How the Sublime Became "Now": Time, Modernity, and Aesthetics in Lyotard's Rewriting of Kant

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> The sublime is in fashion. All fashions, in spite of or thanks to their futility, are means to the presentation of something other than fashion: they are also of the order of necessity or destiny.... What then offers itself or what is offered in this recent fashion for the sublime?... [T]he sublime forms a fashion that has persisted uninterruptedly into our own time from the beginnings of modernity, a fashion at once continuous and discontinuous, monotonous and spasmodic. The 'sublime' has not always taken this name, but it has always been present. It has always been a fashion because it has always concerned a break within or from aesthetics (whether 'aesthetics' designates taste or theory).... [I]t has been a kind of defiance with which aesthetics provokes itself.... The motif of the sublime ... announces the necessity of what happens to art in or as its modern destiny.
> —Jean-Luc Nancy[1]

Writing in the late 1980s, Nancy gives as examples of the "recent fashion for the sublime" not only the theoreticians of Paris, but the artists of Los Angeles, Berlin, Rome, and Tokyo. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the sublime may of course no longer seem quite so "now" as it did back then, whether in North America, Europe, or Japan. Simon Critchley, for one, has suggested that, at least as regards the issue of its conceptual coupling to "postmodernism," the "debate" concerning the sublime "has become rather stale and the discussion has moved on."[2] Nonetheless, if *that* debate has indeed "moved on"—and thankfully so—it is not without its remainder, particularly in the very contemporary context of a resurgence of interest in explicitly philosophical accounts of art, in the wake of an emergent critique of cultural studies and of the apparent waning of post-structuralism's influence—a resurgence that has led to a certain "return to aesthetics" in recent Continental philosophy and to the work of Kant, Schelling, and the German Romantics. Moreover, as Nancy's precise formulations suggest, the "fashion" [*mode*] through which the sublime "offers itself"—as "a break within or from aesthetics"—clearly contains a significance that Critchley's more straightforward narration of shifts in theoretical chic cannot encompass. At stake in this would be the relation between the *mode*

of fashion and art's "destiny" within *modernity* itself, from the late eighteenth century onwards.

Such a conception of art's "destiny," as inextricably linked to that of the sublime, is not unique to recent French theory. In a brief passage in *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno also suggests that the "sublime, which Kant reserved exclusively for nature, later became the historical constituent of art itself.... [I]n a subtle way, after the fall of formal beauty, the sublime was the only aesthetic idea left to modernism."[3] As such, although the term has its classical origins in Longinus, its historical character for "us," both Nancy and Adorno argue, associates it specifically with the emergence of the modern. As another philosopher states: "It is around this name [of the sublime] that the destiny of classical poetics was hazarded and lost; it is in this name that ... romanticism, in other words, modernity, triumphed."[4]

This latter philosopher is, of course, Jean-François Lyotard. Indeed, despite the passing whims of fashion, no attempt to think about the interrelated concepts of modernism and the avant-garde "today," and their relation to the modern, post-Kantian discourse of aesthetics, can escape an encounter with Lyotard's intervention, and with his claim that "it is in the aesthetic of the sublime that modern art (including literature) finds its impetus and the logic of the avant-gardes finds its axioms."[5] As Lyotard makes clear, he is thinking above all of the philosophy of Kant himself, albeit a Kant quite different from the "Kant" who historically informed, for example, the immediate post-war aesthetics of Greenbergian formalism—an aesthetics that continues to cast a lengthy shadow over contemporary art theory.

For Kant, of course, as for Burke before him, any attempt to define the specificity of what is at stake in the *sublime* must take place through its counterposing to the aesthetics of the beautiful, as a differentiation in forms of experience and cognition. As is well known, the aesthetic of the sublime is distinguished as involving a kind of "negative" experience or oscillation of pleasure and pain, attraction and repulsion, caused by a breakdown in the capacity of the imagination. This failure is an inability to find a means to present the Idea, which produces a kind of painful "cleavage" within the subject between what can be conceived and what can actually be imagined or presented. For Kant, pleasure would accompany pain, however, to the extent that a recognition is nonetheless made of an ability, via the faculty of reason, to conceive the Idea beyond direct presentation, rendering "intuitable the supremacy of our cognitive faculties on the rational side over the greatest faculty of sensibility."[6] It is on this basis that Kant, more radically than Burke, defines the experience of the sublime in terms of a certain apprehension of the "formless," "limitless," or "infinite."

As I will not be the first to note, there is an immediate problem regarding Lyotard's identification of "modern art" with an "art of the sublime." For, in the terms of this canonical Kantian interpretation, the sublime is not a form of experience to be had from art at all, but only from *nature*. Moreover, even if, according to Kant, one might have an experience of the sublime in the face of the Pyramids or St. Peter's in Rome, such experience is entirely *subjective*. Kant must refuse the status of actually being-sublime to any *object as such*, insofar as any object which could be directly present and sensible would, by definition, have to be limited. To the extent that Lyotard is evidently aware of such a problem—and that this is not simply a crass misreading—how does he seek to overcome it? He does so by focusing on Kant's seeming allowance for the possibility of a kind of "negative presentation" which would "allude" or "evoke" what he calls the "unpresentable" (Idea). It is in this sense, Lyotard argues, that the possibility of a "presentation" of the "fact that the unpresentable exists" is opened up historically for modern art. To preempt certain immediate objections, one should say that, although Lyotard suggests the necessity of a "modification" of Kant's analytic, in light of the later "experimental" practices of various writers, artists, and composers, as a reading of Kant himself Lyotard's understanding of the sublime remains, even given the above, clearly problematic. Paul Crowther sums up the case against: "The distinction between the mathematical and dynamic modes is not utilized; he ignores Kant's reservations about sublimity in art; and he makes no reference to the supersensible—an awareness of which ... is, for Kant, the source of the pleasurable aspect of the sublime."[7] It is not my intention to dispute any of these points in detail, although I will say that Crowther is largely right concerning his first point, partially right (as I have already indicated) about the second (Lyotard never really engages with the place of subreption in Kant's account of the feeling of the sublime in relation to nature), but peculiarly mistaken concerning his last point. However, it is important to note that to the extent that Lyotard does elaborate his conception of the sublime through Kant's analytic, it is subject to one extremely important qualification, a qualification that will directly open up the question of the avant-garde here. For in order to suggest that "[a]vant-gardism is ... present in germ in the Kantian aesthetic of the sublime," one has to *re-inscribe* sublime experience away from the essentially spatial experience of "an absolutely large object" (as in the mathematical sublime) and toward, Lyotard writes, a question that "does not form part—at least not explicitly—of Kant's problematic": "the question of *time*."[8] It is this question of time, as a question of the sublime, that I want to consider here. Such consideration is crucial not only because it brings the question of history into Kant's effectively ahistorical categories, but also because it

relates the problematic of aesthetics specifically to art's *modernity* and to the issue of the *contemporary*, which must be the true "test ground" of any culturally relevant philosophical account of art itself.

The Two "Sublimes": Abstraction and the Temporality of the Modern

Part of the more general problem with assessing the tenability of Lyotard's equation of sublime and avant-garde, as a means of thinking art's cultural present, is the way in which it runs together two somewhat different "meanings" of the concern for the "unpresentable" with which he associates it. I want to argue, in the section that follows, that while one of these meanings corresponds to a fairly straightforward (if not itself unquestionable) understanding of the potential for sublimity "in" the art work, associated particularly with the problematic of representation in abstract painting and the negation of figuration, the other relates, more interestingly (and in ways that have seldom been recognized), to an understanding of the *general* temporal structure of experience articulated by the *concept* of an avant-garde, and the privileging of the future (as a category of present time) it entails. By this I mean, not the avant-garde as a conventionally received art-historical category, but (in a certain amount of tension with this) as a concept that inscribes a particular mode of temporalizing history in its own right; the articulation of a distinct, but essentially abstract temporal form which embraces a wide range of often conflictual, concrete artistic forms and practices. Yet I also want to suggest, in the latter sections of this paper, that while this second possible meaning of a presentation of the "unpresentable," in Lyotard's work, may be useful in thinking this temporal structure, it is best thought of, ultimately, as a displaced question of the "modern" itself for which a certain conception of sublime *experience* is, via its temporalization, something like a potential interpretative *framework*. This framework reflects the extent to which Kantian conceptual figures continue to haunt contemporary aesthetic theory as a result of the ways in which, as Adorno argues, they are themselves *historical* categories responsive to the "situation" of art's modernity.

In considering the first meaning of the "unpresentable," let me return to Lyotard's citation of Kant's notion of "negative presentation." Recognizing Burke's judgment that painting (unlike poetry) was "incapable of fulfilling [the] sublime office in its own order," Lyotard suggests that, in the *Critique of Judgment*, "Kant outlines, rapidly and almost without realizing it, another solution to the problem of sublime painting":

> [T]he absoluteness of the Idea can be revealed in what Kant calls a negative presentation, or even a non-presentation. He cites the Jewish law banning images as an eminent example of negative presentation: optical pleasure when reduced to near nothingness promotes an infinite contemplation of infinity.... [T]he door had thus been opened to enquiries pointing toward abstract and Minimal art. Avant-gardism is thus present in germ in the Kantian aesthetic of the sublime.[9]

It is on this basis, Lyotard asserts, that, in painting at least, the avant-gardes perform their historical negation of figuration or pictorial representation from the beginning of the twentieth century.

A great deal turns on the exemplarity Lyotard accords, in a series of essays, to the work of Barnett Newman in theoretically mediating, at the level of the particular, a more general relation between avant-gardism and the Kantian aesthetic of the sublime, through the specific problematic of "abstraction." Alongside the paintings themselves, the key text is of course Newman's 1948 essay, "The Sublime is Now." For Newman himself it seems clear that the appeal of the notion of the sublime was as a means of combining an historical recognition of the painting's surface as "a surface which could no longer sustain illusion of the narrative kind," with "a conviction that the making of great art involved the embodiment of significant content."[10] The invocation of the sublime was primarily a means of resisting a formalist reduction of abstraction to the *merely* beautiful, a contentless abstraction that would ultimately be indistinguishable from *decoration*.

As a reading of Newman and other artists of his generation (Rothko, Still), and even possibly of "abstraction" more generally, Lyotard's Kantian formulation of "negative presentation" has some merit. (Lyotard, however, does rather pass over the extent to which, from Apollinaire to Greenberg, painterly abstraction has often been understood precisely in terms of an aesthetic of the beautiful, however problematically). The question, however, is how this can be said to relate to the second possible understanding of a presentation of the "unpresentable" that I alluded to above, that is, to a thinking of the *general* logic of avant-gardism, as a temporal structure of experience, rather than simply of the more limited question of painting's possible "meanings" beyond the figurative. In this light one might well share the confusion apparent in Crowther's declaration that "Lyotard is most difficult to follow," a difficulty Crowther suggests stems from his very "use of the term 'avant-garde.'" As Crowther writes, "[w]e customarily associate this ... term with twentieth-century painting—especially abstraction—and

at times Lyotard seems to be using it in this way. However, at other times he seems to use it more broadly, in a way that encompasses the romantics."[11] Without considering who this "we" might be—for, following the work of Peter Bürger, "we" are probably more likely to associate the avant-garde with Dada or Surrealism than with the abstract expressionists—it seems clear that Crowther's difficulty relates in part to the tension I have delineated, between the avant-garde as designating something like a given typological or art-historical category and the *concept* of an avant-garde as a more general and necessarily abstract temporal logic of artistic production and experience. It is in relation to this latter "conceptual" sense that Susan Buck-Morss, for one, insists:

> The avant-garde philosophically understood, as a temporal structure of experience, is a cognitive category [not a 'generic' one].... It is the *aesthetic experience* of the artwork ... that counts in a cognitive sense. The power of any cultural object to arrest the flow of history, and to open up time for alternative visions, varies with history's changing course. Strategies range from critical negativity to utopian representation. No one style [such as abstract painting], no one medium is invariably successful.[12]

While Lyotard is well aware of this tension between "conceptual" and "stylistic" definitions, there remains a problem which is revealed in his tendency to suggest what is a far too simple analogy between the opposition of beautiful/sublime and that of figuration/abstraction. By making an example of Newman in the way that he does, Lyotard problematically conflates two, not entirely compatible, understandings of the way in which the "unpresentable" is opened up "within presentation" in the work. On the one hand, the "unpresentable" is understood, in Buck-Morss's terms, as a generalizable, avant-garde temporal structure of experience, marking the particular non-identity of Newman's work to the "regulations" of tradition within the cultural present—the "unpresentable" as a relation to the present as a category of historical *time*—different, but comparable, to that of, say, Duchamp or Daniel Buren. On the other hand, however, more directly, and more or less in line with Newman or Rothko's own primary self-understanding of the sublimity of their painting, the "unpresentable" is also thought of as explicitly "presented" in the actual "form" of the work itself, as a negative figuring of the "perceptual and imaginative struggle" that we conventionally associate with the sublime—what Newman variously termed the "sublime image" or "sublime content" of the work. The problem does not necessarily concern either one of these understandings, but their

running together. Indeed, to some extent, by threatening to "fix" sublimity as an *inherent* "quality" of Newman's paintings—in their inducing a feeling of the absolute through their non-figurative sublime *content*—the conception of the sublime implied here might actually work to elide the significance that the notion of the "unpresentable" could, from another perspective, be said to have as a means to conceptualizing the critical and dynamic *openness* to change and future possibility that characterizes the more general (and abstract) temporality of avant-garde-ness, given the essential historicity of this category.

It is noticeable in this respect that in Newman's essay on the sublime, upon which Lyotard lays so much weight, the explicit intention is to assert the contemporary superiority of American to European art, an intention entirely passed over by Lyotard. Indeed, it is this cultural nationalism that provides the piece with its own articulation of something like an avant-garde temporal logic in a properly conceptual sense:

> We are freeing ourselves of the impediments of memory, association, nostalgia, legend, myth, or what have you, that have been the devices of Western European painting. Instead of making *cathedrals* out of Christ, man, or 'life', we are making it out of ourselves, out of our own feelings. The image we produce is the self-evident one of revelation, real or concrete, that can be understood by anyone who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses of history.[13]

In one of the most astute commentaries on this concluding passage, Juliet Steyn writes that this "can be understood perhaps, as the avant-garde artist overthrowing tradition in order to create anew.... Newman's work can be seen also as an articulation of particularism [of American art and, even more specifically, Jewish American art] in tension with universalism. However, in Newman's own account ... such a tension is eradicated. The rhetoric of the *sublime* with its appeal to the universal, effectively conceals its own contradictions."[14] If it were indeed such a rhetoric of the "universal" and "transcendental" with which Lyotard was identifying the avant-garde, *in general*, then Margaret Iverson's assertion that his work on the postmodern sounds "very much like an 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' for the 1980s" would be hard to deny.[15]

The potential problems created by such a confusion can be observed if one considers, to take an example almost at random, a recent essay on the artist Anish Kapoor published in the British journal *Gothic Studies*. Here the author, despite the apparent shifts in (philosophical) fashion alluded to above, explicitly picks up Lyotard's "reworking" of the Kantian category of

the sublime (with little acknowledgment of the difficulties such a reworking entails) as a means of "illuminating" the "sensation of a loss of boundary" apparent in Kapoor's work, suggesting, in turn, that this may be related to a Gothic (rather than, what is termed, an Enlightenment) sublime that "defies totalisation in perpetuity." It is noted, furthermore, that Newman is "one of Kapoor's most obvious influences," and claimed, more generally, that Lyotard "was formulating his definition of modern art in relation to the *avant-garde* artists and their successors who produced work up until the late 1970s." The (implicitly negative) contrast made by the author is with the "present generation of British artists," such as Damien Hirst or Tracy Emin.[16]

A problem here is that Kapoor is such an *obvious* candidate for such interpretation. (The character and sheer scale of the recent installation in the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern in London, *Marsayas*, is exemplary). Yet Lyotard himself is far from restricting the significance of the sublime for "modern art" to such "obviously" sublime work, or even to the likes of Newman himself (whatever particular significance he is accorded), presenting it as the "key" also to the (far less obviously sublime) productive logics of, for example, Cézanne, Duchamp, Kosuth, or Buren, or, for that matter, Joyce, Schoenberg, or Boulez. If, in the context of the 1980s, his affirmation of "the work of the avant-garde" is indeed explicitly framed against "the eclecticism of consumption" which he associates with the "trans-avantgardism" of Bonito Oliva, "neo-expressionism" or various "styles" of American "postmodernism," this is clearly not *intended* as some pseudo-Greenbergian defence of "high modernist" painting and sculpture, nor as a *réssentiment* against contemporary artistic practice in general. Far from it. Indeed, by contrast to the implicit content of much of the more recent return to aesthetics, there is no melancholic longing here for the "lost" sensuous forms of 1950s abstraction. It is, nonetheless, the unfortunate *conflation* of the two senses of the "unpresentable" outlined above, as manifested in the specific readings of Newman's work, that makes such a (mis)reading possible. How therefore *should* the conceptual constellation of sublime and avant-garde in Lyotard's writings be understood?

The Time of the Sublime

Let me come, then, to Lyotard's own famous (and undoubtedly idiosyncratic) account of what he calls the "postmodern": "It [the postmodern] is undoubtedly a part of the modern. All that has been received, if only yesterday ... must be suspected. What space does Cézanne challenge? The Impressionists'. What object do Picasso and Braque attack? Cézanne's. What presupposition does Duchamp break with in 1912? That which says one must make a painting, be it cubist."[17] It is here that Lyotard's oft-remarked proximity, not so much to Greenberg, but rather to Adorno's conception of modernism becomes apparent. For Lyotard's postmodern—which clearly can no longer be contained by any usual generic or periodizing definition of this term (such as Jameson employs)—does indeed look very much like Adorno's theorization of the temporal dynamic of avant-garde-ness as a productive logic of *non-identity*, where non-identity defines the way in which the "new" artwork exceeds any existing positive definition or determination by tradition. Is this not precisely how, in accordance with the second meaning of "unpresentable" outlined above, Lyotard defines the postmodern (avant-garde) work as that which is "not in principle governed by preestablished rules," and which "cannot be judged" according to a determining judgment or by applying "familiar categories" to the work?

By Lyotard's argument, then, if—stretching Kant's own definitions a good deal—the aesthetics of the beautiful still involves an "appeal to a universal consensus," in doing so setting to work forms of positive legislation or regulation, the postmodern or avant-garde work is sublime because the "retreat of regulation and rules" is what generates the feeling of the sublime. Politically and artistically, the "feeling of the sublime involves a disturbance of settled ways of understanding ... [which] also involves the sense of an opening on to possibilities."[18] In this sense, if "unpresentability" causes the pain characteristic of the sublime, *pleasure*, according to Lyotard, comes here, not from a properly Kantian "super-added thought of ... totality," nor from the "inflationary" claim to aesthetic "transcendence" implicitly ascribed to it by Iverson, but from "the jubilation which result[s] from the invention of new rules of the game"; not from a compensatory movement toward identity, that is, but from an experience of non-identity as futural opening.[19]

In a recent book on the avant-garde, Richard Murphy, following Lyotard, states that, for Kant, in "exceeding the limits of representation the sublime is consequently associated firstly with the monstrous and the formless, and secondly with that which fails to adhere to the (generally agreed upon) conditions of the aesthetic."[20] However—and this is the crucial point—it has to be reiterated that this second "association" is simply *not true of Kant*, in the sense in which Murphy understands it. This cannot be stressed enough. (The breaking of the "generally agreed upon" would, for Kant, be associated more with the problematic of genius, which still remains within the aesthetics of the beautiful, and which is anyway somewhat unclear in Kant's own presentation, as regards its relation to both tradition and nature). It is in fact Lyotard's *rewriting* of Kant that opens up this dual association. One can see why, then, from the perspective of, say, Crowther's fairly straightforward theorization of sublime art—as marking objects that spatially

stimulate the "privileged effect" of "overwhelming our perception and imagination"— Lyotard's claims seem obviously spurious. For, as Crowther notes, "whilst the radical innovations achieved by the avant-garde show that painting can be developed in an inexhaustible number of directions, such works do not, however, explicitly attempt to present this unpresentable space of infinite possibility."[21]

Crowther's objection is not incorrect. However, it misses, once again, the temporal reinscription that underpins Lyotard's account, as articulating an "endlessness" which is then equated to the apprehension of infinity at work in the sublime feeling. Something of what is at stake in this can perhaps be best brought out by comparing his account of the avant-garde with that of Greenberg, insofar as the aesthetic judgment for the latter is very clearly the Kantian judgment of *taste* (i.e., of the beautiful), and not the judgment concerning the sublime. A critical comparison is helpful here if only because there are certainly *some* similarities between the two theorists, to the extent that it must be acknowledged that Greenberg is himself articulating a certain logic of avant-garde-ness conceptualized in terms of what he describes as art's stage of "self-criticism."

The work of Barnett Newman is significant here too. For if such an idea of self-criticism is, in the case of Greenberg, deployed as a conceptual mediation of modernist practice, up to and including Pollock, the historical importance of Newman is, revealingly, related to what happens to the reading of the avant-garde as the logic of self-criticism *after* the "heroic" stage of American abstraction: "Newman, Rothko, and Still have swung the self-criticism of modernist painting in a new direction simply by continuing it in its old one. The question now asked through their art is no longer what constitutes art, or the art of painting, as such, but rather what irreducibly constitutes *good* art as such. Or rather, what is the ultimate source of value or quality in art?"[22]

Thierry De Duve has correctly presented this as Greenberg's resolution of the conflicting claims of the strictly "modernist" (or avant-garde) and "formalist" aspects of his theory, a conflict in which "formalism"—the aesthetic judgment in a conventional sense—ultimately wins out under the pressure of late 1950s American art's turn toward minimalism and post-painterly abstraction, the historical impasse that Greenberg's project of self-criticism reaches within the specific *medium of painting* when it appears that it has no more "expendable conventions" to shed.[23] The result of this is an effacement of the necessity of the dynamic project of self-criticism itself, through an historical return to the (retrospectively always implicit) horizon of a "consensus of taste," and, as such, to the *atemporal* and *ahistorical* space of formalist judgment, in which the radically temporalizing character

of avant-garde-ness as art's self-criticism is dissolved (for all Greenberg's own claims for its continuation in a "new direction").

In asserting its "irreducible" status as "good art," Greenberg writes that Newman's work "keeps within the tacit and evolving limits of the Western tradition of painting."[24] For Lyotard, such a judgment is exactly what an attention to the work of the sublime should resist, "prevent[ing] the formation and the stabilisation of taste" that Greenberg's aesthetics of the beautiful still insists upon as a regulating Idea. It is this that, whatever other problems it may have, at least allows Lyotard to move beyond the historical impasse that Greenberg's formalism reaches. As he writes in an essay from the 1980s: "Is an object necessary? Body art and happenings went about proving that it is not. A space, at least, a space in which to display as Duchamp's *Fountain* still suggested? Daniel Buren's work testifies to the fact that even this is subject to doubt."[25] Yet given the apparent *structural* similarities in the conceptualization of self-criticism, in what way is the actual division between the beautiful and the sublime of any significance here?

In his most famous claims for the postmodern, as that which resists a consensus of taste through a non-identity to the "rules" which are available within the present, Lyotard suggests that the postmodern work is that which has the "character" of an *event*. It is precisely this *temporality* of the event that suggests, for him, the possibility of a kind of three-fold constellation of the *experiences* of the avant-garde, the sublime, and shock: "The arts, whatever their materials, pressed forward by the aesthetics of the sublime in search of intense effects, can and must ... try out surprising, strange, shocking combinations. Shock is, *par excellence*, the evidence of (something) *happening*."[26] Implausible though in certain respects I find his precise reading to be, even when pushed beyond Newman's own self-understanding, this is where Lyotard's interpretation and exemplification of Newman becomes both more interesting and more singular, in terms of its promised potential for an understanding of the *general* temporal structure of experience articulated by the concept of an avant-garde:

> Newman's *now* which is no more than *now* is a stranger to consciousness and cannot be constituted by it.... What we do not manage to formulate is that something happens, *dass etwas geschieht*. Or rather, and more simply, that it happens ... *dass es geschiet*.... The event happens as a question mark 'before' happening as a question [about what it is and about its significance]. *It happens* is rather 'in the first place' *is it happening, is this it, is it possible?*[27]

Now—*now*—"it happens," *as a question*, insofar as "something remains to be determined, something that hasn't yet been determined"; that is, insofar as there is the possibility of a moment of *non-identity*—a moment that is "not yet" incorporated—to what is received.

Clearly it is, most crucially, the *experience* of terror that Lyotard also suggests is that found, in some kind of *transfigured* form, in the temporal structure of an experience of shock. The experience of delight that comes when terror "does not press too close," as Burke presents it, offers a *parallel* to the situation of experience involved in the shock of the "new" which would demand a reflexive judgment. The potential critical value of Lyotard's readings of Kant and Burke lie therefore in their attempt to give a more concrete conceptual form to avant-garde *experience* as an experience of shock. Yet what must be noted here is, as I indicated at the outset, the need this entails to *reinscribe* the experience of the sublime into a particular *question of time*, a need that now opens a question of what, more precisely, this "time of the sublime" *is*. The answer to this question is perhaps implied in the following passage:

> Modernity, in whatever age it appears, cannot exist without a shattering of belief and without discovery of the 'lack of reality' of reality, together with the invention of other realities. What does this 'lack of reality' signify if one tries to free it from a narrowly historicised interpretation? The phrase is of course akin to what Nietzsche calls nihilism. But I see a much earlier modulation of Nietzschean perspectivism in the Kantian theme of the sublime.[28]

In this sense, the force of both the (temporalized) motif of the sublime and the Nietzschean problematic of nihilism derives from their both being "modulations" of the temporal form of *modernity itself*. In other words, if the motif of the sublime, articulated in Kant, can, *once it is reinscribed into a question of time*, seem to provide "the logic of avant-gardes" with "its axioms," it is only because its reinscription "corresponds" with the abstract temporality of the modern, as the coming forth of a dynamic and ineliminable non-identity of modernity and tradition; that is, the irreducible co-belonging of modernity and tradition, which characterizes the modern itself, and which prevents the self-identical completion of either, as competing modes of historical temporalization, within the cultural present.[29] Indeed, Osborne suggests that the concept of modernity, as it developed from the Enlightenment in the "subsequently consolidated sense of *Neuzeit*," may itself "be understood as the term for an historical sublime."[30] To the extent that this is the case, it seems clear that the significance of the sublime,

beyond its Kantian formulation, is dependent upon the *already emergent* structures of temporal experience and historical consciousness which the concept of modernity articulates; the "time" into which the sublime has to be reinscribed is the specific "time" of modernity.

The Sublime, the Fragment, and Modernity

"Modernity," Lyotard writes in one of his later meditations on the concept, "is not an epoch but a mode (the word's Latin origin) within thought, speech, and sensibility." It is in these non-periodizing terms, as I have suggested, that the "modernity" of the avant-garde is, most fundamentally, to be located in the particular ways in which it articulates or works through this "mode," as an affirmative modality of its temporal dynamic. For, as Lyotard also argues, the modern mode is essentially a "mode of organising time."[31] The roots of the idea of modernity more generally have been traced, by the likes of Koselleck and Calinescu, to the Latin *modernus* first used in the late fifth century, deriving from *modo*, meaning "recently, just now." As Calinescu shows, the central condition for this was not secularism, as is often argued, but "simply a sense of *unrepeatable time*.... That is why, while conspicuously absent from the world of pagan antiquity, the idea of modernity was born during the Christian Middle Ages."[32] This idea of the modern can then be traced in its development through the Renaissance division of its own historical present from the preceding "periods" of the Middle Ages and antiquity to the famous "Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns" in the late seventeenth century. However, it is only with the Enlightenment that the conception of modernity—based upon the irreversibility and unrepeatability of time's movement—as *qualitative historical difference* fully takes shape. The crucial shift is thus in a repositioning of the historical present in its relation to the *future*. It is this repositioning that feeds into, for example, the reworking of the term "revolution," whether political, social, or scientific, as a concept belonging to the terrain of historical time, in which it "is distinguished from any form of spontaneous or even conscious rebellion because it implies, besides the essential moment of negation or rejection, a specific consciousness of time and an alliance with it." Similarly, the concept of utopia gradually acquires "temporal implications" which "far outweigh whatever it may have preserved of its strict etymology," as relating to geographical-spatial difference. As Calinescu notes, "[u]topian imagination as it has developed since the eighteenth century is one more proof of the modern devaluation of the past and the growing importance of the future."[33] If, then, the concepts of avant-garde and sublime "communicate," it is not, I want to argue, because one

straightforwardly develops from, or is pressed forward by, the other, as Lyotard seems to imply, but because both emerge as part of a particular network of "themes" implicated, potentially, within a working through of the temporal structure of modernity (a network also including, for example, progress, the fragment, the ruin, allegory) which constitutes the existence of "a conceptual space available for an abstract temporality of qualitative newness which ... could now be extrapolated into an otherwise empty future, without end, and hence without limit."[34] Such a "conceptual space" cannot be claimed exclusively for any limited generic, periodizing category.

Following, up to a point, certain suggestions by Adorno, J. M. Bernstein also argues, from a somewhat different perspective than that of Lyotard, that "the Kantian sublime anticipates the logic of disintegration" which specifically befalls the art of modernity after Kant, arguing that the development of modernist art might "best [be] understood in terms of a diachronic movement from beauty and taste to the sublime."[35] Given the above, this clearly has a certain logic to it. Yet, equally on the basis of the above, there is good reason to be wary of making too hasty an assumption that because the sublime is what marks the "other" to the beautiful *in Kantian aesthetics*, something like the avant-garde, qua avant-garde, can straightforwardly be regarded as sublime in itself, insofar as its temporal logic seems to necessitate a critique of "beautiful semblance." Indeed, there is a danger of this rather too neat assumption in both Lyotard and Bernstein's movement from the observation that modernism is "interruptive" to the assertion that "the aesthetic figure of interruption is the sublime," to the conclusion that therefore modernism *is* sublime *per se*. For, as Bernstein goes on to note, what modernism actually interrupts is *tradition*. To which one might reasonably respond: Is the sublime, whether in Burke or Kant or any of its conventional formulations, understood as an interruption *of this kind?*

It is apparent that the arguments of both Lyotard and Bernstein require a *reconceptualization* of what is interrupted in the "figure of interruption" which the sublime would seem to mark. Such a reconceptualization is not illegitimate, but it cannot but rework the sublime into the more general question of the non-identity of modernity and tradition (where the beautiful could then indicate the continuity of tradition, as a form of historical temporalization, in a way in which it simply does not for Kant himself). Lyotard's elaboration of a *différend* between the supposedly modern and postmodern—that is, in effect, between a nostalgic modality of modernism and the avant-garde—can only be secondary to this initial inscription of non-identity. The corresponding (but not identical) questions of sublime and avant-garde experience, as *temporal* structures of experience, must therefore return us to what is both of their condition of possibility: the experience of *the modern itself*. Let us recall what Lyotard writes:

> [O]n the side of melancholia, the German Expressionists, and on the side of *novatio*, Braque and Picasso, on the former Malevich and the latter Lissitsky, on the one Chirico and on the other Duchamp. The nuance which distinguishes these two modes may be infinitesimal; they often coexist in the same piece, are almost indistinguishable; and yet they testify to a *différend*.... [The melancholic] allows the unpresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents.... [T]hese sentiments do not constitute the real sublime sentiment.... The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste.[36]

In suggesting here that the melancholia of modern aesthetics does not "constitute the *real* sublime sentiment," it seems evident that this is equivalent to saying that its nostalgic form opposes it to the "sentiment" of an openness at the present to future possibility outside of any regulating Idea. As such, the normative presumption implied by the rhetoric of "real" is effectively that only an *affirmative* modality of the temporality of modernity is true to what the modern makes possible, in terms of potential cultural experience.

Lyotard's *différend* is, as he admits, schematic, sometimes infinitesimal, and certainly one might dispute some of the placing of his pieces "on the chessboard of the history of the avant-gardes." (I think that Malevich is on the wrong side, and find it hard to accept that expressionism, in its entirety, belongs to melancholia). Nonetheless, it is a *différend* that is worth interrogating further. It is in light of this distinction that, for example, Lyotard proclaims: "It seems to me that the essay (Montaigne) is postmodern, while the fragment (*The Athenaeum*) is modern."[37] While Lyotard (slightly eccentrically) cites Montaigne here, it seems most likely that, in opposing the latter to the former, Lyotard has in mind Adorno's "The Essay as Form" with its assertion (just prior to citing Lukács on Montaigne) that the "essay allows for the consciousness of non-identity, without expressing it directly ... in its accentuation of the partial against the total."[38] Yet immediately following, Adorno himself describes this as the essay's "fragmentary character," and further on makes the connection with what is, for Lyotard, the essay's opposite even clearer:

> The romantic conception of the fragment as a construction that is not complete but rather progresses onward into the infinite through self-reflection champions this anti-idealist motive in the midst of Idealism.... [The essay's] self-relativisation is inherent in its form.... It thinks in fragments ... and finds its unity in and through the breaks and not by glossing over them.... Its totality, the unity of a form developed immanently, is that of something not total.[39]

This distinctly Romantic conception of the fragment, to be found in the work of Schlegel and others, is one that, following the work of Benjamin, Blanchot, and more recently Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, has been subject to much commentary over the last few years. Space does not allow any further development of such work here. Nonetheless, on this basis it may well be plausible to suggest that what Lyotard is seeking to articulate, through the thematic of the sublime, is a post-Romantic contestation concerning the nature of the fragment itself—a contestation that derives directly from that non-identity which marks what Adorno calls the "irresistibility of the modern." At stake in this would be the *différend* between a conception of the fragment as that which evokes "something that has previously been or will subsequently be whole"—as "the severed finger refers back to the hand"—and of the fragment as that which has never been or will be part of a whole but which, in "ironic" fashion, displaces any immanent or transcendental horizon of completion.[40]

The Romantic image of the *ruin* may be incorporated within this broad "double" schema. Alexandra Warwick, writing on the sublime place of ruins in the nineteenth-century *fin de siecle* imagination, suggests:

> [T]here are different types of ruin ... [which] have different significances for the perceiver.... The theoretical difference rests in part on thinking of readings of the sublime, and shifts in the response to the fragment. We can locate a Kantian notion of the sublime, in which the fragment points to wholeness.... This, I think, is the response that is evoked by the classical ruin.... [T]hey are the ruins of tragedy.... Gothic ruins ... are [by contrast] the mark of progress. They indicate the superseding of barbarism ... perhaps closer to the way in which the postmodern sublime has been theorised, which is that fragments do not point to the closure of realising the greater whole, but summon a vertiginous sense of further fragments, infinitely replicating fragments.[41]

This is a convincing argument. Yet it seems to me that there is, once again, an absent determinant implied within this account of sublime experience as a "response to the fragment." For what the architectural image of the ruin, as a particular instance of fragmentation, brings forth within the cultural present is, inescapably, the "presence" of *modernity*, as the non-sublatable non-identity of modernity and tradition.

The situation in which the perceiver manifests a response to the ruin is the historical situation of the cultural present. The sublimity of the ruin thus relies upon a *temporalization* of the sublime, in which the unattainability of wholeness, at the present, becomes a question of historical time. This temporal experience of the sublime marks an experience of the fragment as an experience of the present's *incompletion*—the cultural present as itself a site of fragmentation—understood as the non-identity of modernity and tradition. More specifically, the experience of historical time which the ruin invokes must be understood as relating to what is, from Eliade to Benjamin to Lefebvre, understood as that distinctly *modern* experience of *irreversible* time, as opposed to cyclical or mythical time, where no past "origin" is ever recovered. What has been ruined stays ruined, and, as such, the division of past and present is revealed as a *qualitative* and *historical* (rather than merely chronological) difference. Hence, in its dominant modality, from Romanticism onwards, the melancholia generated in the response of the perceiver, whereby the ruin stands in for a more general modern sensibility concerning the *tragedy* of loss. This is certainly how Lyotard understands Romanticism itself: "The avant-gardes ... fulfil romanticism, i.e., modernity, which, in its strong and recurrent sense, is the failure of stable relation between the sensible and the intelligible. But at the same time they are a way out of romantic nostalgia because they do not try to find the unpresentable at a great distance, as a lost origin or end."[42]

Whatever the rights or wrongs of Lyotard's judgment on Romanticism here (and it seems to me that there is a clearly non-melancholic, properly "revolutionary" dimension to many of Schlegel's writings which Lyotard fails to acknowledge), it is certainly the case that if nostalgia dominates historically, the temporality of ruination also has its affirmative responses. Think for example of Dada and early Surrealism, or of Lefebvre's famous response to Tristan Tzara's question, "You're picking up the pieces! Do you plan to put them back together again?": "No—I'm going to finish smashing them."[43] The point to be stressed is that the image of the architectural ruin marks, in a particular form, the *general question of time* which the problematic of fragmentation inscribes. While the fragment may present itself as a certain type of spatial form, its character is always fundamentally temporal. There may be non-modern fragments, but they can only properly come forth *as*

fragments by virtue of the "presence" within the cultural present of the non-identity of modernity and tradition. Moreover, it is this that gives modernity itself its temporal character, while at the same time making possible a range of different conflicting forms of historical temporalization as forms of response to this incompletion, from the avant-gardism of Marinetti, Tzara, or Artaud to the traditionalism of Eliot. Schematically, the nostalgic and the affirmative are differentiated through their respective conceptions of this incompletion—the cultural present as a site of lack/loss (Lyotard's "missing contents") or of possibility. As such, it is this *essential* incompletion, which is nothing other than the non-identity of modernity and tradition, that makes possible Lyotard's reinscription of the Kantian category of the sublime, and not the other way around, as a repositioning of the future which has itself historical conditions of emergence.

The Sublime and the Contemporary

Of course, in the light of a certain sense that "the discussion has moved on," one might well ask of the above: What does all this mean for "us" *now*? Where do "we" stand with regard to the "mode" of the sublime, after Lyotard? At the very least, the theoretical discourse of the sublime, as manifested within the contemporary, may seem to reflect a more general disjuncture between the "aesthetic" concerns of philosophers and critical theorists, and the actual work of present-day artistic practitioners. If this is indeed our situation, then it is an unfortunate state of affairs for *both* philosophers and artists, one that would seem to legitimate Nicolas Bourriard's complaint that, too often, the former "are happy drawing up an inventory of yesterday's concerns, the better to lament the fact of not getting any answers."[44] For if it is not to amount simply to a sophisticated mode of cultural conservatism, then the current, largely welcome, surge of interest in philosophical accounts of art, and of the aesthetic tradition, must prove itself by its capacity to engage what is at stake in the contemporary forms and practices that mark our own cultural present. As the comments of Bourriard and others suggest, up to now, whatever its other achievements, it has generally failed to do so, finding itself lapsing into a mourning for modernism as a lost aesthetic object—typically centered on "the sensual achievements of modernist painting from 1850 to 1950"—and losing sight of "the shifts and transformations" in post-conceptualist art over the last thirty or so years.[45]

This is, as the likes of Steyn and Iverson sense, evidently the danger too in any unreflective retention of the Kantian category of the sublime as a means of working through the artistic problems of today, particularly if it

remains tied to a theoretical vocabulary developed in relation to the earlier (pre-conceptualist) achievements of Newman, Rothko, and others. As I have argued here, it does not seem that this is Lyotard's intention. One would have to note that, in his hands, the sublime relates as much to *Arte Povera* or Buren as to Newman. Nonetheless, if this is to have the kind of critical purchase it promises, then it will have to be continually re-thought through its potential connections to the promise of the avant-garde itself, and to its (ongoing) working through of *modernity* in its own fullest and most emphatic sense. Moreover, insofar as the art of modernity is specifically defined by its productive non-identity to what it has been, and by its opening to what it might become, the *concept* of art itself must remain fragmented, open, and incomplete, beyond the hold of any one inherited framework. When Kant scholarship can sometimes seem to displace the work of aesthetic theory itself, it is wise to remember that it is this that is modern art's true provocation.

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Notes

1. Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Sublime Offering," trans. J. Librett, in Jean-François Courtine et al., *Of The Sublime: Presence in Question* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 25–6.

2. Simon Critchley, *Continental Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 58.

3. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Athlone, 1997), 196–7. Adorno's argument does not follow exactly the same path as either Nancy's or Lyotard's, working far more, as it does, with the pivotal role of nature in Kant's account of the sublime.

4. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington & Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), 92.

5. Ibid., 77.

6. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, Part II, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), §27, 106.

7. Paul Crowther, *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 158.

8. Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 98, 99 (emphasis added).

9. Ibid., 84–5, 98.

10. Charles Harrison, "Abstract Expressionism," in Nikos Stangos, ed., *Concepts of Modern Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981), 181. In 1948, the same year that "The Sublime is Now" was published, Newman, Rothko, Robert Motherwell, and William Baziotes formed a "school" with the name "Subjects of the Artist" in order to emphasize this commitment to "subject matter" in abstract art. Alongside Newman, Harrison also cites, as exemplary of the fashion for the sublime around this time, a 1963 statement by Still accompanying an exhibition of paintings at the University of Pennsylvania.

11. Crowther, *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism*, 155.

12. Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 62–3.

13. Barnett Newman, "The Sublime is Now," in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory1900–1912: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 574.

14. Juliet Steyn, "The Subliminal Greenberg: The Americanisation of Aesthetic Identity," in Alex Coles and Richard Bentley, eds., *Excavating Modernism* (London: Backless Books, 1996), 45.

15. Margaret Iverson "The Deflationary Impulse: Postmodernism, Feminism and the Anti-Aesthetic," in Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne, eds., *Thinking Art: Beyond Traditional Aesthetics* (London: ICA, 1991), 83. "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" is, of course, a famous essay by Clement Greenberg, whose apparently elitist conception of the aesthetic constituted one of the major objects of attack for postmodernist theory in the visual arts.

16. Andrew Teverson, "'The Uncanny Structure of Cultural Difference' in the Sculpture of Anish Kapoor," in *Gothic Studies* 5, 2 (November 2003), 87–8, 95n36, 91. The distinction between a Gothic and Enlightenment sublime is drawn from Vijay Mishra, *The Gothic Sublime* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994).

17. Lyotard, "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" trans. Régis Durand, published as an appendix to Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Masumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 79.

18. James Williams, *Lyotard: Towards a Postmodern Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998), 112–3.

19. Lyotard, "Answering the Question," 80.

20. Richard Murphy, *Theories of the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 273.

21. Crowther, *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism*, 153, 167.

22. Clement Greenberg, "After Abstract Expressionism," in *Art International* 6 (October 1962), 30.

23. See Thierry de Duve, *Kant After Duchamp* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 220–2. De Duve goes on to observe that Greenberg tends to link the sublime to what he terms "concocted art." See also David Cunningham, "*Ex Minimis*: Greenberg, Modernism and Beckett's *Three Dialogues*" in *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* 13 (2003).

24. Clement Greenberg, "Art Chronicle 1952," in *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 150.

25. Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 103.

26. Ibid., 100.

27. Ibid., 90.

28. Lyotard, "Answering the Question," 77.

29. For a more detailed account of this conception of modernity as the non-identity of modernity and tradition, see David Cunningham, "A Time for Dissonance and Noise: On Adorno, Music and the Concept of Modernism," in *Angelaki* 8, 1 (April 2003), 61–5.

30. Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 1995), 11.

31. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained to Children*, trans. Julian Pefanis and Morgan Thomas (London: Turnaround, 1992), 36.

32. Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), 13.

33. Ibid., 22, 63. See also David Cunningham, "Architecture, Utopia and the Futures of the Avant-Garde," in *The Journal of Architecture* 6, 2 (Summer 2001).

34. Osborne, *Politics of Time*, 11.

35. J. M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), 235. I say "up to a point" because, although certainly not illegitimate, Bernstein's claim that "the transition from beauty and taste as constitutive of 'aesthetics' to sublimity as the overcoming of 'aesthetics' from within, is the determining historical gesture of Adorno's aesthetic theory" (235–6), hazards an enormous amount on what are only four or five pages of Adorno's three-hundred odd page unfinished book. See *Aesthetic Theory*, 195–9. Bernstein is not exactly mistaken, but he misses, I think, both the dialectic of sublime *and* play in which Adorno places the former—"[t]he legacy of the sublime is unassuaged negativity...[which] is however at the same time the legacy of the comic"—and, generally, rather overestimates the significance the sublime has for his aesthetic theory as a whole.

36. Lyotard, "Answering the Question," 80–1.

37. Ibid., 81.

38. Adorno, "The Essay as Form," in *Notes to Literature, Vol. One*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 9.

39. Ibid., 16–7.

40. Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Howard (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 307. For a more detailed account of this distinction between different forms of the fragment, see David Cunningham, "A Question of Tomorrow: Blanchot, Surrealism and the Time of the Fragment," in *Papers of Surrealism* 1 (2003).

41. Alexandra Warwick, "Life in Ruins: Architecture, Archaeology and Victorian Gothic," in *In-between: Essays and Studies in Literary Criticism*, 8, 2 (September 1999).

42. Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 126. It is in these "nostalgic" terms that, more generally, Peter Szondi (like Hegel and Lukács before him) reads the Romantic conception of the fragment as an ultimately *tragic* and *melancholic* longing for absent reconciliation. See Peter Szondi, "Friedrich Schlegel and Romantic Irony," in *On Textual Understanding and Other Essays*, trans. H. Mendelsohn (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986). For an alternative, affirmative reading of Schlegelian irony, see Simon Critchley, *Very Little ... Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* (London: Routledge, 1997).

43. Henri Lefebvre, cited in Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1989), 191.

44. Nicolas Bourriard, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: Les presses du reel, 2002).

45. John Roberts, "On Autonomy and the Avant-Garde," in *Radical Philosophy* 103 (September/October 2000), 28. Roberts's criticisms here are chiefly directed at the recent "aestheticist" work of the art critic T. J. Clark and the philosopher J. M. Bernstein.