-esque ‘end of history’.

⁸⁶ In sociology, modern (capitalist) society is characterised by both Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck as fundamentally a ‘society of risk’, one obsessed with the production and management of risk. As well as Giddens (cited in footnote above), see Ulrich Beck, Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity, trans. Mark Ritter, Theory, Culture and Society (London: Sage, 1992).

unleashes the destructive, transformative energies of scepticism which he notes the avant-gardes rely on (p.105).

Such a description might also accord with the fact that capitalist societies have thus tended not to be regular and orderly, controlled and disciplined, but ones in which, as Marx put it, and commentators ever since have ceaselessly observed, “all that is solid melts into air,” societies characterised by instability and restless change, in which unstable energies seem to have been released. This highly ambivalent aspect of capitalist societies, which Lyotard seems to touch on but not fully integrate into his argument would seem to chime with the another aspect of ‘capital’ which Lyotard seems to ignore in favour of the determinacy of the economic exchange. Perhaps equally key to Marx’s description of Capital is the notion of ‘surplus value’, that which once re-invested in production becomes capital itself. Surplus value, though quantifiable, is unpredictable, unstable, fluid, and even likely to drain away altogether if overaccumulated. Its instability is structurally bound up with the effects of the abstraction involved in making all things exchangeable. Such an abstraction, although adding a quantifiable, determinate price to everything, does so through uprooting it from any ground on which it might be determined (‘use value’, land, labour time, a finite quantity of gold), and in the end ‘exchange value’ – especially as we move towards a ‘postmodern’ economics of brands, signs and images – rests only on what exchange will bear⁸⁷. This removal of any fixed co-

⁸⁷ Goux notes that even the ‘classic’ political economy of the Enlightenment does not, as many commentators confuse it, mix up economic ‘use value’ with utility, which latter would seem to suppose a fundamental human ‘need’ which value expresses; ‘use value’ in economics, on the other hand, has no such moral force,

ordinates or ground for value is a de-ontologising and de-teleologising force, eschewing any transcendental point of origin or destination, in which everything is laid out in a horizontal relation of exchangeability; as such, it is either the expression or source (or perhaps it is at once both) of the forces of scepticism and destruction on which the avant-garde draw, and which saw to the end of all the fixed systems of value and hierarchy of the *ancien regime* and its classical poetics.

Such a vision of the nature of capital, as involving the tension between the drive to quantification, and the uncontrollable mutability of capital as 'surplus', goes further, I think, towards making it clear how Lyotard's 'sublime' might not be in opposition to capital, but in fact perhaps one of its (many) faces... Wilhelm Wurzer, in an essay on Lyotard, and citing Georg Simmel makes a similar kind of equation:

Making the exchange between things possible, capital, unlike any other being, is paradoxically both the least and the most representational (Thing). Never entirely present, it stands at an insurmountable distance from the subject that craves and enjoys it [...] The sublime is no longer present to itself. [...] In its 'postmodern' context as capital, the word 'sublime' (*erhaben – erheben in die Höhe heben*) becomes a sign that cannot be read so easily. Drawn into an aesthetic explosion of appearances (as Adorno might say), and sliding off from mimesis, the sublime marks the very scene of the *différend* wherein the dissolve becomes capital, a promise without finality, a maddening presence.⁸⁸

Wurzer, however, would seem to mean something rather precise (and a little idiosyncratic) by 'capital'. In his book, Filming and Judgment, he notes that, as he would like to define it, "There is more to capital than its alignment

and merely refers to the value which people might attach to a use: thus diamonds have the 'use' of ornamentation... Goux, "General Economics," 209.

⁸⁸ Wurzer, "Lyotard," 208.

with capitalism.”⁸⁹ Capital, as just such a disruptive, anti-metaphysical, de-ontologising force as we have described, is to be distinguished from its reinsertion into ‘capitalist’ ideologies and social forms, which would also involve the reterritorialisation of the restless energies of capital by the (relatively) stable discourses of capitalism, with their metaphysics of the commodity relation.⁹⁰

Such a reading of the sublime as tied up with the emergence of a logic of capital (aside from the synchrony between the two, which we noted earlier, discussing Lyotard’s own periodisation of the sublime) might be given further credence by the historical argument of Peter De Bolla’s The Discourse of the Sublime: Readings in History, Aesthetics and the Subject about the developments in the mid-eighteenth century of the discourse on the sublime, and its links to shifts in economic discourses.

⁸⁹ Wilhelm S. Wurzer, Filming and Judgment: Between Heidegger and Adorno, Philosophy and Literary Theory, ed. Hugh J. Silverman (London and New Jersey: Humanities Press International, 1990) 65.

⁹⁰ Wurzer’s is a post-Marxist project, which seeks to embrace ‘post-modern’ thought such as Lyotard’s. For Lyotard, the error of Marxism lies in precisely the confusion of capital with capitalism, and its failure, as we enter ‘late capitalism’ to account for the new forms of thought or action which are possible (or made impossible) by this new society. “Marxism fails to understand the disruptive relations of capital and power, inasmuch as it refuses to interpret capital without its signified and power without representation [...] It does not know how to relate to a culture whose political signified has withdrawn into the darkness of yesterday’s dialectic.” Furthermore, the fading of the subject, which is readily discernible in the cultural contours of our epoch, constitutes an *abyss* for marxist theory. Classic revolutionary intentions are therefore incapacitated. As the revolutionary subject with a political will to change the social infrastructure evaporates, so does the conventional theory-practice polarity. Hence the question: shall marxism be able to relate to the subversion of western culture without fading from the scene in a ‘time without spirit’ [...] While the obscenity of our age may reflect the absence of political and moral accountability, postmodern thought neither affirms this nor denies this nontransformative propensity. Instead it highlights that we are free to explore possibilities of change through formative modes of judging. Such modes do not seem to accommodate the principle of political intentionality, making it unlikely for change to come about through narrow political reflections.” Wurzer, Filming 64, 58.

This book came out in English in 1989: in other words, two years before Lyotard's key essays on the sublime were collected in The Inhuman in English translation, and De Bolla, writing from the perspective of the discipline of eighteenth-century British literary and cultural history does not mention Lyotard, or seem to have been aware of the forays into the notion of the sublime that Lyotard was by that point already making. However there seems to be a certain synchronicity between this question of the sublime as an 'excess' that will not (yet) be represented or controlled in the web of discourse in De Bolla's book, and Lyotard's account of it⁹¹. However, in De Bolla's account, the discourse on the sublime, as we find it in such authors as Burke, Kames and Gerard, can be understood to be involved in exactly the same management of excess, of surplus value, of unstable and unruly forces, as that which is involved in the shift towards an economics of debt and credit, and towards the malleability of value caused by the increased move to paper money...

In particular, De Bolla discusses the emergence of the discourse on sublimity as having in it much in common with (and in fact, forming a 'discursive knot' along with) the discourse on the English national debt as it escalated, especially during the Seven Year War with France. De Bolla points out that the campaign, which was in the first place one over access to territories for reasons of trade, "a struggle for the right to exploitation,

⁹¹ This 'synchronicity' is less surprising when we take into account De Bolla's interest in and use of poststructuralist (in particular, it seems, Derridean and Foucauldian) notions of 'discourse', springing from just the intellectual milieu from which Lyotard's own work springs, notions which stress 'surplus' and 'excess' as central. When De Bolla and Lyotard apply these notions to the 'sublime', it is hardly a shock that their versions of sublimity might resemble one another... Note also: Bataille is a central influence on the growth of such theories of discourse.

manufacture, expansion of capital: profit,” did not just have money as its stakes, but also as its means of combat; it was an economic war as well as a war for economic gain. However, the economic weapons with which the two side fought were somewhat different: whereas the English opened a ‘sinking fund’ which allowed the national debt to spiral in order to keep interest payments to its creditors high, the French attempted to limit their debt by periodically reducing interest payments by decree. As a result, the French found it difficult to keep up the level of investment necessary to pursue the war, whilst investment in the English war effort remained an attractive proposition. The problem for the English became extricating themselves from the war without financial collapse, and the possibility of winning the war only to the effect of a disastrous economic collapse (winning the war but losing the peace) was only too real.⁹² If the discourse on the sublime was “a powerful mechanism for ever more sublime sensations,” De Bolla claims, the discourse on debt created “the rationale for a never-ending inflation.”⁹³

According to De Bolla’s account, throughout the eighteenth century, in particular in the period of the war, we see a shift in the way that the (‘unruly’) “potentially infinite excess”⁹⁴ of the national debt can be figured, mirroring the shift of power from the landed to the moneyed class. As value becomes a mere product of exchange⁹⁵, uprooted from any absolute mooring in land or

⁹² De Bolla, *Discourse of the Sublime* 106-8. This is, of course, a situation conjuring the spectre of eternal war, one which has so many sinister echoes throughout the centuries since and also in the present day... In this respect, the current ‘war on terror’ complies to an awful financial rationality...

⁹³ De Bolla, *Discourse of the Sublime* 6.

⁹⁴ De Bolla, *Discourse of the Sublime* 108.

⁹⁵ This is also linked to the increase of the printing of paper money at this period (the ten pound note, for example, being introduced in 1759, which perhaps marks a key

labour, the debt starts to become imagined as productive, and its instability manageable, even desirable. No longer a 'parasite' on the body of the nation, debt becomes a peculiar body itself, a positive property that one can own, even in its negativity⁹⁶; a body which can itself be healthy or vigorous, and which can even come to represent the 'body' of the nation itself...⁹⁷

For De Bolla, this figure of over-plus comes, furthermore, to be used to harmonise in a new (properly 'modern') way, the 'interest' of the individual subject and national 'interest', coming together in what is more than a pun in the 'interest' accruing in the national debt. As the century progressed the interest accumulated by private investors on their loans to the nation and public interest were seen increasingly to be in harmony, in their free decision to lend to the nation, allowing the blood of capital to circulate from the individual to the national body.

For De Bolla, the management and figurability of such a potentially infinite national debt and the interpellation of the subject in its terms, amounts to both the birth of 'modern' subjectivity and "a founding gesture of the capitalist description of the subject."⁹⁸ It relies on an essentially similar discursive technology, or technology of subjectivity as that which is involved in the discourse of the sublime: sublime discourse produces the individual subject as marked by a discursive excess, an excess of affect and 'meaning', which forms a 'surplus' which cannot be accounted for within the balance

point in paper currency's competition with coin), in part to service such a national debt, which further uprooted the value of a denomination from a particular body of gold or silver.

⁹⁶ Might we in fact compare such a negative positivity to Burke's 'negative pleasure', the 'delight' of the sublime?

⁹⁷ De Bolla, *Discourse of the Sublime* 104, 08, 13.

⁹⁸ De Bolla, *Discourse of the Sublime* 6, 128.

sheet of discourse, and which thus constituted the irreducible difference of 'individuality' in the same way as the economic subject is marked by the exponential 'surplus value' of the 'interest' on their investment. Both discourses, he argues, involve "a conceptualisation of the subject as the excess or overplus of discourse itself; as the remainder, that which cannot be appropriated or included within the present discursive network of control."⁹⁹

Both discourses also involve a new kind of reflexivity about the 'surplus' they have within themselves of discursive power, the discursive surplus which will mark the subject's place within them (as both discourse's producer and product). The new conception of economic value in the age of national debt and paper money, made seemingly infinitely malleable – a fact understood as both dangerous and productive – was based on the fact that the new form of economics had made money itself understandable an arbitrary sign, a representation. Thus by 1778, Price could write of paper money, representing a representation (coin) of a representation (value), as if it was simply "a fact of life" that "signs can and do produce further signs."¹⁰⁰ Such signs are available, moreover, to be produced and manipulated through the representational systems of 'theories' of the economic (by political economy) in a similar way to that in which theories of the sublime were being understood themselves to be productive (and managerial) of sublimity and of forms of sublime (literary or rhetorical) discourse¹⁰¹. Discourse, argues De Bolla, becomes something all at once excessive, and also itself regulatory

⁹⁹ De Bolla, Discourse of the Sublime 6.

¹⁰⁰ De Bolla, Discourse of the Sublime 138. De Bolla is referring to a passage in Richard Price, Two Tracts on Civil Liberty (London, 1778) 74-5.

¹⁰¹ See the repeated assertion, after Boileau, that Longinus's essay *is itself* an example of the sublime of which it treats...

and productive of (discursive) excess, a discursive excess, which, we have noted, is the mark of the subject of the discourse of the sublime and of modern economic discourse, the place where such a subject nestles into and finds a home within such discourses.¹⁰²

De Bolla draws back from drawing a causal link – from arguing either that the discourse of the sublime is ‘caused’ by economic change, or that the economic changes of the eighteenth century were produced by their liberation from old modes of activity by the new ways of conceiving subjectivity and excess which were being opened up in the nascent aesthetics of the sublime. Rather, aiming more to describe a configuration of discourse than a causal relation, his argument is that the two discourses, in their synchronicity, form a kind of discursive ‘knot’, bound together within the complexity of interrelations and tensions in a larger synchronous structure of the network of discourse. Nonetheless, what we have in his work is a powerful image of the emergence of a discursive logic which is both that of the sublime and that of one of the key mechanism’s characteristic of capitalism, and one which seems to strike a series of chords with those aspects of the capitalism, in all its ambiguity, which find their way into the Lyotardian sublime: the importance of its (deontologising) forces of scepticism, which cause experiment, destruction and rapid change, and the fact that in spite of its drive to order, capitalism creates an ever more complex and uncontrollable world. Such an account, I think, starts to open up a reading of Lyotard’s statement that “Sublimity is no longer in art, but in

¹⁰² De Bolla, Discourse of the Sublime 6.

speculation on art.” (p.106), and also starts to tease out the ties between the ‘new’ and the ‘now’.

Afterword 1: Piranesi, Breughel and the sublimity of capital

There seem to be two images from art history of Lyotard’s sublime vision of capital.

Piranesi’s *Carceri*, themselves a key site of critical discussion around which the British shift from a taste for the beautiful to one for the sublime was effected, and around which the properties of (a version of) this new taste was to be articulated, is the most obvious. The prisons, springing from Piranesi’s nightmares, embody the Faustian work of capital, as envisaged by Lyotard, as an inhuman monad in expansion. Expanding infinitely, they are always only half-built, often strewn with scaffolding and the tools of their construction, but are seemingly already falling into decay. The prisons are an inhuman landscape, filled with devices of torture, built counter to the needs and purposes of their inhabitants, expanding according to their own autonomous, geometric logic, which prescribes for them no proper boundary, no closed form, only a modular, – though also somewhat chaotic – vertiginous self-replication, a ‘complexification’ which is logically unlimited. Their hard, rough, cold stone surfaces are hardly adapted to the needs of the human body, and their vast scale uproots and unsettles, or even annihilates the sense of self, offering no orientation to the subject.

Piranesi's etchings were, of course, central in the development of the 'Gothic sublime'¹⁰³, inspiring so centrally as they did Horace Walpole's own dream-scape of The Castle of Otranto. The castle/prison that was to emerge as central in the Gothic imagination, like Lyotard's sublime capital, forms a landscape or architecture that itself takes on a form of uncanny, inhuman agency, which becomes more a character, more a protagonist than the human 'characters' of the novel or play, who become fragmentary and inconsistent, losing their individuality on the one hand in a series of shifts or inconsistencies in behaviour and motivation from scene to scene as they jump from role to role, and on the other in a labyrinthine structure of doubling with the other 'characters' in the narrative, a labyrinth which itself mirrors the architectural labyrinth in which the action takes place, and turns out to be the only real logic which animates it. Such a vision of the heteronomy of the self and its motivation, it could be argued, parallels the experience of the subjection and reification of the individual at the hands of an external agency or 'Will' in capitalist relations, an 'Will' that seems less and less like that of another individual, and more and more like that of a 'system', an inhuman monad.

(Hence, Piranesi's etchings seem also to serve as a blueprint for an ensuing tradition of the 'industrial sublime', a profusion of vast, infernal, Miltonesque or Martinesque landscapes of 'Satanic mills', which dwarf the human, and subject him or her to the mechanics of labour and productivity, a vision

¹⁰³For Piranesi's influence on the Gothic imagination, and on Walpole in particular, see Mishra, The Gothic Sublime 59.

extending to the present day in the mammoth photographs of the sites of production, transportation, display, exchange and consumption within which the individual appears as a mere point enplotted within the spatial plan of the architecture or urban site...)

Amongst the predecessors of Piranesi's imaginary, infinitely-expanding prison, set as it is in the tradition of architectural caprice,¹⁰⁴ has to be numbered what for me is the image (or model) *par excellence* of Lyotard's vision of capitalism as inhuman and ever-expanding, a painting which seems to figure rarely in the eighteenth-century canon of sublime paintings, but nevertheless which lies at its thematic core. This image is Pieter Bruegel the Elder's vision of the tower of Babel, painted as it is at a moment of the expansion of early modern capital, industrial and urban expansion in the low countries¹⁰⁵. In the version in Rotterdam¹⁰⁶, by far the more dystopian of the two extant¹⁰⁷ towers he painted, the tower spirals ever outwards in a centrifugal compositional movement to encompass and annihilate the landscape in which it is situated, its pastoral green relegated to the distant horizon, giving way in the foreground to an earth blackened and blasted by

¹⁰⁴ The title of the first state (dating to the 1740s) of Piranesi's prisons denominates them as *capricci*. For Babel as a subject of architectural 'caprice', see, for example, *Giovanni Battista Piranesi: His Predecessors and His Heritage*, (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1968)., which although not listing Brueghel as such as a 'predecessor' for the prisons, does list a series of architectural 'caprices', including several by Claude Lorrain, one of which is a drawing of the Tower of Babel.

¹⁰⁵ The tower is translocated from its Biblical setting to the sixteenth-century Flemish landscape that Brueghel knew, and overflows with observed details of contemporary dress, architecture, and mining and building techniques.

¹⁰⁶ Pieter Bruegel (the Elder), *The Tower of Babel*, c. 1563, oil on panel, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam.

¹⁰⁷ It seems Bruegel in fact painted three; the third, a miniature painted on ivory, is missing. The other tower still in existence is in Vienna.

the mines and furnaces which surround the tower and supply it with the materials of its manufacture. It also swallows up a vast army of labouring figures, in procession up its ramparts towards its unfinished and unfinishable turret, become so tiny in relation to the tower itself that they are almost invisible in reproduction, and cause a viewer of the painting itself to step so close as to be swallowed up in the space of the rather modestly-sized panel on which the picture is painted.

A peculiarity or problem, however, about figuring the sublime in terms of the limitless excess or expansion conjured by the effects of capital's surplus value (or even just as a part of modern discursive technology intimately structurally linked into that part which produces 'surplus value') is the fact that it is so emphatically *nature* – in explicit opposition to the artificial – that is expected to carry the feeling of sublimity in Romantic thought¹⁰⁸. One thing that is striking in eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century accounts of London's sprawling urban structure and its swelling crowds – a city, by this point by far the largest urban centre in the world, growing at a geometric rate, and according to the demands of a 'free' market and which can perhaps be seen, as an embodiment of this market – as a sort of image of the very unrepresentability of that market's principles – is the rarity with which it is named 'sublime', in spite of the fact that observers repeatedly describe it terms of the characteristics reserved for the natural objects evocative of

¹⁰⁸ "we must not point to the sublime in works of art, e.g., buildings, statues and the like, where a human end determines the form as well as the magnitude, nor yet in things of nature, that in their very concept import a definite end..." §26, Immanuel Kant and James Meredith (trans.), Critique of Judgement, 9th April 2000 [1790], downloadable hypertext, University of Adelaide Library, Available: <<http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/k/k16j/k16j.zip>>, January 2004.

sublimity. Repeatedly it is described in terms of its vastness and formlessness, its obscurity and inhumanity, its production of sensory overload or privation, of dizzying disorientation, of feelings of threat and danger or loss of self, but also of exaltation and excitement, its evocation of the sense of a force greater than and overwhelming to the human individual: in short it is described repeatedly as an object impenetrable and unfigurable, the contemplation of which can only evoke an ambivalent sense of 'negative pleasure'. In spite of all this the word 'sublime' itself is hardly ever applied to the city.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ Only a few of the example that Roy Porter cites, for example, in his London: A Social History will make this repeated trope clear. Christian Goede, a German visitor to London, writes in 1802, "nothing is presented to the view but a vast crowd [...], many of whom are so overpowered by the heat, noise and confusion, as to be in danger of fainting. Everyone complains of the pressure of the company, yet all rejoice at being so divinely squeezed." (cited in Porter, London p.115). Robert Southey in 1807: "I began to study a plan of London, though dismayed at the sight of its prodigious extent, – a city a league and half from one extremity to another, and about half as broad, standing on level ground. It is impossible ever to become thoroughly acquainted with such an endless labyrinth of streets" (Letters from England, cited in Porter, London p.93). Walpole himself, in a letter of 1791, writes of a town so vast that "Hercules and Atlas could not carry anybody from one end of this enormous capital to the other", a town nonetheless which "cannot hold all its inhabitants", who seem subject to an even more unimaginable growth: "so prodigiously [is] the population [...] augmented", he writes, that he mistakes the everyday crowds for a mob, and finds himself imagining, in a natural metaphor precisely of sublimity, that "the tides of coaches, chariots, curricles phaetons &c. are endless." (cited in Porter, London p.99) We find Boswell in 1763 on the one hand in enthusiastic rapture at the vast vista of the city: "When we came upon Highgate Hill and had a / view of London, I was all life and joy." (cited in Porter, London p.160) but on climbing the Monument he describes a quite different sense of being overwhelmed, but one that equally follows the tropes of sublimity as classically described by Burke and Kant: "It was horrid to find myself so monstrous a way up in the air, so far above London and all its spires. I durst not look around me. There is no real danger [...] [b]ut I shuddered, and as every heavy wagon passed down Gracechurch Street, dreaded the shaking of the earth would make the tremendous pile tumble to the foundation." (cited in Porter, London p.164) These are (more than) enough examples to demonstrate the insistence of this motif, but many more could be given. Citations above are from Roy Porter, London: A Social History (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1994).

Wordsworth's Prelude provides an example of this phenomenon in its full-blown Romantic form. In Book 7, he describes his time spent in London, after his studies in Cambridge, and the city is described repeatedly in the terminology usually associated with the sublime, just as it is in so many other texts of the time: it fills one with "wonder and obscure delight"¹¹⁰, 'awe', it 'dizzies' one. Wordsworth writes of feeling "in heart and soul the shock / Of the huge town's first presence" (l. 66-7); the streets are "endless" (l.68). In one passage, Wordsworth even goes as far as to bring in the term 'sublime', describing the city in a vision which emphasises its disorienting and inhuman vastness, which reduces us to mere ants, its vortex of dynamic forces, its sensory overload, its chaos and its formlessness:

Rise up, thou monstrous ant-hill on the plain
 Of a too busy world! Before me flow, 150
 Thou endless stream of men and moving things!
 Thy every-day appearance, as it strikes--
 With wonder heightened, or sublimed by awe--
 On strangers, of all ages; the quick dance
 Of colours, lights, and forms; the deafening din;
 The comers and the goers face to face,
 Face after face; the string of dazzling wares,
 Shop after shop, with symbols, blazoned names,
 And all the tradesman's honours overhead
(l.149-159)

The city here, as throughout the book, disintegrates into a shapeless mass of fragments and partial images, which only rarely crystallise into an intelligible form. The rhythm mimes this out, broken into short, staccato clauses, which pile up as grammatical fragments – incomplete, almost verbless – marked by alliteration, repetitions, and by short, Anglo-Saxon words. Stylistically here –

¹¹⁰ William Wordsworth, The Prelude, July 1999 [1799-1805], Bartleby.com, Available: <<http://www.bartleby.com/145/>>, September 2003. Book 7, line 87. Following citations will be given in the body of the text, with only line numbers.

and again throughout the book – Wordsworth leans on the list, a device perhaps borrowed from Pope’s accounts of the maelstrom of urban life¹¹¹, a device which Laura Brown has analysed as being in Pope the formal equivalent of the reification involved in capital, its transformation of all objects into their exchangeable value (or place within a list) and their loss of their specificity under this law of exchangeability – the objects start to appear random in their piling up – at the same time as it mimics the profusion of objects becoming available in their sheer enumeration¹¹².

Wordsworth’s account is hugely ambivalent. It drags us through the exciting, energetic chaos of the city, the magnificence and profusion of its spectacles, from the pleasure gardens of Vauxhall to Ranelagh, its museums and exhibitions with their displays of the exotic, the panoramas, dioramas and miniature models, sideshows, its architectural and engineering wonders, the spectacle of the cosmopolitan crowd itself, the dazzle of the shopfronts and even the more ‘lofty’ pleasures of spectatorship of legal and political oratory¹¹³. However, as well as threatening the senses with overload, and with the formlessness and imagelessness which the city threatens the poem

¹¹¹ That this might be a source for Wordsworth’s style is strengthened by his evocation of the help of a ‘Muse’ to ascend to the heights of the showman’s platform (which is ironically, of course, also a figurative depth) at Bartholomew fair. This muse would have to be, quite literally, be Pope’s “Smithfield Muse” (l.682), and her name ‘dulness’ appears several lines on (l.716). The description of the fair, in particular, with its power to lay “The whole creative powers of man asleep” (l.681), to level and dedifferentiate things shows Pope’s vision of Dulness as an unmistakable influence in Wordsworth’s account of the city.

¹¹² Brown, *Alexander Pope* 130.

¹¹³ At this point, (l.494-571), he picks out Edmund Burke as the great example of such oratory, and his presence as theorist of the sublime is joined with the sublimity of his rhetorical practice... Through a series of metonymic displacements (from the book to the man and his speeches, and from the man to the city within which he speaks), Burke’s theory of the sublime – a theory which stands out amongst other versions of the sublime precisely for its embrace of urban spectacle – finds itself at the heart of London’s visual culture...

repeatedly, the city is also a site of repeated ‘disappointment’ (l.96), its pleasures, aimed at the mass of the crowd, hardly supply more than stimulation, do not aspire to, or offer little more than a dim echo of, the absolute which is Wordsworth’s goal, and which he seems to suggest is perhaps what they appear to be hawking nonetheless¹¹⁴. Moreover, this bathos of the urban spectacle is tinged repeatedly by the threat of moral and social, as well as intellectual, corruption or ‘Dulness’.

Thus it is that Bartholomew Fair - long in literature the name of all that is anarchic, popular and dangerous – becomes the final image which provides the epitome of the urban spectacle of the late eighteenth-century metropolis:

From these sights
 Take one,--that ancient festival, the Fair,
 Holden where martyrs suffered in past time,
 And named of St. Bartholomew; there, see
 A work completed to our hands, that lays,
 If any spectacle on earth can do, 680
 The whole creative powers of man asleep!--
 For once, the Muse's help will we implore,
 And she shall lodge us, wafted on her wings,
 Above the press and danger of the crowd,
 Upon some showman's platform. What a shock
 For eyes and ears! what anarchy and din,
 Barbarian and infernal,--a phantasma,
 Monstrous in colour, motion, shape, sight, sound!
 Below, the open space, through every nook
 Of the wide area, twinkles, is alive 690
 With heads; the midway region, and above,
 Is thronged with staring pictures and huge scrolls,
 Dumb proclamations of the Prodigies;
 (l.675-693)

¹¹⁴ This is perhaps a more important point for my overall argument than its brief treatment here will permit to be made clear. What is the relation between a the commercialised, debased, bathetic version of sublimity we find here, and its more ‘high art’ versions? Does the spectacle of urban life, as suggested here by Wordsworth, with its technologies of the evocation of wonder and awe, depend at least on some broken promise to fulfil the desire for the sublime that is awakened in the high art which leads us to Romanticism?

thousands of her sons”, is able to transform this overwhelming experience of the city and of its commercialised urban culture into a sublime vision, just as the (Smithfield) Muse allows him a panoptical view of the chaotic scene below, which elevates him above it, allows him a form of ‘transcendence’.

But though the picture weary out the eye,
 By nature an unmanageable sight,
 It is not wholly so to him who looks
 In steadiness, who hath among least things
 An under-sense of greatest; sees the parts
 As parts, but with a feeling of the whole.
 [...] Attention springs, 740
 And comprehensiveness and memory flow,
 From early converse with the works of God
 Among all regions; chiefly where appear
 Most obviously simplicity and power.
 Think, how the everlasting streams and woods,
 Stretched and still stretching far and wide, exalt
 The roving Indian, on his desert sands [...] [whose] powers and aspects
 Shape for mankind, by principles as fixed,
 The views and aspirations of the soul
 To majesty.

(l.731-756)

There is something a little Kantian in Wordsworth’s transcendent movement, in that we are faced with an object (one quite counter-purposive to the self) which checks the imagination’s power to take it in and provide a figure for it, on the basis merely of what is presented to it. It is only by turning inward, and away from the scene, by appealing to a supersensory knowledge of the absolute that the profusion of formlessness in the urban spectacle can be ‘manageable’ by the mind. These similarities with the Kantian sublime may be somewhat superficial, however, since for Wordsworth here it is not just an abstract attunement to the ‘absolute’ as an Idea of Reason that allows such a transcendence. It also depends on the powers of memory, and on the mediation of the urban scene by a natural one; as with Kant it is properly the

natural rather than the artificial which allows us access to a 'proper' aesthetic vision of the absolute, though in Wordsworth, nature is figured as something much more directly imbued with the empirically evident presence of the work of God, and although in Wordsworth the man-made starts to take the place of nature as the object which might evoke (or face us with the need for) such a movement transcendent of sensory perception.¹¹⁵

This would seem to me to reveal in the Romantic quest for the solitudinous sublime of nature an explicit (here) though elsewhere implicit retreat from the urban, from the hurly-burly of the commercialism of late eighteenth-century as a kind of repressed object of sublimity, an experience of sensory overload which must be repeatedly distanced from us, and whose anxieties must be displaced into the safer images of the natural sublime¹¹⁶; in this sense the natural sublime is precisely Burke's terror "at one remove", a "modification" of the feeling of terror...

Thus Frances Ferguson is correct, I think, to see the Romantic sublimity of nature as a kind of reaction against the anxieties, already expressed in Gothic fiction, about the press of others on the consciousness of the self, and on the uncomfortable press onto the individual's sense of their identity and autonomy of the grids of social and economic relationships, which determine identity from the outside¹¹⁷. However, it would seem to me

¹¹⁵ Wordsworth continues: "The Spirit of Nature was upon me there; / The soul of Beauty and enduring Life / Vouchsafed her inspiration, and diffused, / Through meagre lines and colours, and the press / Of self-destroying, transitory things..." (l.767-771)

¹¹⁶ Think also of the echo of this in Wordsworth's most known lines, where the image of the city's unbearable throng is sublimated into the rather more domestic (in fact, rather 'pretty') "crowd / of golden daffodils" which does not threaten the poet's solitude or his tranquillity of mind...

¹¹⁷ "The aesthetic discussion that emerged in the eighteenth century located an anxiety about the relationship between the individual and the type," Frances

that her suggestion that this stems from the philosophical problem of how to account for 'how there can be one of anything' in relation to the possibility of plurality, a problem which she sees as having a superior articulation in Kant's idealism (and the of the Romantic poets) to that of Burke's (Gothic) empiricism would only be a secondary consideration¹¹⁸. If the Gothic landscape is one which has become uncannily animated by the forces of capitalist exchange¹¹⁹ (by the nascent – though itself rather un-monadic – 'monad in expansion'?) which provides a mysterious doubleness to our agency, and whose logic has already started to animate us, as if we were characters in a dream, might this not – via a reading of Lyotard through and against himself – provide a more fundamental or satisfactory explanation of the experience – at the very least in terms of the parameters of my own inquiry?

Afterword 2: A rather rambling Post-script

Ferguson, Solitude and the Sublime : Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Individuation (London & New York: Routledge, 1992) 31.

¹¹⁸ Ferguson, Solitude and the Sublime viii.

¹¹⁹ Such a working of a logic of capital to produce the modern subject might be noted to produce it as at once more autonomous from, and at the same time more threatened by, social processes than 'pre-modern' forms of subjectivity. Medieval culture could be imagined to interpellate a subject more stably than that of modern economic reality: less mobility meant both that identity was more welded to one's position in a stable hierarchy, and also that that placing permeated further one's social and cultural experience: to be a peasant or a guildsman was to live, love, worship and feast as one. Under capitalist conditions, the individual achieves a kind of autonomy in that their labour, having become a quantifiable, exchangeable possession ceases to determine identity in quite the same way: identity also becomes exchangeable. However, as with the objects of exchange, it is liable to lose its particularity, and its moorings in any stable terms of reference. hence, perhaps, a need in Romanticism to flee the social sphere to seek a place in nature where the individual can appear to be master of its own experience, as if this individuality to which it aspires were not already a product of the social conditions in which it is formed...

In the above, I have made an exploration of Lyotard's notion of the sublime which starts with the problem presented by Lyotard's opposition between the 'new' and the 'now', between a logic which he wishes to identify with capitalism and one which he wishes to identify with its avant-garde. I have sought to trouble this opposition, something which I believe Lyotard's essays on the sublime start to do already themselves, although this 'agitation' of his own schema often remains buried beneath the surface of his explicit argument. Picking up on hints that he himself provides in the essays, I have sought to show that Lyotard's logics of the 'new' and the 'now', whilst not the 'same', are intimately intertwined, and I have sought to show some of the ways that this might further be written into a historical account in particular of the cultural moment in which the notion of the sublime was transformed – as Lyotard himself schematises it – from what might be a properly 'neoclassical' poetics to a modern aesthetics, a process which involved the growth of a Gothic and then a Romantic sensibility, and was tightly bound into transformations in modern subjectivity in the face, in particular, of the increasingly liberated forces of capital, and of the transformative energies of a kind of sceptical, rational, modern thought which Lyotard might envision as a 'monad in expansion', but which is probably somewhat less monadic than Lyotard envisages.

I've also, in particular attempted to resist some of Lyotard's more 'metaphysical' speculations on the nature of capital(ism) as having an Ideal essence, and have tried to question the generalisations about the nature of 'capital' that he proposes, and its particular uses at the present moment

which is often dubbed 'late capitalism' or 'globalised capitalism'. My own account has, I think, not entirely managed to escape this kind of generalisation or essentialism; I would not like to assume that the two moments that I am centrally picking up on, one which centres in the eighteenth century, and the other in the present day, to serve as a general model of an essential and eternal truth which lies under the surface of the 'capitalism', itself a not an adequate term to designate the totality of any 'capitalist' society which has existed (each such society being produced by other factors besides its economic organisation. I would p[refer the account to be read as noting a series of echoes between that moment and our own, across the wider history of capitalism: it seems to me that it is to this particular earlier moment in particular that our culture seems to be drawing to articulate its own, new forms of capitalist adventure. A Neo-liberalism, then, drawing on the moment of the birth of a liberalism; a global, trade-based 'empire' looking back to the birth of another trade-based empire; two moments in which discourses on 'sublimity' have been important in philosophical speculation on art. What I have written, then, has been seeking not an immutable truth of capital, but to unravel a kind of archaeology or genealogy which starts with the present, with Damien Hirst's brand of capitalist art (an art also not entirely uncritically about capitalism), and with the discussions of value which surround the work, drawing as they do on the notion of the 'sublime'.

I would like, however, to finish with a short speculation on some of the implications of the motivations behind my discussion of Lyotard, some

thought which are certainly rather speculative, and which thus must form a post-script, really, rather than a conclusion.

The first question that might arise from my analysis might be thus: Does the destabilisation of Lyotard's opposition, suggest that the 'now' might be as likely to be found in commodified work – in Hollywood film, television documentaries, and in the work of a 'capitalist' artist such as Damien Hirst – as it is in the products of a 'genuine' avant-garde? For me, however, this destabilisation is not one whose ultimate aim is to suggest that Damien Hirst and Hollywood movies, since they are 'sublime' (and since being 'sublime' is obviously a 'good' thing), might thus aspire to the heights of critical respectability that are normally accorded to high art. Rather, I think, the notion of the 'now' – the sublime itself – has itself to be understood as a much more ambivalent term than it might at first appear in Lyotard's writing. I'm not sure that it can guarantee the value of artworks, or their status as 'oppositional' in quite the way that he would like. What Lyotard's essay seems itself to repress as much as anything else are the full implications of the fact that the avant-garde, or modernist art (or whatever one might like to call it) is more fully a result of capital and commodification, more fully a form of commodified thought, than he would like to admit, and its staging of the irruption of the event might be one of the primary movements of capital itself. The sublime may turn out, all along, to have always been capital. The two, after all, emerge co-temporally, and seem to share so many characteristics. The question of the 'now' needs to be figured somewhat differently: the 'now'

itself, entangled as it is with the 'new', may be as ambiguous a force as that of capital, which has both a liberatory and a repressive dimension.

Does this argument involve a kind of levelling out of avant-garde art and commercial culture? In a sense, yes. To be sure, modern art, in its specificity (though in fact it has itself been extremely heterogenous) has constituted a valuable form of ('serious'?) intellectual and political work, which is quite different from the main body of products of the 'entertainment' industry, in many ways for precisely some of the reasons that Lyotard lays out in his essay: it has been more experimental than most other forms of culture, less formulaic; it is a form of production allowed more autonomy, and which has taken the rejection of givens as a methodology, taking it as a value to proceed from aporia to aporia. It has been produced in specific institutional and discursive frameworks, allying itself in particular ways to critical, philosophical, political and other modes – should I say projects? – of intellectual inquiry; there has been a particular form of economic and social basis for its production (artists have enjoyed a very particular and peculiar status within our society; furthermore, they understand their work within the narrative framework of an 'art history' which enplots them in a particular way), which has allowed it to claim specific forms of artistic agency or autonomy; art has pretensions to a seriousness and respectability, to an independence and a rebelliousness which set it aside from other forms of cultural product. But much of this value of art also distances it from the purely 'sublimicist' reading that Lyotard would like to make. One dimension of its 'seriousness' is also bound, then to (political, social) projects which

Lyotard would like to name 'cultural' work, rather than the proper work of the sublime and of the avant-garde: hence his troubling elision of any discussion of the important political work being done by many artists at the time Lyotard was writing.

Furthermore, to note all these institutional and discursive specificities of that which is called art doesn't amount to an argument for art's *essential* difference from other forms of culture (as aesthetic rather than cultural product) but for the favourableness of the discursive and institutional framework within which art is (still?) produced for 'serious', 'productive', 'original', 'oppositional' thought in both 'aesthetic' and 'cultural' modes. Whatever precisely these terms might mean, and whatever kind of a value they might amount to, they are certainly the 'values' which form the conditions for the production of 'art' in modern Western culture. Such an argument is one for understanding art, as it has been produced over the last hundred or so years (perhaps more), as being culturally constructed as a *relatively* more free and autonomous, *relatively* more serious and inquiring form of cultural production than that of more straightforwardly commercial and mass-distributed products. Such an argument for the relative advantage of art as a cultural sphere will have also to note that the products of what is called the 'culture industry' are also not as homogenous as the label suggests. Not all products are equally as crass. Many products of the 'culture industry' to an extent share with art a pretension to being a form of 'intellectual work' as well as one of 'entertainment'. They take on a similar burden of seriousness (though usually to a lesser extent), engage with other

forms of intellectual inquiry, reflect critically on their own formal and institutional nature, and offer criticisms of society – this happens, perhaps, to an extent through their very pretension to belong to the elevated category of ‘art’ itself, and to do the work which it does.

Moreover, this intellectual work is not the only thing that might constitute ‘art’, and might not be the only value that art might have for us. This would be so if we are to take seriously either the claims made by aesthetics or psychoanalysis about the workings of art. Art has consistently, over the last two centuries, been expected to be *more* than a form of independent intellectual inquiry, an expectation linked to the very demand that it ‘bear witness to the unrepresentable’. If art, as well as forming a kind of intellectual inquiry also has a ‘sensuous’ existence, if it articulates lived experiences in sensuous thought, if it deals with affect as well as intellection, if it is anything like ‘myth’ (a formal, symbolic or narrative grappling with lived contradiction), if it is thought to give voice to unconscious (repressed) thought as well as its conscious counterpart, to exist as a realm of free play outside the demands of politics and economics, – or even if we are to think of art as communicating with a broader audience than a handful of peers – then art’s (multiple and unfixed) nature cannot be reduced to the kind of discursivity and institutional embodiment in theories of aesthetics, in avant-garde manifestos and in academic curricula that might constitute it as the form of intellectual inquiry which we think we know it as. All this much is in tune with Lyotard’s thesis in “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde.”

But it seems to me that in this case, if art's value is also in this sensuousness, in its formal properties, in its voicing of the 'repressed' and excluded, the particular, that which does not find its place readily in an order of things but demands, nonetheless, not to disappear, then this is once again also something that happens – if often to a lesser extent, and if in different forms – in other forms of culture; it is something that cannot help finding its way back into culture just as the repressed will always find its way back into the very speech that attempts to bury it, and this would seem to trouble Lyotard's insistence on a particular form of temporality, a particular slowness in thought, which he would seem to imagine as essential to the articulation of such matter. The play of language, of images, of representation and signification, the instability, the polysemic nature, and the multiple rather than single agency of speech and representation, their grounding in energies and forces which are the other of language's order – all these things already guarantee this.

It is this which allows, for example, Bersani and Dutoit, in their work on the great Ancient Assyrian friezes of the lion hunts of Kings Ashurnasipal and Ashurbanipal in the British Museum¹²⁰, in spite of their function as state propaganda aggrandising the power of the monarch, to find an equivalent to the twentieth-century avant-garde's engagement, both through an aesthetic formalism, a process of interrupted (de)subjectivisation, a subversive form of eroto-aesthetic, anti-climactic, masochistic ecstasy¹²¹ We are dealing here

¹²⁰ Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, Forms of Violence: Narrative in Assyrian Art and Modern Culture (New York: Schocken Books, 1985).

¹²¹ See Lyotard's later essay, "Emma Between Philosophy and Psychoanalysis," where he makes an exposition of Freud's metapsychology, and the relation between

with something which is perhaps not so much to do with the demands of (historically specific) discourses (such as 'art'), but of discourse, representation and culture *per se*. If we accept this, then we must admit that if there is an aesthetic dimension to any form of cultural production, then there is an aesthetic dimension to all cultural production. Perhaps, then, even the most crass cultural product may have within it, if not exactly a 'value' (we would have at the least to say what kind of a value this was) then at least an interest.

It is this aesthetic dimension of the cultural (of that which signifies) which we are dealing with when we are dealing with the 'now', the 'event' of the sublime as Lyotard formulates it, and I refuse to hold that such an event could possibly be found exclusively in the work of the avant-garde.

Thus, for example, in a recent article drawing on the aesthetics of Lyotard (as well as Deleuze in particular), Simon O'Sullivan calls for a visual culture in the expanded field, which takes into consideration an aesthetic dimension of signification, as well as one of cultural signification:

Paradoxically the notion of an 'aesthetic function' might well return us to a productive utilisation of the term 'visual culture.' But this will be a return marked by its passage through aesthetics, through Adorno and Deleuze especially. In a sense this passage – this championing of art as an autonomous, aesthetic practice – was only the

language and the 'drives' which lie underneath it. These drives are energetic rather than representational in nature, but find themselves expressed through a 'representation' which diverts and channels their pulsional force. The essay is in Hugh J. Silverman, ed., *Lyotard: Philosophy, Politics and the Sublime* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) 23-45. I have avoided in the passage above naming too precisely the nature of these 'other' forces. They may be figured, of course, as those of the *id*, but there may also be other forms of force which exert their pressure on discourse, other (secret) agencies of speech; to simply equate these forces as those of the individual's drives is to impose a particular teleology of the individual (and perhaps propose art or speech as a form of therapy for this individual), which I am loathe to do. It is perhaps precisely the point about these secret forces that they are secret, essentially unknowable, not exactly an 'agency'. They are, precisely, the 'inhuman' in (human) speech.

first moment, the second being a detachment of the aesthetic from its apparent location within (and transcendent attachment to) certain objects (the canonical objects of art history). [...] We can speak of a kind of visual culture after all, not through the notion of a general semiotics, but rather through the notion of a general aesthetics. [...] How might this effect the practice of art history? A certain kind of art history might disappear: that which attends only to art's signifying character, that which understands art, positions art *work*, as representation. Indeed, these latter functions might be placed alongside art's other asignifying functions – art's affective and intensive qualities (the molecular beneath, within, the molar). In this place art becomes a more complex, and a more interesting, object.¹²²

Whilst O'Sullivan is primarily couching this in terms of an attack on a reductionist social-historical approach to art, his logic also implies (though it is more reticent in putting the argument forward) a similar criticism of a reductionist aesthetic approach to art, and insists that it is not only 'art' which might be the subject of such a widened sphere of study.

Adorno himself, lurking as he is in the background throughout Lyotard's aesthetics, after all, reminds us in his Aesthetic Theory, not simply that the cultural analysis misperceives art in forgetting the aesthetic, but that:

The tendency to perceive art in extra-aesthetic or preaesthetic fashion, which to this day is undiminished by an obviously failed education, is not only a barbaric residue or a danger of regressive consciousness. Art perceived strictly aesthetically is art aesthetically misperceived. Only when art's other is sensed as a primary layer in the experience of art does it become possible to sublimate this layer, to dissolve the thematic bonds, without the autonomy of the artwork becoming a matter of indifference. Art is autonomous and it is not; without what is heterogeneous to it, its autonomy eludes it.¹²³

The 'aesthetic' and the 'cultural' dimensions of art (and by extension all culture) are intertwined, inseparable, bound in a dialectic relationship, two

¹²² Simon O'Sullivan, "The Aesthetics of Affect: Thinking Art Beyond Representation," Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities 6.3 (2001): 130.

¹²³ Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, Aesthetic Theory, eds. Gretel Adorno, Rolf Tiedemann and Robert Hullot-Kentor, Athlone Contemporary Thinkers Series (London & New York: Athlone Press, 2003) 6.

halves, perhaps, of a torn whole, which under our 'alienated' conditions, will never add up to a full experience.

Avant-garde versus popular-cultural sublimines?

How do we, then distinguish between avant-garde art and its cousins in the mass- or popular-cultural realm, the two kinds of art which Lyotard would like to divide with the categories of the new and the now? And where are we to plot Hirst within this?

Avant-garde work ushers the sublime irruption of the inhuman into discourse through the staging of an aesthetic disappearance – or alternatively, an aesthetics of disappearance or even a disappearing aesthetic – greeting the spectator with the mute (im)materiality of the work and its refusal to speak in the viewer's code, confronting them with the possibility that 'nothing may happen'; commercial culture also ushers in the inhuman, if in quite different ways. How else are we to account for the obsession evidenced in the scheduling of television documentaries about super-volcanoes, global-scale storms, meteorites hitting the earth, killer sharks and deadly pandemics? If these supply us with a *petit frisson*, it is not just that of the 'new': they are not merely novelties; indeed, obsessively repeated motifs since at least the eighteenth century, it would be strange to call these concerns 'new' in any real sense. These images are more specific in what they usher into representation. Something 'inhuman' here – something irresistibly inhuman – is insisting its way into discourse, even if it insinuates itself there rather crudely as an attempt at the representation of

the unrepresentable, an imaging of the unimaginable, a self-contradictory quest which is inevitably prone to failure, bathos and disappointment. The affect which these works attempt to elicit (again and again) is that of ‘astonishment’, which Burke famously formulated, as the central ‘passion’ of the sublime, defining it as: “that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it.”¹²⁴ It seems to be this definition of the sublime, where Burke emphasises the power of astonishment to take thought hostage, to halt reason’s discourse or to “hurr[y it] on by an irresistible force” – either way overpowering it – which in “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde” Lyotard draws on in order to imagine sublimity not as a Kantian overcoming-through-Reason of the failure of the imagination, nor as a Romantic swelling of the ego, but as the disarmament of thought (p.90), the defeat of the will (p.107), in which reason (or discourse) is presented with that which it cannot represent, a heterogeneity which agitates it, but also baffles it and makes it grind to a halt¹²⁵.

The repeated motifs of the (supposedly) astonishing in the contemporary genre of the scientific documentary are emphatically objects of *nature* – vast, terrible, and powerful – which refuse to be subjugated to

¹²⁴ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful, and Other Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, ed. David Womersley (London: Penguin, 1998). Part II, Ch1, “Of the Passion Caused by the Sublime,” 101.

¹²⁵ See esp. p.205 of “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde”, where Lyotard cites just this passage from Burke’s treatise: “a very big, very powerful object threatens to deprive the soul of any ‘it happens’, strikes it with ‘astonishment’ [...] The soul is thus dumb, immobilised, as good as dead.”

human will, which make human will appear as nothing and which leave us helpless before them.¹²⁶ In a more Lyotardian sense, and to be more precise, they are not so much ‘natural’ as ‘inhuman’,¹²⁷ since they also have their counterparts in fantasy images of the ‘cyber-sublime’, where we are confronted with a ‘second nature’ as terrifying, counter-purposive, vast and

¹²⁶ If this is recognisable as Kant’s dynamical sublime, it is also a central theme of Burke’s sublime. Having introduced the notion of ‘astonishment,’ Burke goes on to gloss this in the next chapter, on “terror” (Part II, Ch.2). He discusses various animals, suggesting that it is an animal’s power to resist human will and control (rather than its mere strength) which makes it terrible (and hence sublime) to us. A strong but docile animal such as an Ox, for Burke, is merely ‘contemptible,’ which is quite the reverse of the sublime, which is associated with feelings of reverence and respect. Later in the treatise (in a section added in the second edition), it turns out to be God, as supremely powerful being, who stands as the ultimate figure in this chain of respect and awe. God is, perhaps, then, the ultimate instance of the ‘inhuman’ for Burke, and for that body of eighteenth-century thought which remained ensconced within a religious or theological world-view. It is this world-view that Kant’s achievement it was to break away from when he places ‘Reason’ instead of God as the transcendental principle at the centre of the sublime. Burke’s feeling for the sublimity of nature’s resistance to human powers goes back to his adolescent letters, and his experience of flood in Ireland. In one letter, Burke discusses the peculiar pleasurable feeling (which might in colloquial terms be termed as having been thrown into a ‘philosophical’ state of mind) which such events give one of a smallness and powerlessness in the face of the inhuman powers of nature: “It gives me pleasure to see nature in those great tho’ terrible Scenes, it fills the mind with grand ideas, and turns the soul in upon herself [...] I consider’d how little man is yet in is own mind how great! he is Lord and Master of all things yet scarce can command any[.] [H]e is given freedom, but wherefore? was it only to torment and perplex him the more? How little avails this freedom if the objects he is to act upon be not as much disposd to obey as he to Command [...] what well Laid and what better executed Sceme [...] is there but what small change of nature is sufficient to defeat and entirely abolish [...] The Servant Destined to his use confines, menaces, and frequently destroys this mighty and feeble Lord!” Edmund Burke to Richard Shackleton, 25 January ‘1744/5.’ Edmund Burke, The Correspondence of Edmund Burke, ed. Thomas W. Copeland, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1900) 38-9.

¹²⁷ In terms of the history of the ‘sublime’, it might be worth tracing the kind of historical genealogy of these images of catastrophe and the powers of the inhuman through the Gothic novel. Mishra has discussed these images of catastrophe in relation to the figure of the ‘monster’ – what could be more inhuman? – in particular in the work of Godwin and Mary Shelley (see footnote 24, page 19, above). Mishra argues that in her work - and that of several contemporaries and predecessors –there emerges an imagery of catastrophe in which the human is finally annihilated, that turns out to be the ultimate logic of the sublime. The scenario of Lyotard’s “Can Thought Go on Without a Body?”, the first chapter of The Inhuman, follows this same Gothic plot...

inhuman as nature itself. We need only go as far as films such as The Matrix or Terminator for examples of this. It is also supplemented by a further form of the 'inhuman' which is at once inhuman nature and inhuman technology, in the figure of alien invasion: the sublime of the vast alien ships of Independence Day, as they prepare to liquidate human cities...

Indeed, it is again to Adorno that we might – surprisingly enough – turn in order for the suggestion that even in these popular manifestations of sublimity, there is a kind of hidden 'truth' value. Adorno is particularly sceptical of the sublime (at one point he even suggests we do away with the notion altogether), however, in his discussion of natural beauty, he does make some steps towards a rehabilitation of the term, and peculiarly enough precisely in the context of the debased, 'popular' forms of the taste for the sublime. This occurs in the context of an argument where he suggests that since 'nature' is only definable in terms of an opposition to culture, natural beauty is only ever something in surplus to our discourses on it, to any ideas of what it is. It always retreats from us and is that which strikes us, in a somewhat ambivalent way, with a force from 'beyond' the cultural norms. Natural beauty, then, is always an experience of the 'inhuman.' Thus, as the age of 'taste' for nature advances, experience of nature itself retreats under the onslaught of the categories which pin it down and transform it into an 'encultured nature', which no longer provides us with any experience of nature *per se*, but only with a reflection of our ideas of the cultural category of 'nature'. It is under the pressure of such a retreat of natural beauty that Adorno would like to suggest that the taste for the sublime arose in the

eighteenth century, a taste which has been driven towards ever-more extreme manifestations of nature, which are ever-less absorbable by popular taste, or into any classifiable notion of 'beauty'.¹²⁸ Such a taste for sublime nature, suggests Adorno, was only ever destined to be short-lived under the pressure of the ever-expanding impetus to absorption in cultural categories: hence quickly, 'sublime' nature becomes formularised in the 'picture-postcard' sublime of mass tourism, perhaps the most assimilated category of natural beauty of all:

He writes: "Historically this attitude was ephemeral. Thus Karl Kraus's polemical genius – perhaps in concurrence with the *modern style* of a Peter Altenberg – spurned the cult of grandiose landscapes and certainly took no pleasure in high mountain ranges, which probably prompt undiminished joy only in tourists, whom the culture critic rightly scorned."¹²⁹

However, Adorno finds even in this most formulaic tourism a special kind of truth:

Even the abstract magnitude of nature, which Kant still venerated and compared to moral law, is recognised as a reflex of bourgeois megalomania, a preoccupation with the content of setting new records, quantification, and bourgeois hero-worship. This critique, however, fails to perceive that natural grandeur reveals another aspect to its beholder: that aspect in which human dominion has its limits and that calls to mind the powerlessness of human bustle. This is why Nietzsche in Sils Maria felt himself "two thousand meters above sea level, but even higher than that above all things human."¹³⁰

¹²⁸ "As the antithesis of immediacy and convention became more acute and the horizon of aesthetic experience widened to include what Kant called the sublime, natural phenomena overwhelming in their grandeur began to be consciously perceived as beautiful." Adorno, 70.

¹²⁹ Adorno, 70.

¹³⁰ Adorno, 70.

This aspect is, of course, precisely Burke's awe at the counter-purposiveness of nature, and the smallness of humanity, and also Lyotard's 'inhuman.'

There are, of course, a number of ways in which we might understand the interest or pleasure in these images of terrible otherness, of an alien power beyond us and holding sway over us, the desire which makes us (repeatedly) return to these images. It might be understood to lie in the figurative overcoming of the horror. This overcoming may be embodied literally in the narrative of the programme, where it will often be implied towards the end that the – sublime? – human 'spirit' or 'science' will somehow overcome the horror of a – sublime? – catastrophe, or that in any case the chances of the catastrophic event are so small that we can return to a state of complacency. Such an overcoming may be understood to exist even without such a literal inscription in narrative, as involving a Kantian moment where, in spite of our physical helplessness, we "discover within us a power of resistance of quite another kind"¹³¹, in the recognition of our 'supersensuous' nature as rational beings, beyond our merely physical incarnation and capable of free action on grounds other than those of our immediate self-interestedness.

In other terms, however, the pleasure of such images might be understood to consist in a kind of Oedipal identification in which the vast power is taken into the self. In alternative (or additional) psychoanalytic terms, the pleasure of contemplating the deadly can be understood as a kind of pre-Oedipal identification with the object, an expression of an 'Oceanic'

¹³¹ Kant and (trans.), Critique of Judgement. §28, "Nature as Might"

and narcissistic (death-)wish to return to the maternal continent. The pleasure could also be understood as a displaced expression of greater fears, which can hardly come to the surface without even greater distress: for example, in recent films such as The Day After Tomorrow stories of environmental catastrophe seem to serve as a disguised figure within which even more unthinkable fears about terrorism might find some release. Perhaps, furthermore, there is pleasure in the ability to be able to imagine and master such huge events – a suggestion given weight especially by the prominence of the new (digital) technologies of representation used to picture such an event; a kind of ‘expansion’ of the powers of the imagination as imagined by Addison.

In terms of a response to Lyotard, however, it is perhaps most pertinent to argue simply that in these images we have the insistent return of that which resists the totalising logic of the ‘monad in expansion’, the unexpected and incalculable event which destroys its programme, and asserts – once and for all in the figure of death – the contingent and the heterologous. In terms of the destabilisation of agency which Lyotard stages, the problem of the pleasure of the sublime might be understood to be that of *whose* pleasure (or the pleasure of *what*) it might be...

In these last few paragraphs, then, I have tried to trace an alternative Lyotardian schema, in which the ‘now’ attempts to find its way into representation both in avant-garde art and in contemporary commercialised or ‘mass’ cultural products. It does so in very different ways, in accordance with the different institutional and discursive natures of the different cultural

spheres. The energies of this 'now' are perhaps captured in different ways in these different discourses (and perhaps differently in different artworks). It would seem to me that such an irruption is always an ambivalent one: it is always partly recuperated, and partly a dangerous and destabilising force.

Works cited

- Addison, Joseph, and Sir Richard Steele. The Spectator, in Four Volumes. 14 April 2004 [electronic version of Henry Morley's 1891 edition]. online e-text. Project Gutenberg. Available: <<http://www.gutenberg.net/1/2/0/3/12030/12030-h/12030-h.htm>>. May 2004.
- Adorno, Theodor Wiesengrund. Trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor. Aesthetic Theory. Eds. Gretel Adorno, Rolf Tiedemann and Robert Hullot-Kentor. Athlone Contemporary Thinkers Series. London & New York: Athlone Press, 2003.
- Adorno, Theodor Wiesengrund, and Max Horkheimer. Dialectic of Enlightenment. Trans. John Cumming. Verso Classics; 15. London & New York: Verso, 1999.
- Bataille, Georges. The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy. La part Maudite (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1967). Trans. Robert Hurley. Vol. 1: Consumption. 3 vols. New York: Zone Books, 1988.
- Beardsworth, Richard. "On the Critical 'Post': Lyotard's Agitated Judgement." Judging Lyotard. Ed. Andrew Benjamin. Warwick Studies in Philosophy and Literature. London: Routledge, 1992. 43-80.
- Beck, Ulrich. Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity. Trans. Mark Ritter. Theory, Culture and Society. London: Sage, 1992.
- Bersani, Leo, and Ulysse Dutoit. Forms of Violence: Narrative in Assyrian Art and Modern Culture. New York: Schocken Books, 1985.
- Botting, Fred, and Scott Wilson, eds. Bataille: A Critical Reader. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998.
- Brown, Laura. Alexander Pope. Rereading Literature. Ed. Terry Eagleton. Oxford: Blackwell, 1985.
- Burke, Edmund. The Correspondence of Edmund Burke. Ed. Thomas W. Copeland. Vol. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1900.
- . A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful, and Other Pre-Revolutionary Writings. Ed. David Wormersley. London: Penguin, 1998.
- Crow, Thomas E. Modern Art in the Common Culture. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1996.
- De Bolla, Peter. The Discourse of the Sublime: Readings in History, Aesthetics and the Subject. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Economimesis." Diacritics 11.2 (1981): 3-25.
- Eagleton, Terry. The Ideology of the Aesthetic. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990.
- Ferguson, Frances. Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Individuation. London & New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Foster, Hal, ed. Postmodern Culture. [first published as The Anti-Aesthetic (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983)]. London and Sydney: Pluto Press, 1985.
- . Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics. Port Townsend, Wash.: Bay Press, 1985.
- Freud, Sigmund. Civilization and Its Discontents. Trans. David McLintock. The New Penguin Freud. London: Penguin, 2002.
- Giddens, Anthony. The Consequences of Modernity. London: Polity Press, 1990.
- . Reith Lectures: Runaway World. Lecture 2: Risk. 1999. online transcription of radio broadcast. BBC. Available: <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/reith1999/lecture2.shtml>>. 4 April 2005.
- Gilder, George. Wealth and Poverty. London: Buchan and Enright, 1982.
- Giovanni Battista Piranesi: His Predecessors and His Heritage. London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1968.
- Goux, Jean-Joseph. "General Economics and Postmodern Capitalism." Bataille: A Critical Reader. Eds. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson. Blackwell Critical Readers. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998. 196-213.
- Greenberg, Clement. "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas. Eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood. Oxford and Malden: Blackwell, 1992. 529-41.
- Habermas, Jürgen. The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society. Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought. Cambridge: Polity, 1989.
- Harris, Paul. "Thinking @ the Speed of Time: Globalization and Its Discontents or, Can Lyotard's Thought Go on without a Body." Yale French Studies 99 (2001): 129-48.

- Heidegger, Martin. Nietzsche. Trans. David Farrell Krell. Vol. I: The Will to Power as Art. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1961.
- Hirst, Damien, and Gordon Burns. "The Naked Hirst (Part 2)." Guardian 6 October 2001.
- Kant, Immanuel, and James Meredith (trans.). Critique of Judgement. 9th April 2000 [1790]. downloadable hypertext. University of Adelaide Library. Available: <<http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/k/k16j/k16j.zip>>. January 2004.
- Kristeva, Julia. Revolution in Poetic Language. Trans. Margaret Waller. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984.
- Lyotard, Jean-François. "Complexity and the Sublime." Postmodernism. Eds. Lisa Appignanesi and Geoffrey Bennington. I.C.A. Documents; 4-5. London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1986.
- . "Critical Reflections." Artforum International 29 (1991): 92-3.
- . The Differend : Phrases in Dispute. Theory and History of Literature ; V. 46. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988.
- . "Emma: Between Philosophy and Psychoanalysis." Trans. Michael Sanders, Rochard Brons and Norah Martin. Lyotard: Philosophy, Politics and the Sublime. Ed. Hugh J. Silverman. Continental Philosophy. New York and London: Routledge, 2002. 23-45.
- . The Inhuman: Reflections on Time. Trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991.
- . "Judiciousness in Dispute, or Kant after Marx." The Lyotard Reader. Ed. Andrew Benjamin. Oxford and Cambridge, Ma.: Blackwell, 1989. 360-92.
- . "La Peinture Du Secret à L'ere Postmoderne: Baruchello." Traverses 30-31 (1984): 95-101.
- . Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994.
- . Libidinal Economy. English translation of *Economie Libidinale* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1974). Trans. Iain Hamilton Grant. London: Athlone Press, 1993.
- . The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge. Theory and History of Literature; V.10. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984.
- . The Postmodern Explained to Children: Correspondence 1982-1985. Trans. Don Barry, et al. Eds. Julian Pefanis and Morgan Thomas. Sydney: Power Publications, 1992.
- . "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde." Trans. Lisa Liebmann, Geoffrey Bennington and Marian Hobson. The Inhuman. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991. 89-107.
- Martin, Chris. "Coldplay Attack 'Evil' of Profits." Evening Standard 18 May 2005: 7.
- Massumi, Brian. A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari. Cambridge, Ma. and London: MIT Press, 1996.
- Mishra, Vijay. The Gothic Sublime. S.U.N.Y. Series on the Sublime. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994.
- Morris, Meaghan. "Postmodernity and Lyotard's Sublime." Art & Text 16 (1984): 44-67.
- Newman, Barnett. "The Sublime Is Now." Art in Theory 1900-90: An Anthology of Changing Ideas. Eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood. Oxford: Blackwell, 1992. 572-74.
- . "The Sublime Is Now." Tiger's Eye 1.6 (1948): 51-3.
- Nicolson, Marjorie Hope. Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory : The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite. [1959]. Weyerhaeuser Environmental Classics. Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, 1997.
- Noggle, James. "Skepticism and the Sublime Advent of Modernity in the 1742 *Dunciad*." Eighteenth Century Theory and Interpretation 37.1 (1996): 22-40.
- O'Sullivan, Simon. "The Aesthetics of Affect: Thinking Art Beyond Representation." Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities 6.3 (2001): 125-35.
- Porter, Roy. London: A Social History. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1994.
- Readings, Bill. Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics. Critics of the Twentieth Century. Ed. Christopher Norris. London and New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Ritzer, George. The Mcdonaldization of Society: An Investigation into the Changing Character of Contemporary Social Life. London: Pine Forge, 1993.
- Schiller, J.C. Friedrich von. Letters Upon the Aesthetic Education of Man. August 1998 [1794]. Fordham University. Available: < <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/schiller-education.html>>. January 2002.
- Shannon, Claude E. The Mathematical Theory of Information. Urbana: University of Illinois, 1949.
- Shelley, Mary. The Last Man. [1826]. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965.

- Silverman, Hugh J., ed. Lyotard: Philosophy, Politics and the Sublime. London and New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Solkin, David H. Painting for Money : The Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century England. New Haven: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 1993.
- Watts, Jonathan. "In China's Richest Village, Peasants Are All Shareholders Now - by Order of the Party: Model Community with Spectacular Industrial Growth Owes as Much to Feudalism as to Communism." Guardian 10 May 2005: 3.
- Wordsworth, William. The Prelude. July 1999 [1799-1805]. Bartleby.com. Available: <<http://www.bartleby.com/145/>>. September 2003.
- Wurzer, Wilhelm S. Filming and Judgment: Between Heidegger and Adorno. Philosophy and Literary Theory. Ed. Hugh J. Silverman. London and New Jersey: Humanities Press International, 1990.
- . "Lyotard, Kant, and the in-Finite." Lyotard: Philosophy, Politics, and the Sublime. Ed. Hugh J. Silverman. Continental Philosophy. New York and London: Routledge, 2002. 201-12.