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Strategies of Resistance: On Ambivalent Words in Jean-François Lyotard

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Abstract

This essay examines Jean-François Lyotard's ambivalent use of the "sublime," focusing on the intricate tension and complicity between capitalism and avant-garde art. Capitalism, while dehumanising and dematerialising individuals, generates avant-garde art that critiques these very processes. Lyotard's use of terms such as "terror," "inhuman," and "immaterial" reveals their dual role: they function both as instruments of the capitalist system and as tools of resistance. By tracing Lyotard's evolving thought from the 1970s to the 1980s, this essay explores how he argues that effective critique of capitalism must come from within its structures, a strategy that may be described as "mimetic adaptation." Additionally, the essay highlights how Lyotard's insights continue to be crucial for understanding the dynamics of power, resistance, and the potential for subversion in contemporary capitalist society, especially through the lens of aesthetic theory.

Keywords: Jean-François Lyotard, Sublime, Capitalism, Avant-garde, Inhumanity, Immateriality

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Introduction

Lyotard's theory of the sublime underscores the tension and complicity between avant-garde art and capitalism. While the capitalist movement is sublime in its capacity for dehumanising and dematerialising us, it also generates avant-garde art that critiques these processes. Capitalism may arouse fear through its processes of dehumanisation and dematerialisation, yet it also opens the door for critique by the very inhumanity and immateriality inherent in art. Lyotard's ambivalent use of these terms reveals a critical tension that can only emerge through capitalism's own mechanisms.

For instance, Lyotard employs the term "terror" to symbolise both the power exercised by the oppressive system and the power revealed in literary and artistic practices that resist it. He argues that terror must be both excluded from the community and imposed as a condition within writing (*écriture*).

This ambivalence extends to terms like "immaterial," "inhuman," and "sublime." On one hand, Lyotard critiques the dematerialisation caused by technological advances, as exemplified by his writings on the exhibition *Les Immatériaux* (1985). The progression of technology reduces not only inorganic substances but also organic life, including the human body, into analysable objects, threatening human subjectivity. As Lyotard suggests, the term "immaterial" in the exhibition title symbolically indicates the process of dematerialisation driven by science and technology, and the capitalist society sustaining it. This relentless process transforms familiar spaces and objects into something alien and uncanny (*unheimlich*). The force that homogenises the world around us—dematerialising it—is rooted in the impersonal movement of capitalism. Conversely, the term "immaterial matter," as discussed in "After the Sublime, the State of Aesthetics" (1987), refers to "the Thing" (*la Chose*) inherent in matter, which cannot be fully objectified.

The analysis of terms such as "sublime," "terror," "inhuman," and "immaterial" illuminates the recurring strategies underpinning Lyotard's aesthetics. While Lyotard does not explicitly clarify his dual use of these concepts, their purpose can be discerned by revisiting his texts from the 1970s. Lyotard's critical insight into capitalist society is encapsulated in his assertion that "all criticism, rather than overcoming capitalism, reinforces it."[1] As an impersonal system, capitalism absorbs even the critiques directed against it. Thus, any attempt to critique capitalism from an external vantage point is futile; instead, effective critique must find the incommensurable within the system. This strategy can be described as mimetic adaptation to the capitalist economy. This essay thoroughly examines this logic.

1 Jean-François Lyotard, *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud* (Paris: Union générale d'éditions, 1973), 16. The following quotations from French texts are my translation.

1. Drift—Beyond Critique

To understand a portion of Lyotard's reflections on capitalism, it is essential to examine his texts from the early 1970s. For example, in *Drift from Marx and Freud* (1973), Lyotard states that the threat of capitalism lies in its ability to absorb everything. Capitalism incorporates all forms of negation, continuously generating new value from them. Thus, criticising it is always difficult, and any "direct" critique of it is nearly impossible. In the preface of the book, Lyotard suggests this by referencing a book he once attempted to publish, which had "neither a title nor an author's name":

> I once dreamed, together with Bruno Lemenuel, of a book with neither a title nor an author's name. But that was a simple, naive idea. Even if such a book were published and found a publisher, the law of value would inevitably absorb such an object into its cycle, and, due to the very fact of its lack of title and author, would draw even more value from it. And, the fact that it lacks a title and author would make this book a highly coveted commodity. [...] The capitalist economy robs us of anonymity itself, turning that anonymity into a mode of surplus value appropriation.[2]

The "book with neither a title nor an author's name," as mentioned here, although seemingly escaping the standard value system, would eventually be integrated into the law of value due to its novelty, which previous "commodities" lacked. Even if this attempt contained irony or critique of capitalism, capitalism's constant pursuit of novelty incorporates even the irony or critique directed at it. Thus "all criticism, rather than overcoming capitalism, reinforces it." From here, Lyotard's thesis for attempting a true critique of capitalism becomes clear—"one must drift beyond critique."[3]

Although Lyotard does not explicitly state this, considering the context of Paris around the 1970s, the term "drift" (*dériver*) could have multiple sources of inspiration.[4] Nevertheless, Lyotard adopts this concept as his own, arguing that it is not by "criticising" capitalism but by "drifting" one's desires that capitalism could ultimately be undermined. The drift, as suggested by the title of this collection of essays, involves redirecting or transforming the desires and energies that sustain the established system, as much as possible. According to Lyotard, the Latin origin of the word "drift" (*derivatio*) does not mean "to leave the

2 Lyotard, *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud,* 7–8.

3 Lyotard, *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud,* 15.

4 The two figures that immediately come to mind are Jacques Lacan and Guy Debord. Martin Jay notes that Lyotard may have deliberately used this term to indicate his "disenchantment" with the Situationists. Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 562.

shore." Rather, it means "to change the course, to head towards a place other than the original destination."

To rephrase this in the context of the current discussion, drifting does not mean taking a critical distance from capitalism and then criticising it, but rather changing the course of the desires of those who shape and maintain capitalism. According to Lyotard, capitalism, and by extension, society in general, is sustained by the investment of desire. As elaborated in *Libidinal Economy* (1974), Lyotard's view during this period is that capitalist society is maintained by energetically investing our desires to bodies, language, land, and cities. As we have already seen, criticism of capitalism ultimately adds something new to it, thereby reinforcing the investment of capital. A profound critique of capitalism, on the other hand, is found in redirecting the flow of such desires and withholding the investment from specific sectors:

> What destroys capitalism is the drift of desire and the loss of investment. However, this is not what economists are seeking [...] It is the loss of libido throughout the capitalist system.[5]

Although Lyotard rarely revisited the texts from this period in later years, it is clear that Lyotard maintained this critical awareness of capitalism throughout his life. While his Marxist activities in *Socialism or Barbarism* came to an end in the 1960s, his critical practice against capitalism persisted through his later writings.

2. Capitalism—A Metaphysical Principle

However, if we do not propose an alternative model to capitalism but instead aim to transform it, we ultimately remain within the bounds of capitalism. This approach may result in a further affirmation of capitalism's infinite movement. In fact, while Lyotard generally maintains a critical stance towards capitalism, he sometimes seems to act as if he supports it. For example, at a symposium held in Cerisy-la-Salle in 1972, "capital" was discussed in relation to Nietzsche's concept of "eternal return":

> On the one hand, 'capital' is production as consumption, and on the other hand, consumption as production. In other words, it is an endless and purposeless metamorphosis. This metamorphosis does not only work to dissolve outdated pre-capitalist institutions but also functions as the self-dissolution of its own constantly deconstructed and reconstructed institutions. By 'institutions,' I refer to all the things given as stable

5 Lyotard, *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud,* 16.

> (political, legal, cultural...) significations that rest within regulated distances and produce representations. The nature of metamorphosis, which perpetually shifts from objects to humans, from humans to objects, from products to means of production, and vice versa—that is, the economy as long as it remains non-political—is what capital teaches us. This dissolution as modernism is fundamentally affirmative; there is no nihilism in this movement. What exists is only the sketch of the superhuman or the inhuman.[6]

Here, "capital" is discussed as embodying Nietzschean terms like "affirmation" and "eternal return." Capitalism, as an affirmative movement devoid of nihilism—such insights resonate with the concerns in *Libidinal Economy*, which frames society within the monistic dynamics of libido.

It is well known that Lyotard later criticised his theory on libido, and some may find it challenging to directly connect it to his texts after the 1980s. However, even if terms like "libido" and "investment" were discarded, Lyotard's ambivalent stance toward capitalism remains prominent. For instance, around the same time as *The Differend* (1983), where Lyotard clearly adopted a critical stance towards capitalism, he made the following statement: "One constantly hears that the most important issue in society today is the issue of the state. But that is a serious misunderstanding. The most important issue, above any other, including the issue of the state in contemporary times, is the issue of capital." Lyotard continues:

> Capitalism has aspired to and indeed has become a metaphysical figure, neither 'economic' nor 'sociological.' In capitalism, the infinite is posited as something that remains undetermined, which should be controlled and possessed indefinitely by the will. [...] This infinite must be controlled and made into a means to reach the ultimate end. And this ultimate end is none other than the glory of the will, the glory of the infinite.[7]

Here, Lyotard states that capitalism "aspired to and indeed has become a metaphysical figure," depicting capitalism as a system embodying the idea of "infinite development"—a system without a subject. He then asserts that we must control this "infinite," but immediately after, he denies that it can be controlled: "No class exists that can embody and monopolise this infinite will. When I speak of 'capitalism,' I do not refer to capital owners or capital managers."[8]

6 Jean-François Lyotard, *Des Dispositifs pulsionnels* (Paris: Union générale d'éditions, 1973), 308–309

7 Jean-François Lyotard, *Tombeau de l'intellectuel et autres papiers* (Paris: Galilée, 1984), 78.

8 Lyotard, *Tombeau de l'intellectuel*, 80.

The "infinite will" is represented exclusively by the impersonal movement of capitalism. In other words, it is impossible for this to be possessed by a state, much less a particular class or individual. Capitalism, as a system that refuses any domination, does not aim for technical, social, or political achievements. According to Lyotard, the aesthetics of such capitalism is the aesthetics of the sublime:

> Capitalism does not aim for technical, social, or political achievements produced by various rules. The aesthetics of capitalism is not the aesthetics of the beautiful but the aesthetics of the sublime. Its poetics is the poetics of genius, and for capitalism, the act of creation does not follow rules but rather creates rules.[9]

The contrast between the "aesthetics of the beautiful" and the "aesthetics of the sublime" can be understood as "aesthetics that follows rules" and "aesthetics that creates rules." The reason Lyotard attributes a negative connotation to the term "beautiful" can be best understood by referring to his art theories from the 1980s.[10] According to him, the "beautiful" today is nothing more than something pre-calculated and harmonized to suit popular taste. The aesthetics of the beautiful follows rules in this sense. In contrast, the aesthetics of the sublime creates rules. This is precisely what Lyotard supports in avant-garde endeavours, as evidenced by the following description in *The Inhuman* (1988):

> [Artists] move into the dialectic of the avant-gardes. What is at stake in this dialectic is the question, 'What is painting?', and what keeps the dialectic moving into is the refutation of what was done or has just been done: no, *that* wasn't indispensable to painting either. Painting thus becomes a philosophical activity: the rules of formation of pictural images are not already stated and awaiting application. Rather, painting has as its rule to seek out these rules of formation of pictural images, as philosophy has as its rule to seek out the rules of philosophical sentences.[11]

While this text describes "creating rules" as the endeavour of artists, in *The Tomb of the*

9 Lyotard, *Tombeau de l'intellectuel*, 79.

10 As the following publications clearly show, Lyotard had been developing art criticism grounded in psychoanalysis since the 1970s, and it was likewise in the 1970s that he produced monographs on Jacques Monory and Marcel Duchamp (Herman Parret, ed., *Jean-François Lyotard: Écrits sur l'art contemporain et les artistes / Writings on Contemporary Art and Artists,* 7 vols., Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2009–2013). Nevertheless, the definitions of "the beautiful" and "the sublime" that concern us here begin to appear only with the French publication of "Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?" in 1982.

11 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time,* trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 121.

Intellectual (1984), "creating rules" is described as the creative act of capitalism. These two propositions should never be mixed. The artists' creation of rules and the creative act of capitalism are fundamentally different. Moreover, the artists' endeavour was considered sublime precisely because it could serve as a critique of capitalism. Nevertheless, if we frame Lyotard's arguments in this way, the aesthetics of the sublime, which "creates rules rather than follows them," becomes something paradoxically held by both (a) avant-garde art, which criticises capitalism, and (b) capitalism, which is criticised by avant-garde art. Here, we encounter a paradoxical situation where the aesthetics of the sublime is shared by two opposing entities.

3. Capital and the Avant-Garde

Let us further explore this issue. The earlier assertion that "the aesthetics of capitalism is […] the aesthetics of the sublime" rests on the premise that capitalism creates rules rather than follows them. However, in "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde" (1985), Lyotard explicitly argues that the sublime exists within capitalism:

> There is something of the sublime in capitalist economy. It is not academic, it is not physiocratic, it admits of no nature. It is, in a sense, an economy regulated by an Idea—infinite wealth or power. It does not manage to present any example from reality to verify this Idea. In making science subordinate to itself through technologies, especially those of language, it only succeeds, on the contrary, in making reality increasingly ungraspable, subject to doubt, unsteady.[12]

This is a somewhat obscure description, but it is important to note that the term "Idea" is rooted in Kantian terminology. In *The Assassination of Experience by Painting, Monory* (1984), Lyotard, clearly referencing Kant, argues that what was once Kant's "transcendent sublime" has now been replaced by an "immanent sublime" in the twentieth century. Kant, in the *Critique of Judgment*, distinguishes between natural objects, without purpose, and man-made objects, with purpose. However, according to Lyotard, in the current context where nature is no longer taken as given, our various emotions, including the sublime, can no longer arise without being framed within some artificial system. Kant's sublime was doubly transcendent: it was both triggered by nature, external to society, and connected our sensibility to transcendent reason. Lyotard, however, challenges this Kantian notion, arguing that his own sublime resides entirely within capitalism and is disconnected from nature. If we accept this premise, then, as Lyotard suggests, the sublime indeed exists within capitalism.

12 Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 105.

However, a more fundamental point needs to be clarified. The assertion that "the sublime exists within the capitalist economy" is not merely about the finite nature of our environment or our sensory capacities. Lyotard asserts that a certain complicity exists between capital and the avant-garde:

> Yet there is a kind of collusion between capital and the avant-garde. The force of scepticism and even of destruction that capitalism has brought into play, and that Marx never ceased analyzing and identifying, in some way encourages among artists a mistrust of established rules and a willingness to experiment with means of expression, with styles, with ever new material.[13]

No matter how much art resists the levelling of value by capitalism, the undeniable truth remains that this search for novelty is driven by capitalist dynamics itself. Lyotard, who had been engaging with the issue of capitalism since the 1970s, was fully aware of this duality. From an early stage, Lyotard was keenly aware of the paradox—that the sublime could only be located within the very capitalism he sought to critique, and that a certain complicity existed even there.

4. The Inhuman

Lyotard long associated this duality with the term "the inhuman" (*l'inhumain*). This term, "inhuman," is employed in two principal senses. The first refers to the inhumanity imposed by the development of capitalism. The system of late capitalist society transforms us into inhuman beings. Additionally, the modes of communication in the modern world de-corporealise us, and we find ourselves caught in an inexorable process of inhumanisation. In this sense, the term is used critically to describe a system that prioritises efficiency and economy.

However, on the other hand, it is also used in a positive sense to refer to the less-than-human residing within humanity itself. This second form of "inhumanity" refers to the otherness within the self, something irreducible and incomprehensible, or what might be termed the infantile—the *infans*, or speechless one in psychoanalysis. This does not simply refer to infancy as a phase of life ("An infancy that is not an age and that does not pass, with time."[14]) It is the remainder that persists within us, something that remains

13 Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 105.

14 Jean-François Lyotard, *Readings in Infancy,* trans. Robert Harvey and Kiff Bamford (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 1.

eternally as a residue. As Lyotard points out, without this "inhuman" residue, the very category of the "human" could not exist:

> If this were the case, it would be inexplicable for the adult himself or herself not only that s/he has to struggle constantly to assure his or her conformity to institutions and even to arrange them with a view to a better living-together, but that the power of criticizing them, the pain of supporting them and the temptation to escape them persist in some of his or her activities.[15]

In other words, the fact that humanisation is an ongoing process—that the transformation of a "child" into an "adult" and their adaptation to society never ceases—implies that the inhuman persists as an irreducible remainder. Lyotard, who frequently references texts by Apollinaire and Adorno, regards art and literature as the "inhuman" within society, insisting that artists and writers must heed their inhuman voices rather than conform to societal norms. Clearly, this aligns with his demands on the avant-garde. Humanism, grounded in rigid dialectics and hermeneutics, seeks to rapidly humanise this internal inhumanity and harmonise it with the system. Therefore, artists must make this very inhuman indeterminacy serve as a critique of the system.

> All education is inhuman because it does not happen without constraint and terror; I mean the least controlled, the least pedagogical terror, the one Freud calls castration and which makes him say, in relation to the 'good way' of bringing up children, that in any case it will be bad (close in this to Kantian melancholy). And conversely, everything in the instituted which, in the event, can cut deep with distress and indetermination is so threatening that reasonable mind cannot fail to fear in it, and rightly, an inhuman power of deregulation.[16]

The inhumanity brought about by late capitalist society and the inhumanity as a condition of humanity are, of course, fundamentally different in nature. However, as with the "terror," a notable feature of Lyotard's discourse is his frequent and deliberate use of such dualities. For example, in the case of "terror," it is something that should be excluded from the community, but at the same time, it must be imposed as a condition in writing (*écriture*). Similarly, while "inhumanity" should be excluded when imposed on us externally, it must also be embraced as a condition of literature and art.

15 Lyotard, *The Inhuman,* 3.
16 Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 4–5.

Lyotard's approach in this respect is quite distinctive. If this strategy is a defining feature of his entire philosophy, then the paradox surrounding the sublime that we discussed earlier becomes more comprehensible. Specifically, the sublime is (1) primarily found within capitalism, which is "governed by the idea of infinite wealth and power," and (2) also present in the practices of the avant-garde, which, while complicit with capitalism, are still capable of criticising it from within.

Moreover, there is another such dualistic concept in Lyotard's vocabulary. The term "immaterial" (*l'immatériel*), often used in the form of "immaterial matter," is another example.

5. The Immaterial

Here, we will briefly discuss the term "immaterial." One of its implications lies in the concept of "immaterial matter," which is primarily used to denote a kind of immateriality. "Immaterial matter" refers to something that, while included in matter, cannot itself be objectified. This notion emerges in texts from the late 1980s and forms the core of Lyotard's theory of the sublime as an "aesthetics of shock."[17] It is understood to be that which suspends the continuity of time sustained by the imagination, albeit only for a moment.

On the other hand, the term "immaterial" carries a different implication in a different context. However, this is not found in Lyotard's philosophical texts. In fact, Lyotard was involved in the exhibition titled *Les Immatériaux*, held at the Pompidou Centre in 1985.[18] The term "immaterial," as it appears in the title of this exhibition, stands in stark contrast to the concept of "immaterial matter."

First, let us review an overview of *Les Immatériaux*. Held over four months from 28th March to 15th July 1985, this exhibition was one of the largest ever organised by the Pompidou Centre at the time and generated significant interest, not only in France but also in the art worlds of the United States and the United Kingdom. What exactly was it about *Les Immatériaux* that provoked such a response? Let us examine some accounts from English-speaking attendees who experienced the exhibition.

17 Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger et « les juifs »* (Paris: Galilée, 1988), 59.

18 With regard to this exhibition, see in particular the following important studies. Yuk Hui and Andreas Broeckmann, eds., *30 Years After Les Immatériaux: Art, Science and Theory* (Lüneburg: Meson Press, 2015); Daniel Birnbaum and Sven-Olov Wallenstein, *Spacing Philosophy: Lyotard and the Idea of the Exhibition* (London: Sternberg Press, 2019).

John Rajchman, a philosopher specialising in twentieth-century continental philosophy and critical theory, wrote the following about this exhibition in an essay:

> At the time, the show was the largest and most expensive undertaken by the Pompidou Center. But such 'bigness' was not monumental; rather it assumed the form of a labyrinthine sprawl as the 'condition' of mixtures and heterogeneities. There was too much "information" to absorb or digest, even when armed with the compendious accompanying catalogues, which, if anything, served to complicate things further. Moreover, all the 'data' didn't cohere, but rather fell together in strange, even surreal, juxtapositions or unforeseen patterns. In this respect one was at some distance from the notion, often associated with the theme of 'mechanical reproduction,' that capitalism 'equalizes' everything; the exhibition was rather a mad jumble into which we were plunged. And, while there was lots of 'theory' in the show, it was part of the jumble. It occurred alongside or among the objects shown rather than 'above' them, as if no longer able to oversee their spread or supply an Ariadne's thread to get out from it. Theory, too, had become part of the 'condition.'[19]

It is worth noting the "catalogues" mentioned here. The exhibition catalogue consists of two volumes: one is an illustrated catalogue titled *Album et Catalogue*, which comprehensively documents the works exhibited at *Les Immatériaux*. However, many of the exhibits included objects and industrial products that could hardly be classified as art. The inclusion of these items as equivalent "data" alongside artworks clearly reflects Lyotard's intention, as he ultimately determined the direction of the exhibition.

The other volume, titled *Épreuve d'écriture*, is structured like an encyclopaedia. In this volume, twenty-six co-authors, including Jacques Derrida, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, and François Châtelet, contributed brief texts on seventy-four entries such as "body," "memory," and "time." What is particularly interesting about this catalogue is that the texts written by each author were subsequently passed on to others, resulting in a printed text where a dialogue unfolds between multiple authors. From today's perspective, this may not seem especially novel. However, it is important to recognise that this project, undertaken in 1985, represented a challenge to the nature of "knowledge" in an increasingly information-saturated society and foreshadowed the advent of the internet.
With this in mind, let us return to the exhibition itself. The following is an excerpt from Paul Crowther, a specialist in aesthetics and art theory, who has written extensively on

19 John Rajchman, "Jean-François Lyotard's Underground Aesthetics," *October*, no. 86 (Fall 1998): 15.

Kant's concept of the sublime:

> There is no one route through this labyrinth. Rather, the visitor is free to wander, wearing radio-controlled headphones which offer 'commentaries' in the form of music, poetry, literature, philosophy and other readings, which change as one moves from zone to zone.[20]

As Crowther describes, *Les Immatériaux* was an audio-visual exhibition in which visitors wore headsets that correlated the visual elements in the exhibition space with the auditory elements delivered through the headsets. Moreover, the exhibition was designed so that the individual works receded into the background, with the exhibition space itself becoming a "work" of art, which was quite unique for the time.

Additionally, the theme of *Les Immatériaux*, focusing on the progress of technology in late capitalist society, can be viewed as an extension of Lyotard's earlier work *The Postmodern Condition* (1979). As confirmed by the catalogue, many of the objects displayed evoked the postmodern condition of late capitalist society. In other words, *Les Immatériaux* presented a fragment of the contemporary situation that Lyotard had raised in *The Postmodern Condition*, but in the form of an art exhibition.

Lyotard encapsulated this idea in the exhibition's title, *Les Immatériaux*. The vocabulary surrounding "material" was divided into five phases (*maternité, matrice, matériau, matière, matériel*). Using these five words as his core vocabulary, Lyotard proposed one decisive "postmodern condition" in *Les Immatériaux*. Namely, that the objects and spaces around us, and even our bodies, are being dematerialised—that is, the substances that produce things are gradually becoming invisible, decomposing, and becoming commensurable through the progress of science and technology. In other words, the immateriality referred to here is not the immateriality inherent in matter, as the term "immaterial matter" seeks to express, but rather the dematerialisation of the world through technology.

In another essay, "The Postmodern Museum," John Rajchman argues that the term "immateriality" can be understood in two senses.[21] First, Lyotard is sounding the alarm about "the deprivation of the human body by electronic technology," and second, about "the dematerialisation of space." While the validity of clearly separating these two interpretations is not debated here, Rajchman's reading accurately captures the issues

20 Paul Crowther, "*Les Immateriaux* and the Postmodern Sublime," in *Judging Lyotard*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (London: Routledge, 1992), 193.

21 John Rajchman, "The Postmodern Museum," in *Philosophical Events: Essays on the 80s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 113.

Lyotard raised with this exhibition. For example, Lyotard spoke of the exhibition as follows:

> The word 'human', as substantive adjective, designates an ancient domain of knowledge and intervention which the technosciences now cut across and share; here they discover and elaborate 'immaterials' which are analogous (even if they are in general more complex) to those examined and detected in other fields. The human cortex is 'read' just like an electronic field; through the neurovegetative system human affectivity is 'acted' on like a complex chemical organisation composed of information transmitted by media and according to diverse codes connected by interfaces where 'translations' take place.[22]

As can be discerned from this statement, Lyotard aimed to criticise the process of dematerialisation enabled by technological progress. Technology reduces not only inorganic matter but also organic substances, including the human body, to analysable objects, thereby leading to the degradation of the traditional concept of the human. Thus, the term "immaterial," used by Lyotard as the title of this exhibition, symbolically indicates the current state in which rapidly advancing natural sciences and the capitalist society driving them are threatening human subjectivity.

As we have just confirmed, the system of late capitalist society, driven by scientific and technological progress, transforms familiar objects and spaces into uncanny entities by infinitely dismantling them. The force that converts everything around us into data, making all things commensurable—in other words, the greatest driving force behind the dematerialisation of this world—is none other than the impersonal movement of capitalism.

As was evident with the concepts of "terror" and "inhumanity" discussed earlier, it is clear from the discussion thus far that the concept of immateriality also carries a dual meaning. Therefore, when Lyotard uses the term "immaterial matter," we should be aware that another form of "immateriality" is likely being considered. The "immaterial matter" discussed in *The Inhuman* tends to be reduced to sensory issues such as nuance or timbre in a work, but in a broader context, it can be understood as a concept that borders on the dematerialisation driven by scientific and technological progress.

22 Jean-François Lyotard, "Les Immatériaux" (1985), trans. Paul Smith, in *Thinking about Exhibitions,* eds. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson and Sandy Nairne (London: Routledge, 1996), 116.

Conclusion

The starting point of this essay was the question of why Lyotard's sublime is applied both to capitalism's endless movement and to avant-garde art, which seeks to distance itself from it. Let us now summarise the key points.

1. Lyotard's writings contain discussions on capitalism that span a long period. Moreover, even in texts that appear to address purely aesthetic issues, similar concerns are consistently present in the background.

2. Lyotard refers to the general practice of art that can function critically against capitalism as the avant-garde. This avant-garde effort is considered sublime and applies to a wide range of artistic forms, including painting, music, and literature.

3. On the other hand, Lyotard also designates capitalism itself (or the aesthetics of capitalism) as sublime. This is because both share the characteristic of not adhering to pre-established rules but instead "creating their own rules."

In most discussions surrounding Lyotard's sublime, some of these perspectives are often overlooked. In the more superficial readings, the points raised in 1 and 2 are ignored, and Lyotard's argument is reduced to a mere theory of abstract painting. Furthermore, many interpretations fail to address the duality of the sublime as outlined in 3. Particularly in his writings in the 1980s, which seem far removed from his political phase, it is important to recognise that Lyotard continued to engage with these concerns through aesthetics—or perhaps, precisely by engaging with aesthetics. This has largely been overlooked to this day.

The reflections on "terror," "inhuman," "immaterial," and "sublime" demonstrate that this critical methodology forms the core of Lyotard's aesthetics. However, Lyotard himself does not explicitly explain his dual use of these concepts. Therefore, the reasons for adopting such a critical strategy must be inferred, though a somewhat coherent answer can be gleaned from his texts of the 1970s. This understanding is encapsulated in statements like "all criticism, rather than overcoming capitalism, reinforces it." As an impersonal system, capitalism constantly incorporates even the criticism directed at it. Hence, attempting to criticise capitalism from the outside is ultimately futile. If such criticism is possible, it must come from within capitalism, by identifying something incommensurable with it. Lyotard's strategy could be termed "mimetic adaptation" to the capitalist economy.[23] When discussing topics of the "sublime" or "immaterial matter," Lyotard was not thinking in the narrow sense of aesthetics. Even when emphasising the unique character of an

23 Pierre V. Zima, *La Négation esthétique. Le Sujet, le beau et le sublime de Mallarmé et Valéry à Adorno et Lyotard* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2002), 191.

artwork, Lyotard regarded this event or happening as a mimicry of the "newness" that capitalism constantly pursues, for instance, in the following manner:

> It is understandable that the art-market, subject like all markets to the rule of the new, can exert a kind of seduction on artists. This attraction is not due to corruption alone. It exerts itself thanks to a confusion between innovation and the *Ereignis,* a confusion maintained by the temporality specific to contemporary capitalism.[24]

Lyotard's aesthetic theory reveals a profound duality that permeates both his critique of capitalism and his reflections on avant-garde art. His concept of the sublime, applied to both the relentless movement of capitalism and the critical practices of avant-garde art, underscores the complexity of engaging with a system that absorbs even its critiques. The duality in his use of terms like the "inhuman" and "immaterial" further highlights this tension, as they function both within the structures of capitalism and as tools for resisting it. Ultimately, Lyotard's aesthetics invite us to consider how art, by embracing this ambivalence, can function as a critical force, subtly undermining the very system it operates within.

In this sense, the question of resistance in Lyotard cannot be resolved by simply opposing the avant-garde to the capitalist system, nor by assuming that all forms of critique are absorbed without remainder. While Lyotard repeatedly emphasises the system's capacity to integrate newness, he also insists that certain kinds of intensity—what he sometimes calls *la chose*, or the infantile remainder within the subject—cannot be fully translated into the circuits of value. This "inhuman" element, which persists as something unformed and not yet phrased, marks the limit of what capitalism can appropriate. Even if capitalism absorbs many artistic practices, it cannot fully capture these moments of interruption that disclose the incommensurable within experience.

Seen from this perspective, Lyotard's strategy of resistance emerges less as a programmatic alternative and more as a way of attending to what cannot be stabilised or functionalised. The avant-garde does not resist by standing outside the system—as this position is no longer available—but by exposing moments in which the system's demand for productivity falters. These events, even if fleeting, testify to a kind of "inhuman" that cannot be reduced to information, profit, or efficiency. Lyotard's emphasis on infancy, on the unreadable, and on the silence that precedes articulation suggests that resistance may persist precisely where articulation fails.

24 Lyotard, *The Inhuman,* 106.

To describe this strategy, one might speak of a form of mimetic adaptation that operates from within the system while remaining attuned to what cannot be assimilated by it. The avant-garde, in this view, does not overcome capitalism, but neither is it simply absorbed. Rather, it maintains a relation to what remains incommensurable, something that capitalism can never fully absorb.

This may not amount to a strategy in the conventional sense, but it provides a way of thinking resistance that is consistent with Lyotard's aesthetics and his understanding of the sublime. What remains crucial, then, is not to offer a definitive escape from the system, but to recognise the forces that silently interrupt it—forces that persist, however modestly, in the experiences of the sublime, the inhuman, and the immaterial.

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