

Lyotard and the 21st Century

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2024 marked the 100th anniversary of Jean-François Lyotard (10th August 1924, Versailles–21st April 1998). Lyotard was the thinker who endeavoured the most to open a new epoch, most influentially reflected in his discourse on the postmodern. His characterizations of the postmodern, such as “the incredulity toward metanarratives,” “the decline of universalist discourses,” “the reign of the performativity principle,” and the age of the “hegemony of the techno-economic system,” thus not only remain actual but deserve a deeper engagement from within our current technological condition. His articulation of the postmodern is not only limited to the books containing the word “postmodern” in their title—*The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), *The Postmodern Explained* (1988) and *Postmodern Fables* (1993)—but can also be found throughout his reflection on science and technology. In *Discours, Figure* (1971), one also can find consistent motives concerning disturbances and resistances against any totalizing discursive system. And with his magnum opus, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (1983)—“my philosophy book,” as he himself called it—Lyotard became one of the most prominent representatives of the so-called “linguistic turn,” which dominated continental philosophy in the 1980s and 1990s.

Due to such a reach, Lyotard thus remained a highly influential author throughout the late twentieth century, not only in philosophy but also in aesthetics, art and media theory, political theory, sociology, pedagogy, linguistics and cultural studies. He was one of the major voices in the dispute between the modernists and postmodernists at the time, alongside Jacques Derrida, Jürgen Habermas, Karl-Otto Apel, Fredric Jameson and Richard Rorty. After his death in 1998, and with the gradual closure of the postmodern interlude, the name Lyotard appeared less frequently; however, in recent years, it has regained attention, in particular as regards his views on politics and technology, the latter being Lyotard’s main theoretical and political focus from the mid-1980s, expressed in books such as *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (1988), *Readings in Infancy* (1991) and *Postmodern Fables* (1993). It is also worth mentioning that Lyotard was also the curator of the legendary exhibition *Les immatériaux* opened in March 1985 at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. The exhibition not only inaugurate what we would call an exhibition of postmodernity but also the fruitful curatorial intervention of philosophers, which continued in Bernard Stiegler, Bruno Latour among others.

In 2024, on the occasion of his centennial anniversary, *Technophany* took the opportunity to dedicate a special issue to the continuing relevance of the work of Lyotard for the 21st century. As if along prophetic lines, the 21st century appears to be developing as previsioned by Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*; for instance, there is the ongoing consolidation of the global techno-economic system embodied by the most updated logic of capitalism and an ever-increasing subordination of societies on a global scale to the performativity criterium through digital networks, AI algorithms and the transhumanist ideology propagated by the global oligarchy. However, the 21st century likewise seems to have unfolded into a series of crises that Lyotard himself did not fully anticipate, for example, the apocalyptic urgency of the global ecological crisis and the enframing of the Earth into what Earth system scientists have called the Anthropocene, a new geological and geo-technological condition.

Lyotard's thinking, apart from its celebrated postmodern birthmarks, thus offers plenty of resources for thinking through our geo-historical moment and reflecting on the many material and intellectual developments currently at stake. His rich thinking opened a myriad different incomplete paths to confront the challenges and crises humanity faces in the disorienting 21st century of crisis-ridden planetarization and ongoing technologization. With this in mind, this special issue, dedicated to the voluminous thought of Lyotard, consists of 10 contributions of authors from different continents and various academic backgrounds. They cover almost all aspects of Lyotard's work but specifically focus on its relevance to the present, especially technological acceleration, which was the drive beyond the postmodern condition. We believe that these contributions will leave marks on the future studies of Lyotard's thought. We would like to thank the authors for their dedicated work and patience. In the following, we will highlight the significance of these contributions.

The article by Anna De Martino offers a theoretical contribution to postmodern geography and militant counter-cartography by developing the concept of "cartographic anamnesis" through key Lyotardian notions such as "anamnesis," the "figural," the "libidinal set-up", and the "interworld." Although Foucault, Derrida, and Deleuze are frequently invoked in critical cartography, Lyotard's philosophy has received comparatively little attention. De Martino bridges this gap by rereading cartography—understood in Henri Lefebvre's terms as both "representation of space" and "space of representation"—through Lyotard's framework, while demonstrating important continuities across his oeuvre, from the early libidinal works *Discourse, Figure* (1971) and *Libidinal Economy* (1973) to his later postmodern thought.

De Martino develops this idea through a "veduta" on medieval cartography, contrasting the encyclopaedic and mythico-figural Hereford *mappamundi* with the practical, textual *Carte*

Pisane. The argument culminates in the analysis of Gianfranco Baruchello's "cartographic paintings," such as *La presqu'île intérieure* (1963) and *Rilievo ideale* (1965). These works act as libidinal surfaces that blur text and image, disorient conventional mapping, and invite viewers to become active co-cartographers of potential worlds.

Ashley Woodward's contribution reassesses the contemporary relevance of Lyotard's diagnosis of the postmodern condition, focusing on his seminal claim in *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) that postmodernity is defined by an "incredulity toward metanarratives" and the ensuing process of delegitimation. He examines two primary instances of this delegitimation, examining their status today.

The first involves twentieth-century historical events acting as "signs of history" (in a Kantian sense) that falsify modern metanarratives of emancipation, progress, and rationality. The second is the displacement of narrative legitimation by "performativity"—the optimization of input/output efficiency through the convergence of science, technology, and capital. Also engaging with Yuk Hui's reading of Lyotard in *Recursivity and Contingency* (2019), this contribution advocates a return to the latter's earlier works for resources of resistance. It proposes an "informational turn" that reconceives information beyond linguistic models, instead emphasizing aesthetic heterogeneity and "technodiversity." Drawing on Lyotard's analyses of the sublime and exhibitions like *Les Immatériaux*, Woodward highlights the potential for a "new sensibility" and artistic invention capable of retorting to the System through formless sensation and pluralistic experimentation. In an era of apparent system fractures alongside technological intensification, Lyotard's thought provides critical resources for fostering contingency, resistance, and renewed possibilities for thought, art, and politics.

Daan Keij's contribution examines the continued relevance of Lyotard's philosophy of infancy as a further source of resistance against the "inhumanity of development" in light of Stiegler's diagnosis of widespread infantilization. In *The Inhuman*, Lyotard distinguishes two forms of inhumanity: (1) that of development (encompassing contemporary capitalism as a cosmic process of complexification, negentropy, and performativity), which seeks to save time, impose efficiency, and control the future through calculation and innovation; and (2) that of infancy understood not so much as a developmental stage but as a persistent dimension of human existence characterized by radical openness, indeterminacy, affectivity, and passivity. Reconnecting with this dimension of "inhumanity" through slow anamnesis, Lyotard offers modes of resistance against economic development's demand for transparency, speed, and utility.

In the age of digital platforms, algorithmic governance, and accelerating complexification, Lyotard's thought of infancy thus retains vital critical potential. Resistance requires

both Stiegler's mature responsibility and Lyotard's cultivation of infantile affectivity: a paradoxical composition of maturity and persistent immaturity. The contribution concludes that saving childhood and infancy cannot be programmed but must involve taking care of the conditions for the event of affect, enabling new forms of sharing joy, wonder, melancholy and invention beyond the imperatives of economic, or otherwise, development.

Franziska Aigner's contribution interrogates the complex interplay between technics, forgetting and recollection in the Western philosophical tradition, discussing the thought of Stiegler vis-à-vis Heidegger and then focusing crucially on Lyotard's reading of Heidegger. From Plato's *anamnesis* to Heidegger's critique of enframing, philosophy has consistently approached truth as a recovery from concealment (*aletheia*) while viewing technics negatively as a force endangering originary knowledge and provoking the forgetting of Being. Heidegger's diagnosis of modern technics as the culmination of Promethean metaphysics, however, is itself marked by significant omissions.

Leaning on Lyotard's *Heidegger and "The Jews,"* Aigner then advances a more radical thesis: philosophy's relation to technics is structured by a form of *primary repression*, analogous to Freud's distinction between primary and secondary repression and to Kant's sublime. Unlike recoverable forgetting, primary repression designates that which was never apprehended or inscribed in the first place—what withdraws from representation and cannot be recollected in the ordinary sense. Heidegger's silence on the Holocaust and his reduction of Auschwitz as being symptomatic of enframing exemplify this structural limit. Technics, like "the Jews" in Lyotard's figural sense, marks an exclusion that resists assimilation into philosophical systems of meaning. Aigner argues that technics has been subject to an originary, structural forgetting that exceeds ordinary *anamnesis*. Rather than seeking to remember what was lost, philosophy must transform its method to reckon with what was never available to inscription. This shift moves beyond both Heidegger's diagnosis and Stiegler's corrective retrieval, opening new ways to think the pharmacological ambiguity of technics without defensive projection or reductive mastery. In the 21st century, as a time of accelerating digital technologies, such a transformed *anamnesis* is essential for addressing the political and existential stakes of our technological condition.

The contribution by Futoshi Hoshino examines Lyotard's aesthetics through his strategic deployment of ambivalent concepts—"sublime," "terror," "inhuman," and "immaterial"—revealing a profound tension and complicity between avant-garde art and capitalism. Capitalism appears as a metaphysical principle of infinite development, dematerialization, and performativity that absorbs all critique, turning negation and novelty into surplus value. Since direct opposition is futile, Lyotard proposes the advance of "drifting" (*dérivé*) desires and mimetic adaptation from within the system.

Drawing on writings from the 1970s (*Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud, Libidinal Economy*) to the 1980s (*The Inhuman, The Differend*), Hoshino shows that Lyotard's aesthetics is consistently political. Capitalism sustains itself through the investment of desire; effective resistance lies in redirecting that desire and attending to what remains incommensurable—the event, infancy, the unphrased. Avant-garde art, though complicit with capitalism's demand for novelty, maintains a relation to the inhuman remainder that cannot be entirely appropriated. Lyotard thus offers a nuanced strategy of resistance: not external opposition but an internal interruption that exposes the limits of capitalist absorption. In our early 21st century of platform capitalism and pervasive dematerialization, his ambivalent aesthetics underscores the persistent possibility of critique through openness to the unrepresentable and infancy within experience.

Gael Caignard's contribution proposes a "pagan" approach to the Anthropocene by drawing on Lyotard's earlier reflections on paganism, developed in works such as *Rudiments païens* and *Instructions païennes*, to move beyond the framework of his better-known postmodern critique. While *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) diagnosed the crisis of modern grand narratives of emancipation and their role in legitimizing knowledge, the article argues that the Anthropocene risks replicating similar totalizing structures—whether in techno-optimistic geo-engineering narratives or eco-catastrophic apocalyptic ones—thereby subsuming diverse experiences under a monolithic "humanity" as geological agent.

Lyotard's paganism offers an alternative: it refuses theoretical terror by embracing theory-fiction, intensities, and "little narratives" that operate in interstitial spaces (*pagus*)—border zones where multiple discourses, desires, and entities meet without hierarchical unification. Paganism acknowledges the plurality of phrase regimens and the impossibility of a single legitimation discourse, favouring negotiation, metamorphosis, and openness to the unrepresentable over grand syntheses. Caignard connects this to contemporary efforts such as Latour's cosmograms and translation tables for Gaia, Hui's cosmotechnics, and Haraway's speculative fabulations (e.g., the Camille stories in the Cthulucene), which exemplify pagan practices of sympoiesis and diplomatic negotiation between human and nonhuman entities.

A pagan Anthropocene thus inhabits the *pagus* rather than seeking a new universal narrative. It thus maintains openness for plural, situated knowledges that resist both the absorption of critique into capitalist performativity and the exclusionary tendencies of small narratives. By constantly reminding us of the "damage" that any narrative can inflict, this approach enables inventive local responses to the global ecological crisis that integrate scientific, artistic, political, and affective dimensions without theoretical hegemony. Ultimately, Caignard aims to demonstrate that Lyotard's paganism, often overshadowed by his postmodern writings and provides enduring resources for thinking and acting in the uncertain era that is the Anthropocene in the 21st century.

Kiff Bamford's contribution explores Lyotard's enduring relevance for 21st-century intersections of art, technology, and communication through the notion of "*communication volontaire*" (voluntary or self-directed communication). Discussing a 1978 interview from the journal *Art Présent* alongside the key texts *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) and *The Differend* (1983), he contrasts Lyotard's earlier Wittgenstein-inspired concept of language games with his later emphasis on phrases and phrase regimens. This shift distances itself from anthropocentrism by highlighting how phrases precede and situate human speakers, opening space for the non-human, the figural, and the unarticulated.

Central to the argument is Lyotard's pedagogical practice at Vincennes, where "*communication volontaire*" manifested as an open, exploratory mode of thinking aloud—akin to Freudian free-floating attention—resisting the *déjà dit* and normative genres. Bamford juxtaposes this with Anicka Yi's 2021–2022 Tate Modern installation *In Love with the World*, featuring AI-informed, jellyfish-like aerobes that invite speculative engagement without didactic explanation. Such works exemplify an aesthetics of uncertainty, where technology elicits questions rather than delivering optimized meaning, echoing Lyotard's concern with the event, the *differend*, and involuntary linkages. Ultimately, Bamford positions Lyotard as a vital resource for navigating technological mediation. His insistence that "no phrase is the first" and his call to listen beyond established regimens offer critical tools for resisting the performativity of digital capitalism while promoting inventive, heterogeneous modes of linkage in art and thought.

In her contribution Maaïke Bleeker examines the exteriorization of knowledge in the context of technological development by a diffractive reading of Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) alongside Karen Barad's agential realism in *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007). Lyotard observes that computerization leads to a thorough exteriorization of knowledge with respect to the "knower," shifting legitimation from grand narratives to the criterion of performativity—the optimization of the system's efficiency. This analysis, written at the dawn of widespread digitalization, anticipates profound transformations in how knowledge is produced, circulated, and validated.

Bleeker brings Lyotard into conversation with Barad's new materialist framework, where knowing is understood as a distributed, material-discursive practice enacted through apparatuses that entangle matter and meaning. Both thinkers challenge representationalism, yet from complementary angles: Lyotard focuses on socio-technical shifts in legitimation and the pressure to "perform-or-else," while Barad emphasizes the ontological entanglement of phenomena and the performative role of scientific practices. Mark Hansen's media philosophy further illuminates how 21st-century technologies expand the sensible beyond human perception, decentring human experience within larger environmental processes. By juxtaposing Lyotard and Barad, the article demonstrates

how technological developments intensify the exteriorization of knowledge, demanding new understandings of human participation in material configurations of the world. Lyotard's emphasis on performativity complements Barad's onto-epistemology, together providing critical tools for addressing the becoming-performative of knowledge in the 21st century. This diffractive approach reveals both the dehumanizing risks and the generative potential of distributed knowing, urging a rethinking of knowledge production beyond humanist assumptions.

Sunil Manghani's contribution offers a reading of Lyotard's related essays "A Postmodern Fable" and "Can Thought Go on Without a Body?" in dialogue with 21st-century developments in artificial intelligence and with Max Tegmark's mathematical universe hypothesis. Lyotard's postmodern fable contemplates humanity's fate with respect to the sun's death that is said to occur in four and a half billion years, posing the question of what the "Human and his/her Brain—or rather the Brain and its Human" will resemble after such an event. In this fable, he distinguishes two inhumanities: the negentropic drive of complexification and exteriorization of thought characteristic of technological development and the persistent "in-human" remainder—an "infantile," affective dimension irreducible to calculation or representation.

Manghani juxtaposes this with James Lovelock's vision, presented in his book *Novacene* (2019), of "electronic life" emerging from the Anthropocene and the prospect of autonomous artificial intelligence surpassing human intelligence. Drawing on Ted Chiang's "Story of Your Life," he then explores alternative temporalities and modes of thinking that challenge anthropocentric linearity. He further engages Paul Klee's figural line and bricolage as metaphors for navigating the matrix of language and computation, suggesting that contemporary AI—through vector spaces, tokenization, and high-dimensional mathematics—operates in a realm closer to Lyotard's figural than traditional linguistic models allow. In the age of generative AI and accelerating technological singularity, Lyotard's work provides a critical lens for interrogating the boundaries between human and machinic intelligence, calling for reflection on what forms of the "in-human" might survive or transform in a post-solar, post-biological future.

Lastly, the contribution of Sergio Meijide Casas re-examines Lyotard's philosophy in order to challenge reductive interpretations that have associated his work exclusively with postmodernism and to demonstrate its contemporary relevance for debates in the philosophy of technology. It pursues two interconnected objectives: first, to clarify persistent misunderstandings regarding Lyotard's concepts of postmodernity, history, and acceleration; and second, to recover conceptual resources within his work that can contribute to contemporary discussions on technological pluralism and technodiversity.

Meijide Casas begins by contesting the widespread assumption that Lyotard's notion of the postmodern signifies a historical period succeeding modernity. Through an analysis of his critique of grand narratives and his conception of paralogy, he argues that Lyotard understood the postmodern not as a post-historical condition but as an internal force of disruption that continually destabilizes dominant narratives and opens alternative futures. This perspective is contrasted with both Hegelian conceptions of historical progress and contemporary accelerationist readings that interpret Lyotard as advocating the acceleration of capitalism or history itself. Instead, the article demonstrates that Lyotard's notion of acceleration concerns the intensification of the "libidinal band," an ontological and affective process that resists reduction to political-economic programs.

Against interpretations that reduce technology to a singular function of species preservation Meijide Casas argues that Lyotard rejects technological teleology and technological determinism. His writings instead foreground the plurality of technological possibilities and the importance of embodiment, difference, and contingency in technological development. Drawing connections between Lyotard's aesthetics and Hui's concepts of cosmotechnics and technodiversity, he proposes an "anamnesis of technology" capable of resisting technological singularism and recovering marginalized technical traditions. In doing so, he presents Lyotard as a significant resource for contemporary efforts to imagine more plural, heterogeneous, and non-teleological technological futures.

Taken together, the contributions gathered in this special issue demonstrate that Lyotard's thought is far from exhausted by the historical category of the postmodern. Rather, they show how the heterogeneous paths opened across his work—through the figural, the *differend*, infancy, anamnesis, paganism, the inhuman, performativity, and the question of technics—continue to provide resources for confronting the transformations of the 21st century. At a moment increasingly defined by technological acceleration, artificial intelligence, ecological crisis, the exteriorization of knowledge, and the growing demands of techno-economic performativity, returning to Lyotard is, therefore, not simply a matter of intellectual or historical reassessment. It is also an invitation to ask anew what forms of thought, art, politics, and resistance remain possible within, against, and beyond these conditions. We hope that the articles collected here will contribute to such a renewed engagement with Lyotard and open further paths for thinking with, through, and beyond his work. It is in this spirit that we invite readers to enter into the contributions that follow.