

System Failure (?)

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Abstract

This paper takes a retrospective look at Lyotard's analysis of "the postmodern condition," a century after his birth, and nearly a half-century since his highly influential book. Lyotard's pessimistic view was that after the end of metanarratives, there is now no alternative to the liberal democratic capitalist "System," which is governed by a technological-economic principle of "performativity." Considering Lyotard's thesis in the light of his own methodology of "signs of history," I argue that it is no longer possible to hold this view. A number of key historical events point to massive fault-lines that have appeared in this System. Nevertheless, much of what Lyotard wrote in *The Postmodern Condition* about the growing influence of *technology* on social and political life has only been confirmed. The hypothesis this paper proposes is that the signs of system failure might at least open paths of resistance to technological hegemony.

Keywords: Jean-François Lyotard; postmodern; political philosophy; philosophy of technology; art and technology

Jean-François Lyotard's most famous work, *The Postmodern Condition*, proposed a number of controversial ideas: ideas about the values of social consensus and dissensus, about postmodern science as the search for instabilities, and about the future of education in the context of developing information technologies, among others.¹ I want to focus here, however, on the famous claim which made Lyotard's book, for a time, one of the most widely referenced works in the Humanities: the claim that postmodernity is defined by "incredulity toward metanarratives."² Lyotard called this loss of credibility "delegitimation." While pointing to internal contradictions in the speculative and emancipatory narratives, there are there are at least two other important reasons for this delegitimation that he also indicates, which I would like to discuss here. The first, developed more in writings following *The Postmodern Condition*, is the occurrence in the twentieth century of events which act as "signs of history" that seem to "falsify" such metanarratives. The second—a focus of *The Postmodern Condition* itself—is the replacement of the narrative form of legitimation by another form, which Lyotard calls "performativity." My paper has two parts, in which I will focus on each of these. In both cases, my aim will be to question the contemporaneity of Lyotard's analyses. At the year of the centenary of Lyotard's birth, and nearly a half-century since *The Postmodern Condition*, how should we understand his thesis regarding the "incredulity toward metanarratives" and the extensions he gave it in his later writings?

I

In assessing the claims of *The Postmodern Condition* today, it is highly relevant to track Lyotard's own later reconsiderations of this work. Characteristically he heaped criticism upon it, saying that "it's simply the worst of my books, they're almost all bad, but that one's the worst," and even characterising it as a *parody* or *satire* of the genre of the report.³ However, we would be justified in ascribing this dissatisfaction more to the generic form it took, rather than its content. According to the distinctions he himself makes in the Introduction, the book excessively apes expertise rather than performs philosophy—that is, it appears too conclusive, while philosophers should only raise questions.⁴

With respect to the content, in later reflections Lyotard only confirmed the thesis of "incredulity toward metanarratives." Let me quote from the 1991 essay "Music and

1 An earlier version of this paper was published in Chinese (translated by Zhou Jing) in *Journal of the China Academy of Art* 41, no. 6 (2020): 88–100.

2 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), xxiv.

3 Jean-François Lyotard, "Interview" (with Arias-Mission), *Eyeline* 3 (Nov 1987): 17–19; 17.

4 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, xxv.

Postmodernity," where he writes:

In *The Postmodern Condition*, which is a Report written [...] for a Canadian institution, I tried to understand, and to make understood, an event. [...] I thought of this event as western. The West is part of the human world that 'invents' the Idea of emancipation, of the self-constitution of communities by themselves, and that tries to realise this Idea. The realisation of this idea rests on the principle that history is the record of the progress of freedom in human space and time. The first expression of this principle is Christian, the latest Marxist. *The Postmodern Condition* referred to the discourse of these philosophies of history by the shorthand name of 'grand narrative.' [...] The postmodern condition is the result of these grand narratives ceasing to be credible. [...] the diagnosis is too vast not to be questioned. Nevertheless, the recent implosion of the states founded on the Marxist grand narrative brings a sort of plausibility to the hypothesis formulated ten years earlier.⁵

I quote this passage for several reasons, among which are that it provides a good summary of Lyotard's thesis, and also that it explicitly marks its limits. Lyotard wrote about the postmodern as a condition he believed befell the West. (He also included Japan, however, which he visited in the late 1980s.)

In various papers and studies in the early 1980s, Lyotard developed a subtle approach to philosophy of history which pointed to the delegitimation of modern metanarratives by key events of the twentieth century. For example, in *The Differend* (§257) he writes:

The names which are those of 'our history' oppose counter-examples [to the modern metanarratives]: -Everything real is rational, everything rational is real: 'Auschwitz' refutes speculative doctrine. This crime at least, which is real [...] is not rational. -Everything proletarian is communist, everything communist is proletarian: 'Berlin 1953, Budapest 1956, Czechoslovakia 1968, Poland 1980' (I could mention others) refute the doctrine of historical materialism: the workers rose up against the Party. -Everything democratic is by and for the people, and vice-versa: 'May 1968' refutes the doctrine of parliamentary liberalism. The social in its everydayness puts representative institutions in check. -Everything that is the free play of supply and demand is favourable for the general enrichment, and vice-versa: the 'crises of 1911 and 1929' refute the

5 Jean-François Lyotard, "Music and Postmodernity," trans. David Bennett, *New Formations* 66 (2009): 37-45; 37-38.

doctrine of economic liberalism. And the 'crisis of 1974–1979' refutes the post-Keynesian revision of that doctrine.⁶

These claims may seem to have an immediate intuitive appeal. However, there is also a complex philosophical argument behind this appeal. Lyotard's method here draws on and transforms arguments advanced by Kant. In the essay "A Renewed Attempt to Answer the Question: 'Is the Human Race Continually Improving?'" Kant suggests that this question cannot be answered with reference to empirical facts, since human beings possess free will, making it impossible to predict their future course on the basis of past events. Instead, he points to the event of the French Revolution as a "sign of history" which can furnish a different kind of answer to the question. Kant argues that the widespread feeling of *enthusiasm* in many spectators of the revolution justifies the judgement that the human race is improving: it is a universal and disinterested enthusiasm not for the bloody events of the Revolution itself, but for the evolution of the constitution towards republicanism. This then indicates, according to Kant, an inclination towards progress in human nature, which we can judge to be a persistent one. Moreover, enthusiasm, according to Lyotard's analysis (which also draws on other texts by Kant), itself indicates a kind of improvement, or moral progress, insofar as this feeling is a *sublime* one, and presupposes a certain level of development of human culture.⁸

Lyotard follows Kant's model but suggests that a different analysis must be given of the events of postmodernity. Instead of filling us with enthusiasm, Lyotard claims that the catastrophic events of the 20th century mentioned above fill us with *sorrow*.⁹ They act to delegitimize the modern metanarratives because they indicate that their Ideas do not match empirical reality. Nevertheless, perhaps surprisingly, Lyotard does suggest that this feeling itself can indicate a *type* of improvement or progress, which would concern the sensitivity and complexity of human beings, signalled by the very recognition of the failure of metanarrative legitimation. In short, metanarratives claim to account for and give meaning to every event according to a single historical finality, but the recognition of their failure is accompanied by an awakening sensitivity to pluralism and heterogeneity. Lyotard writes:

[H]owever negative the signs to which most of the proper names of our political history give rise, we should nevertheless have to judge them as

6 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 179 (§257).

7 Immanuel Kant, "A Renewed Attempt to Answer the Question: 'Is the Human Race Continually Improving?'" in *Kant: Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss, trans. H. B. Nisbet, 2nd Ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

8 Jean-François Lyotard, "The Sign of History," in *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (Oxford and Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 407.

9 Lyotard, *The Differend*, 180 (§257).

if they proved that this history had moved on a step in its progress; i.e. in the culture of skill and of will. This step would consist in the fact that it is not only the Idea of a *single* purpose which would be pointed to in our feeling, but already the Idea that this purpose consists in the formation and free exploration of Ideas *in the plural*, the Idea that this end is the beginning of the *infinity of heterogenous finalities*.¹⁰

In his later reconsiderations of the postmodern condition, such as that indicated above, Lyotard interpreted various contemporary events as confirming that condition. Let us examine his reflections originally presented in a seminar paper in Germany in 1990 under the title “The Wall, the Gulf, and the Sun: A Fable.”¹¹ He used the opportunity afforded by this occasion “to take stock of the present historical conjuncture.”¹² Lyotard recalls here the “situation analysis” he practised decades before as an activist in the Marxist group *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, in order to mark the difference of that period with the situation he believed we faced in 1990.

This essay contains a version of the “postmodern fable” that Lyotard had already presented in several conference papers around this time. In 1979, in *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard confidently proclaimed that “the mourning process has been completed,” and “[m]ost people have lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative.”¹³ By the late 1980s, however, he seems to have realised that he had perhaps spoken too soon, and on multiple occasions presented the “postmodern fable” as “the great narrative that the world persists in telling itself after the great narratives have obviously failed.”¹⁴ It is, in Lyotard’s words, “the unavowed dream the postmodern world dreams about itself.”¹⁵ It bears much in common with ideas now associated with terms such as “transhumanism” and “posthumanism,” and we can speculate on the lines of influence here given that Lyotard frequently taught in California in the years when transhumanism was emerging there. The postmodern fable is based in science but does not have a truly scientific status—Lyotard asserts that if you ask the scientists themselves who spout such ideas, they will say that it is simply a hypothesis,¹⁶ and Lyotard presents it in his own way as comparable to Voltaire’s philosophical fables.¹⁷

10 Lyotard, “The Sign of History,” 409.

11 Jean-François Lyotard, “The Wall, the Gulf, and the Sun: A Fable,” in *Jean-François Lyotard: Political Writings*, trans. Bill Readings and Kevin Paul (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). This paper was later revised, expanded, and published in two parts in *Postmodern Fables*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997): chapter 5, “The Wall, the Gulf, the System,” and chapter 6, “A Postmodern Fable.” References which follow are to this most mature version of the text.

12 Lyotard, “The Wall, the Gulf, the System,” 67.

13 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 41.

14 Lyotard, “The Wall, the Gulf, the System,” 81–82.

15 Lyotard, “The Wall, the Gulf, the System,” 81.

16 Lyotard, “*Oikos*” in *Political Writings*, 101.

17 Lyotard, “The Wall, the Gulf, the System,” 81.

This fable presents a metaphysical, fictional account of how the situation appeared to Lyotard at the time in terms of the triumph of what he called simply “the System.” This System is, *grosso modo*, Western liberal democracies analysed through the lens of a combination of the Marxist critique of capitalism and the Heideggerian critique of modern technology. This System may be expressed in the terms of general physics or dynamics simply as the organisation of energy in the universe, governed by an evaluative structure which privileges improbable order (negentropy) over probable disorder (entropy). The fantasy of “the System” is to justify itself not with reference to a human philosophy of history, but with reference to a (supposedly objective and politically neutral) scientific, physical reality. From this perspective (and Lyotard can be read here as, whether consciously or not, echoing and ironically critiquing Francis Fukuyama¹⁸), Western liberal democracies have won the historical battle of ideologies not because they have proven themselves more just, but because they have proven to be the most efficient means of processing energy to increase order and decrease disorder. They do this by being “open” systems, allowing the entry of new energies, and are thus better at warding off entropy than “closed” systems.

In 1990 Lyotard selects, as events which might gauge the times, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the imminent “first Gulf War” (which Lyotard refers to as “the Persian Gulf crisis,” which at the moment he was writing—October 1990—remained “in a phase of *suspense*”¹⁹). For Lyotard, the fall of the Berlin Wall was an event which signalled the end of Marxism as a metanarrative (*as a metanarrative*, it might be emphasised, since there are other senses in which he continued to insist that Marxism remained relevant²⁰). The Gulf Crisis called for a more complex analysis, which required a reflection on a potential challenge to the System by the alternative global culture known as Islam. He describes Islam as more than a religion; it is a way of life characterized by “a spirituality, which is marked and consecrated in every detail of daily life, and which makes Islam more the name for a total civilization than a particular religious belief.”²¹ This civilization opposes and resists the Western secularization which characterises “the System,” and Lyotard sees the conflict of Saddam Hussein with the Western powers as ultimately a sign of this conflict. He does not seem in any doubt of the victor, writing:

As respectable as Islam may be as a model of spirituality, it cannot equal

18 Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?,” *The National Interest* 16, (1989): 3-18.

19 Lyotard, “The Wall, the Gulf, the System,” 74.

20 Lyotard continued to see the core of Marxism that has a persisting relevance as the exposure of social injustice, which he explained in his own terms as a *differend*. For example, he wrote in 1982: “what in Marxism cannot be objected to [...] is] that there are several incommensurable genres of discourse in play in society, none of which can transcribe all the others; and none the less one of them at least—capital, bureaucracy—imposes its rules on the others.” Jean-François Lyotard, “A Memorial for Marxism,” in *Peregrinations: Law, Form, Event* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 72.

21 Lyotard, “The Wall, the Gulf, the System,” 76-77.

the concrete performances of the West; it will have to modify its status, for instance, by becoming a religious belief and ritual practice among others, if it does not wish to disappear in time.²²

Lyotard's prognosis seems in step with the analyses of others at the time (both before and after the event), such as Noam Chomsky, for whom the Gulf War would not be a true war, involving a conflict between roughly equal sides, but a slaughter, and Jean Baudrillard, for whom the war (as a war, with real stakes in global historical terms) would "not take place."²³ The West, with America's technologically advanced army at its vanguard, seemed unquestionably destined to be the victor, especially as its socio-political form of organisation was just emerging triumphant from a long Cold War.²⁴

In 1990, then, Lyotard saw the world as dominated by a relatively stable and efficient System, where it looked like the stakes and battles of the past were over, and all that remained for the future would be a series of fine-tunings in the efficiency of the global System. He was deeply pessimistic about the dominance of this System, which he saw as a soft totalitarianism, accompanied by its own form of terror. In short, this terror consists in the threat that all that does not conform with the logic of performativity (which I will outline further in the next section) will be eliminated. This is a threat to what is at stake in thought, art, and life, but most dramatically he suggests that this threat might extend to the entire population of the Third World, as it proves to be an entropic drain on the System, which would perform more efficiently without it.²⁵

If we were to entertain Lyotard's perspective, how would today's historical conjuncture look? Do present events confirm the theses of *The Postmodern Condition*, as Lyotard took events in 1990 to do? What are we to make of Lyotard's later developments and modifications of his reflections on the postmodern? I want to suggest several among many possible events—none of which Lyotard, who died in 1998, lived to see—that we could cite in order to gauge how things have changed: the terrorist attacks on America of September 11, 2001; the Great Recession of 2007–9; the rise of the populist Right indexed by the Brexit vote in the UK and the election of Donald Trump in the USA in 2016; the increasing awareness of impending climate catastrophe, which we might index with the proper name and date of Greta Thunberg's global activist presence, which emerged in 2018; and the globally destabilising military conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza since 2022. Each of these

22 Lyotard, "The Wall, the Gulf, the System," 80.

23 See Paul Patton's introduction to his English translation of Baudrillard's *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* for a sober analysis of Baudrillard's provocative position, and a comparison with Chomsky's.

24 It should be noted that despite this apparently critical analysis of the impending war as a function of the System, Lyotard was one of seven signatories to a controversial letter published in *Libération*, 21 February 1991, titled "Une guerre requise," defending the necessity of the war.

25 Lyotard, "Oikos," 99.

events have shown breaks, cracks, splits, and failures in the System which appeared to Lyotard in 1990 to be approaching something like a stable and fatalistic equilibrium.

Regarding the first of these events, it is instructive to compare Lyotard's compatriot Jean Baudrillard, another theorist of the postmodern, who lived for longer and hence saw more of history unfold. After proposing a petition to have the 1990s abolished and proceed directly to the year 2000, the symbolic "end of history"—on the grounds that no historical events occur anymore anyway—Baudrillard announced the return of events on September 11, 2001.²⁶ The instabilities which had been regulated and suppressed through their increasingly high-fidelity representation and mediatisation returned like the repressed. For Baudrillard this was also a matter which could in some sense be understood in terms of systems theory: the global economic system which exploited the majority for the benefit of the minority could not be sustained in equilibrium forever, and this was the backlash of pent-up energies resulting from decades of American imperialism in the Middle East. Putting Baudrillard's analysis in Lyotard's terms, we could suggest that September 11 was the great event which delegitimated the "postmodern fable" of development as simply a matter of fine-tuning the world's politico-economic system. As we have just seen, in 1990, on the brink of the first Gulf War, Lyotard had downplayed the significance of Islam as a less efficient system for the exploitation of energies. Today things look much different, in the wake of this event, two decades of the global "war against terror," and the disastrous wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria. America and the "coalition of the willing" lost the public relations war as well as the fantasy of being the world's police force. Today it is not quite so clear that democratic liberal capitalism is the undoubted victor in the "clash of civilizations."

The Great Recession of 2007–9 has resulted in a widespread incredulity towards the neoliberal economic policies—themselves based in systems theory—which were an important foundation for belief in the stability and resilience of the System. This financial crisis delegitimated the fantasy that the economic system would self-regulate, for the greatest benefit of all, if left free from government intervention. Long-time advocates such as Alan Greenspan admitted their mistake. Today economics as a discipline is in disarray, world markets continue to strive to recover, and there is little belief that there is any economic system which might operate without risk of catastrophic crises. Lyotard was characteristically inconsistent on the issue of whether or not capitalism constitutes a metanarrative. As we have seen above, sometimes he listed it among other modern metanarratives, suggesting that it had been delegitimated by various economic crises, such as the crash of 1929. At other times, he insisted that it was not, because it functioned simply according to the logic of performativity, and thus did not need a philosophy of

26 See, respectively, Jean Baudrillard, "Hunting Nazis and Losing Reality," *New Statesman* 115, no. 2969 (19 Feb 1988): 16–17; and Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2013).

history and a subject of emancipation to legitimate itself.²⁷ Whatever the case with respect to the metanarratives of modernity, capitalism, especially in its neoliberal form, was an integral part of the narrative of development accompanying the postmodern System. It is in this sense that we can understand the Great Recession as contributing to “system failure” today.

In understanding the position Lyotard adhered to in the 1990s, it is instructive to reflect on just how much traditional political oppositions of the Right and Left had imploded into a popular form of centrism, known as the “Third Way,” influentially theorised by Anthony Giddens and manifesting in particular in America and the United Kingdom. Represented by figures such as Bill Clinton and Tony Blair, the Third Way combined progressive social values with the neoliberal economic policies and fine-tuned public relations campaigns that had proven successful for the Right in the 1980s. This centrist politics reflected the widespread feeling that the era of oppositional politics was over, and that politics was now a matter of management rather than of warring ideologies. Once again the new century has given us a rude awakening, with the rise in recent years of populist Far-Right movements and their influence in mainstream politics. Most obviously, in the Western world this has been signalled by the election of Trump and the Brexit vote. These events have contributed to the end of the dream of globalisation. In the 1990s, the free movements of people and goods promised a New World Order which would mitigate against the national protectionist policies which many saw as the catalyst for the two World Wars. Today, impacted by the military and economic instabilities noted above, there is a widespread refugee crisis and a populist backlash against immigration. These same crises have also given rise in recent years to an increased radicalisation of Leftist politics in the mainstream, indicated by Jeremy Corbyn in the UK and Bernie Sanders in the US. The Third Way has lost its way, and the political field in many of the Western countries seems to have re-polarised between increasingly radical ideologies and opposition parties.

A further issue with which to take the tenor of our times, with overwhelming significance, is the increasing awareness of environmental crisis. It is more difficult to name a specific event here, but as suggested above, let us take the galvanisation of the environmental activist movement around the figure of Greta Thunberg. Once again, we can note a shift here in relation to Lyotard’s prognostications. In the 1990 paper he does mention the threat to the natural environment, but simply states that it is necessary “that the open systems temper their success over other systems in order to preserve the ensemble called an ecosystem from a catastrophic deregulation.”²⁸ Once again, Lyotard presents this threat to the stability of the System rather trivially, as merely a matter of needing to fine-tune

27 See for example Lyotard, “Music and Postmodernity,” 38.

28 Lyotard, “A Postmodern Fable,” 90.

its performance. And once again, today such a characterisation appears as a vast underestimation of the instabilities with which we are faced. We are increasingly being given new reports which suggest that such a tuning needs to be anything but fine if we are to ward off existential catastrophe.

Finally, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the Israeli war on Gaza in 2023 have led to widespread condemnation of what is seen as a hypocritical stance by the West. From the end of the Second World War a degree of global stability has been maintained by international institutions largely modelled on American institutions and values. The recent conflicts, and failure of the West to stop the genocide in Gaza, has been widely perceived as a privileging of strategic alliances over principles of international law, and as revealing the moral bankruptcy of the West. These conflicts have deeply undermined any notion of the stability of the System as Lyotard understood it, not only because of the increased global insecurity these conflicts have produced (with both wars threatening to spread beyond their confines in Europe and the Middle East, respectively), but through loss of belief that the West (the System of liberal democratic development) any longer has the will or moral authority to regain and maintain global stability.

These are only a select number of events which have occurred over the last two decades which have been prominent, at least, in the Western imaginary. I have briefly tried to indicate how they point to a delegitimation of the “postmodern fable,” and to failures of the “System,” which I believe necessitate a reassessment of how Lyotard viewed the postmodern condition up until the end of his life. Let me turn now to the second major reason for the delegitimation of metanarratives which Lyotard argues in *The Postmodern Condition*: legitimation by performativity.

II

“Performativity” is a calculation of efficiency, which combines capitalist concern for profit with a technological criterion of the performance of a system. Lyotard explains as follows:

Technical devices [...] follow a principle, and it is the principle of optimal performance: maximizing output (the information or modifications obtained) and minimizing input (the energy expended in the process). Technology is therefore a game pertaining not to the true, the just, or the beautiful, etc., but to efficiency: a technical ‘move’ is ‘good’ when it does better and/or expends less energy than another.²⁹

29 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 44.

Lyotard argues that since the eighteenth century there has been a convergence of science, technology, and capital, such that the performance of each one reinforces the performance of the others: investment in technology improves it, improved technology means greater profit, and science develops with the technologies capable of validating its hypotheses and the capital supporting its researches. The possibility of this convergence is given in the logic of performativity itself, which becomes a new criterion for the legitimation of knowledge. This form of legitimation has no need to refer to *ends* such as the emancipation of humanity, but functions entirely according to *means*, which are judged according to their performativity or efficiency. In this way, the metanarratives of modernity lose their necessity, and are replaced by the logic of performativity, which governs the System. In an important sense, then, postmodernity is characterized by the becoming-autonomous of the means previously turned towards the end of human emancipation. Lyotard even suggests that we have in a sense become enslaved by these means. Let me quote again from “Music and Postmodernity”:

The postmodern condition is that of human beings when they are caught in this process [of the development of the System], which simultaneously develops their powers and demands their enslavement. It is notably marked by the massive introduction of automatons capable of carrying out ‘mental’ operations (calculations, combinations, problem-solving, diagnostics) and of having them executed by ‘physical’ automatons. The world described as developed or in development is not supported by any narrative that would legitimate its path by an eventual emancipation. The systems simply become more powerful.³⁰

Technology is of course a key focus of *The Postmodern Condition* insofar as Lyotard defines the field of his investigation as the “computerization” (*informatisation*, in French) of society. This technological dimension is one that Yuk Hui focuses on in his 2019 book *Recursivity and Contingency*, and it is on this count that he finds Lyotard’s 1979 work prescient and still highly relevant. He writes that

Lyotard [...] remains a prophet of our time. [...] One may have to admit that the actual status of the production of knowledge and technological development has not yet surpassed what Lyotard envisaged in the first pages of *The Postmodern Condition*.³¹

For Hui, the technological dimension of the System Lyotard had anticipated is today being realised through, among other things, the smart city, the internet of things, smart objects,

30 Lyotard, “Music and Postmodernity,” 38.

31 Yuk Hui, *Recursivity and Contingency* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2019), 236–7.

and neuro-networks in urbanism.³² More broadly speaking, the convergence between information technology and political power that Lyotard referred to has been developing in an accelerated way through what has been called *algorithmic governmentality*.³³

I agree with Hui's analysis: despite the fractures in the socio-political dimensions of the System indicated by the events mentioned above, the technological System seems intent on moving towards convergence and perfection, regardless. The latest AI hype following breakthroughs in pretrained transformers only seems to have accentuated Lyotard's prescient analyses in the domain of technics. The question then becomes the difficult one of knowing how these dimensions of the System are today related, and how we should respond to this complex situation. The challenge and opportunity posed by the "system failure" I have suggested above is to know whether the fault-lines that have appeared in the System can be exploited to maximise resistance to it. The very tricky issue here is that we are in a different situation than was Lyotard insofar as we cannot assume, as he did, that relative stability and survival are no longer issues to contend with. Lyotard's deep political pessimism and nihilism in the 1990s was the shadow side of the liberal democratic optimism prevalent at the time. It consisted in the belief that there was no possibility of meaningfully or substantially changing the System, because it had proven itself as the most efficient regulator of energies. As I have suggested, this went with a certain faith in its capacity for achieving a continued stability.

Today, it seems that more than resistance is at stake: we also need to invent modes of greater resilience because the System is no longer performing in a way we can have faith in. Resistance and invention must somehow go hand-in-hand. This is a tricky issue indeed, and it forms the *complexity* that I believe we face when we reconsider Lyotard's work on the postmodern and its relevance today. This needs far more reflection than I can give it here; I would simply like to make one suggestion. We should recognise that the view of a hegemonic self-regulating System appears with its greatest force relatively late in Lyotard's work (as noted above, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the general collapse of communism in Eastern Europe was a catalyst). Lyotard's earlier works assume a lesser degree of stability of this System, and harbour stronger hopes for resistance and change. So, in the context of signs of "system failure" we are, I believe, justified in rereading Lyotard's earlier works as perhaps again more relevant than Lyotard himself believed in the later part of his life.

In the remaining part of this paper, I would like briefly to develop some points of such a reading by engaging a little further with some aspects of Hui's interpretation of Lyotard

32 Hui, *Recursivity and Contingency*, 243–4.

33 Antoinette Rouvroy and Thomas Berns, "Algorithmic Governmentality and Prospects of Emancipation," trans. Elizabeth Libbrecht, *Reseaux* 1, no. 177 (2013): 163–169. Cited by Hui, *Recursivity and Contingency*, 243.

in the final chapter of *Recursivity and Contingency*. This will allow and necessitate a connection with the *aesthetic* and *artistic* dimensions of Lyotard's work on the postmodern.

Against the hegemony of the System, and a single idea of technology stemming from the Western tradition (analysed by Heidegger as *Ge-Stell*), Hui advocates pluralism. In the realm of technology, he names this "technodiversity." This is, of course, very much in line with Lyotard's thought: *The Postmodern Condition* and *The Differend* advocate a pluralism which focuses on the field of language, proposing a heterogeneity of language games (Wittgenstein) or phrase regimens and genres of discourse. This pluralism was also grounded in Lyotard's reading of Kant, where it takes the form of an incommensurability between the faculties. For Lyotard, heterogeneity and incommensurability are a way of challenging the terroristic dominance of performativity and preserving what is at stake in thought and life that it threatens to destroy (which, in general, Hui names "contingency"). I want to suggest a way of developing this pluralist thinking which would draw together more strongly Lyotard's work on heterogeneity and Hui's concern for technodiversity.

I believe that today we can and should update Lyotard's frame of analysis by focusing more squarely on the concept of *information*. For Lyotard, still writing very much under the influence of the twentieth century's "linguistic turn" in philosophy, information technologies are to be understood as machines which process *language*. He writes, for example:

Essentially, the new technologies concern language. [...] They suppose the analysis of operating sequences, their encoding into artificial languages, the constitution of artificial memories, the training of automata obeying orders given in this language.

Language treated in this way is informational.³⁴

Moreover, we can note that the final "Zone" of *Les Immatériaux*—the exhibition Lyotard directed at the Pompidou Centre in 1985, which represents an important dimension of his exploration of the postmodern—was dominated by computer terminals, and entitled "The Labyrinth of Language." This prioritization of language was not uncommon: it also characterizes Heidegger's influential critique of cybernetics, for example.³⁵ Today, I believe we are in a position to reverse this conceptual prioritization: information is not a form of language, but rather language is a form, and just one form, of information. Following those working in the area known as "philosophy of information," we can speak today of

34 Jean-François Lyotard, "New Technologies," in *Political Writings*, 15–16.

35 See Martin Heidegger, "Traditional Language and Technological Language," trans. Wanda Torres Gregory, *Journal of Philosophical Research* XXIII, (1998): 129–145.

an “informational turn.”³⁶ This also follows the prescient lead of Gilbert Simondon, who in the 1950s already showed how the concept of information was flexible enough to think multiple orders of reality.³⁷ Very briefly, the key issue here is that language privileges *semantic meaning* in a way that information does not. Considered more generically, information is a concept which allows us to think languages and technologies together, and what is at stake in their homogenisation or pluralisation.

Predominantly, Lyotard himself understood information as a vector of homogenisation, and even perhaps as the ultimate expression of the logic of performativity, writing that “[s]cience, technology, and economy find a common measure of knowledge, power, and price in information.”³⁸ Moreover, another way in which he presents “the System”—as what he calls “the Leibnizian hypothesis”—prioritises information. This model suggests that humanity and the technical-economic System it has given rise to is developing towards a great Monad which would be equivalent to how Leibniz conceives God: the System would be a great information processor, with a complete store of information, able to calculate any future event on the basis of past events, thus maximising its performance and eliminating any contingency whatsoever.³⁹

Nevertheless, Lyotard in fact gestured towards more heterogeneous, pluralistic possibilities for information in a number of ways, although they remain brief and undeveloped. First, for example, in the conceptual design of *Les Immatériaux*, explicitly outlined in the written materials accompanying the exhibition, there appears a form of the pragmatic “phrase universe” from *The Differend*, translated into informational terms.⁴⁰ The unstated implication is that the contingency of linkages between phrases in *The Differend* might be understood informationally. Second, in a paper presented to French computer scientists in 1982, Lyotard suggested:

The potential ‘market’ opened by the new technologies is immense, because language is potentially an infinity of phrases [...]. But the niche, so to speak, that French industries would have to occupy would be that of enlarging and making more complex the treatment of language (postinformational and postcommunicational) – for example, the analysis,

36 See Frederick Adams, “The Informational Turn in Philosophy,” *Minds and Machines* 13 (2003): 471–501; Luciano Floridi, *The Philosophy of Information* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); and Guowu Li, “Information Philosophy in China: Professor Wu Kun’s 30 Years of Academic Thinking in Information Philosophy,” *tripleC* 9, no. 2 (2011): 316–321.

37 Gilbert Simondon, *Information in Light of Notions of Form and Information*, trans. Taylor Adkins. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020).

38 Lyotard, “New Technologies,” 16.

39 See Jean-François Lyotard, “Matter and Time,” in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

40 See Jean-François Lyotard, “Les Immatériaux,” *Art & Text* 17, (1985): 47–57.

the formalization, the committing to memory of persuasive rhetorics, of ‘musics,’ of inscriptions of movement (kineographic techniques, such as kinetic holography) and so forth.⁴¹

The suggestion here, in short, is that information technologies should further develop their *aesthetic* dimension. Translated from the linguistic to the informational turn, we could understand this not as a “postinformational” treatment of language, but a concept of information itself which might be called “postinformation.” This would move the concept of information away from the linguistic and rationalist prejudices which have dominated it, and would reconsider it in terms both of the *conceptual* history of the term, according to which it can be understood as *that which in-forms forms*—encompassing any and all kinds of forms—and of the *empirical* history in which technologies have been used to capture, process, and transmit sounds and images, and artists have experimented with these technologies, since well before the formalisation of mathematical Information Theory⁴² and the philosophies of information based on it.

This leads us to the issue of the aesthetic, which was never far from Lyotard’s thought, and which is one of the key dimensions Hui quite rightly points to in identifying the possibility of resistance to the System. Citing *Les Immatériaux* and Lyotard’s writings on the sublime, Hui suggests that for Lyotard, the postmodern is accompanied by “a new sensibility.”⁴³ Again I think this is quite correct, and I would simply like to comment on various features of this sensibility in order to extend this idea through my own reading of Lyotard. This “new sensibility” is accompanied by what Lyotard points to as a crisis of perception, of time and space.⁴⁴ This analysis draws out the aesthetic implications of developments in science and technology, but also in the arts. In short, such developments cast doubt on the perceptual “given,” as primacy is accorded to rationality and conception. This occurs in sciences and technologies through the priority of formal modelling and reproducibility. Both in the sciences and in everyday life, through the extension of media and information technologies (as Baudrillard examined in his own way through the idea of simulacra: the model is hyperreal, or *more real* than the thing it models⁴⁵). This is a kind of aesthetic nihilism, since it produces the devaluation of material and sensible immanence that Nietzsche identified in Platonism and Christianity.

However, Lyotard argues that this “crisis of perception” does not destroy all aesthetic

41 Lyotard, “New Technologies,” 18.

42 Principally by Claude Shannon in 1948. See Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963).

43 Hui, *Recursivity and Contingency*, 268.

44 See for example Jean-François Lyotard, “Argumentation and Presentation: The Foundation Crisis,” trans. Chris Turner. *Cultural Politics* 9, no. 2 (2013): 117-143.

45 See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

possibility, because it also corresponds to how Kant analysed the sublime: the predominance of rational Ideas destroys coordinating intuitions, that is, the imagination's free ability to synthesise forms for sensations. Yet it also liberates a feeling of the sublime, because sensation itself is not destroyed, but becomes "formless," and this formlessness of sensation, in dynamic tension with Ideas of reason, is how Kant characterises the sublime. For Lyotard, the sublime sensibility which marks postmodernity is an effect of the predominance of the technoscientific System itself.⁴⁶ There is a paradoxical logic at work here which Lyotard, drawing on the Ancient Greek Sophists, called "retorsion": it allows a response, or retort, to one's opponent by accepting their premises, but subjecting them to a "twist" or "turn," and arriving at a different conclusion.⁴⁷ Thus in the feeling of the sublime, "formless" sensation "retorts" to the aesthetic nihilism of reason.

Lyotard identified this strange crisis and response at work in the arts as well and analysed it in particular in his work on Marcel Duchamp (whom he called a "Great Sophist."⁴⁸) Artists, he believed, have been witnesses to this crisis of perceptual givens, which disorients us in space and time, through their own relentless investigations. Duchamp critiqued "retinal" art—art which is meant to be appreciated for the visual pleasure it affords—and introduced trends which led to conceptual art, as exemplified in his *Large Glass*, which explores a fourth spatial dimension which can be thought, but not intuited. Yet Lyotard argues that Duchamp's work is not the simple departure from sensibility it might appear to be: the posthumously discovered *Last Nude* forms a retorsion by being a version of *The Large Glass* reflected in sensibility (it is a retinal work once again, to be looked at rather than simply thought).⁴⁹ In short, for Lyotard the conceptual experiments of artists should not be thought simply as an aesthetic nihilism, as a destruction of the sensible, but rather a clearing away of traditional assumptions in order to produce new experiments in sensibility, with the aid of critical reason.

A similar paradox and potential for retorsion, I suggest, is at work in *Les Immatériaux* (even if, as his reported later remarks indicate, he believed there was not enough resistance on display there, and so he planned an unrealised second exhibition on this theme!⁵⁰) The exhibition explores the crisis of perception by displaying the technologies which

46 For Lyotard's discussion of these themes, see in particular "After the Sublime, the State of Aesthetics" and "Something Like: 'Communication ... without Communication'" in *The Inhuman*.

47 This theme in Lyotard's work is analysed by Keith Crome in *Lyotard and Greek Thought: Sophistry* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

48 Jean-François Lyotard, "Marcel Duchamp ou le grand sophiste," *L'Art Vivant* 56, (March–May 1975): 34–35.

49 See Jean-François Lyotard, "Duchamp's TRANS/formers," trans. Ian McLeod, in *Jean-François Lyotard: Writings on Contemporary Art and Artists*, ed. Herman Parret. Vol. 3. (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2010).

50 Philippe Parreno and Hans Ulrich Obrist, *The Conversation Series 14* (Cologne: Walter König, 2008), 17.

cause the perceptual given to retreat before the priority of reason. We can see this in the pathway of the exhibition, which proceeds from the “Theatre of the Non-Body” to the “Labyrinth of Language”: it indicates the eclipse of the organic body and its senses by technologically produced information. Yet, the opposite tendency is also at work, since information technologies materialise that which was previously thought to be immaterial: reason itself and the workings of the mind. This paradox, of course, is evident in the title, the “Immaterials.” And alongside these technologies were displayed works by artists who explored, in their own way, this crisis of perception. The potentials of new technologies to exploit this complex “new sensibility”—the postmodern sublime—for works of art was briefly but repeatedly hinted at by Lyotard.⁵¹ The many artists working today who cite this exhibition as inspiration attest to this possibility.

Let me briefly conclude by drawing together the two parts of this paper. As noted above, Lyotard, following Kant, suggested that we can point to “negative” events as signs of progress in humanity because they indicate an increasingly complex sensitivity. In comparing the two parts of my analysis here—socio-political “system failure” and technologically optimised performance—I am tempted by a certain hypothesis. This would be that the very awareness of system failure points to a sensitivity which would indicate a resistance to the System itself, so that, in short, the fault lines in the socio-political System would signal the possibility of technological fracturing and diversification that Hui calls for. No doubt this is far too optimistic and simplistic. Nevertheless, while the technological System has expanded in roughly the ways Lyotard predicted, we cannot today see the System as hegemonically as the “postmodern fable” suggests. The signs of system failure indicated above give us much to be deeply concerned about, but they might also point to expanded possibilities of resistance, invention, and transformation. Without wanting to suggest that these are by any means sufficient for addressing the very serious global problems that confront us today, I have indicated two ways of developing such possibilities on the basis of Lyotard’s legacy. These are strategies via which thinkers, writers and artists might continue to hope to play at least some part in improving the (post?)human condition. First, a task of conceptual innovation and redesign is needed in reconceiving information itself as aesthetic and heterogeneous. And second, artists must continue to invent possibilities for the complexified sensibility which the postmodern condition both threatens and promises.

51 See for example Jean-François Lyotard, *Peregrinations: Law, Form, Event* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 43.

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