

**Critique  
d'art**

## Critique d'art

Actualité internationale de la littérature critique sur l'art  
contemporain

40 | 2012  
CRITIQUE D'ART 40

---

# Lyotard – A Thinker of the Century?

Michal Kozlowski

---



### Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/5666>

DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.5666

ISBN : 2265-9404

ISSN : 2265-9404

### Éditeur

Groupement d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

### Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 1 novembre 2012

ISBN : 1246-8258

ISSN : 1246-8258

### Référence électronique

Michal Kozlowski, « Lyotard – A Thinker of the Century? », *Critique d'art* [En ligne], 40 | 2012, mis en ligne le 01 novembre 2013, consulté le 03 mai 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/5666> ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.5666

---

Ce document a été généré automatiquement le 3 mai 2019.

Archives de la critique d'art

---

# Lyotard – A Thinker of the Century?

Michal Kozlowski

---

## RÉFÉRENCE

Jean-François Lyotard. *Textes dispersés I : esthétique et théorie de l'art = Miscellaneous Texts I: Aesthetics and Theory of Art*, Louvain : Leuven University Press, 2012. Sous la dir. d'Herman Parret

Jean-François Lyotard. *Textes dispersés II : artistes contemporains = Miscellaneous Texts II: Contemporary Artists*, Louvain : Leuven University Press, 2012. Sous la dir. d'Herman Parret  
*Les Transformateurs Lyotard*, Paris : Sens & Tonka : Collège international de philosophie, 2008. Sous la dir. de Corinne Enaudeau, Jean-François Nordmann, Jean-Michel Salanskis, Frédéric Worms

## NOTE DE L'ÉDITEUR

Traduit du français par Simon Pleasance

- 1 To say that Jean-François Lyotard is a thinker to be reckoned with would be tantamount to stating the obvious. We are usually—and this is probably a modern habit—tempted to look for secrets lurking behind this kind of intellectual and creative biography. Put more finely, it is no longer possible—and rightly so—to conceive of a theoretical event and an intellectual output as Œuvre, and, what is more, that of a “great man”, because the two presuppose a miniaturized version of the teleological narrative that Lyotard so powerfully challenged. So we can re-read the rich content of Lyotardian writings and concepts using a different formula—one more faithful to Lyotard himself: a formula involving a reading of the symptoms tallying with the various synchronic and diachronic registers of sensibility, theoretical and political alike. Such a reading in no way means reducing things to the external pleas about what is appropriate for the Lyotardian discourse—quite to the contrary, it helps us to grasp its specific nature, but without any

intent to find, at any price, a structural integrity therein, or a political cohesion, or an all-encompassing conceptual structure. Last but not least, J-F. Lyotard was bold enough to embrace the postmodern identity. In this sense, too, the figure of “one of the thinkers of the century” merits examination. This would imply that, in the Hegelian manner, a period might let itself be confined within any old line of thinking, and that the synchronic might become unequivocal. Lyotard definitely argues against this. Yet his stances are still meaningful for historical, social and moral transformations, as if he had grasped them earlier, and better, than others.

- 2 In 1954, in the *Que sais-je?* collection, Lyotard published *La Phénoménologie*, a reference work in French philosophy. Shortly thereafter, he joined the Socialisme ou Barbarie group—an autonomous and anti-authoritarian communist collective whose aim was to break with Stalinism and bureaucracy, not only with regard to ideas but also in the way it functioned politically (and this well before the other parties of the radical Left had made any such effort). J-F. Lyotard disappeared as an author, joined a collective and asserted himself less as a philosopher than as a specialist on Algeria. The group’s considerable influence was acknowledged. It paved the way for May ’68. But here we find another J-F. Lyotard adopting another stance. In 1965 or thereabouts, he abandoned political activism. He saw that the revolutionary narrative was running out of steam just when others were enthusing about it reaching its peak. In 1979 he wrote a book in yet another vein, its initial purpose being to act as a report for use by the Quebec government. *La Condition postmoderne* is a pluri-disciplinary diagnosis of the present, announcing the cultural, social, economic and epistemic changes about to happen. At that time, computerization, networking, image crisis and the like were of minor relevance. This is not the place to decide whether his positions are defensible or debatable. Even severe critics admit that they are significant.
- 3 The three recent books—*Les Transformateurs Lyotard*, published to mark the tenth anniversary of the philosopher’s death, and the two volumes of *Textes dispersés*, which offer an impressive compilation of writings, including hitherto unpublished texts, and commentaries—attest to J-F. Lyotard’s eminent standing. The *Textes dispersés* deal directly with the issue of art. J-F. Lyotard ranks among those 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophers who grant art a central place as a praxis but also as an area of knowledge. Art is no longer a matter of allegory. It is no longer just a matter of vague representations of what concepts can grasp in a clear and distinct way. Art is a different way of doing and learning, as uncompromising and legitimate as the theoretical way. But although this central place is still holding its ground, its meaning shifts and switches. *Esthétiques et théorie de l’art* brings together nine texts written or delivered as lectures between 1969 and 1996. Perhaps this collection does not provide an altered view of “Lyotardian aesthetics”; on the other hand, it explicitly shows the changes, ambiguities and difficulties which run through the undertaking.
- 4 First off, there is the shift from “libidinal aesthetics”, in the *Discours-Figure* (1971) and *Libidinal Economy* (1974) period, to the “aesthetics of the sublime” which started to shape his approach from the 1980s on. Even if the breaking point is far from being clear, it is schematically possible to observe that the former is constructed mainly with the use of Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx, in a sense where art, here, is the place where bonds of desire meet nodes of domination. As a result, this aesthetics is intended as performative and strategic, if not revolutionary. Such an aesthetics is “an account of the economy of works of art that was cast in libidinal terms [...] would have as its central presupposition

the affirmative character of works: they are not in place of anything; they do not stand for but stand; that is to say, they function through their material and its organization.”<sup>1</sup>

- 5 The aesthetics of the sublime, for its part, unambiguously refuses any such “politicization of desire”. It seeks out two different moments. On the one hand, art’s capacity to describe and illustrate a certain ontology; the fact that it is suited to arranging a special relation to a sort of truth. “The work of art bears witness to the fact that objects do not exist, that they are filtered traces, en- and de-coded by our physical sensibility and our languages, of a power which exceeds them.”<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the aesthetics of the sublime is forever political and ethical, even in a very different way to the affirmative strategic politics of desire. “Art is the *epokhe* of “communication”. It is the mark of the default of the given community. It exalts the community of this default as much as it signifies that it fails it. Which is to say that it fails to imagine it, to put it into images, to stage it or play it. Imagination here is *energeia*, act (but not action). [...] Art is not communication because the latter is only action.”<sup>3</sup> The second use is quite distinct from the first. It is provided with a practical end, not subordinate to needs. This end purpose consists in finding a non-substantial place for criticism; in conceiving that it is not delivered in the name of someone or something—just as it would be as well to avoid a lethal univocality in the manner of speaking, as demanded by praxis (including communication as perceived by Habermas.)
- 6 With Lyotard, the aesthetics of the sublime is usually associated with the “Kantian turn”. Even though the inspiration of Kant’s aesthetic works is explicit and real, one must always bear in mind that this is a very specific, not to say heretical, use of his concepts. Aesthetics for Lyotard never stops being a matter of desire, on the one hand, and, on the other, ontology, not forgetting its ethical-political dimension. The second volume of the *Textes dispersés*, devoted to contemporary artists, includes some thirty essays on painting and painters. This publication reveals the extent to which Lyotard was caught up in the game of art, and by what rules he wanted to play it. To be sure, Lyotard does not accept the position of critic. In particular, he refuses to make any distinction between “good art” and “bad art”. Seeking out neither the uniqueness nor the originality of the work, his selection, in the end of the day, does not necessarily contain the greatest or the most recognized of figures, such as Joseph Kosuth and Casadesus, but rather artists who never reached the “general public”. Nor do they represent a style, a tendency or a school. And as Herman Parret observes in his preface: “The same ‘qualities’ always arouse his interest: the presence of matter, the event of the apparition, colour as spasm, the blinded painter and blindness in painting.”<sup>4</sup> The question nevertheless looms: is Lyotard more faithful to the work of art in its own order of appearance, or is he rather faithful to it in accordance with the age-old formula of philosophers of art, which he used to illustrate and back up his own philosophy?
- 7 It would seem that his intentions matter little. He is closer to the second voice—and this is not necessarily a reproach. In a way, Lyotard tries to forge his own philosophy based on the rules (and non-rules) of art. He does in fact make use of the work (of art), but he does nothing other than what many artists do when they make use of philosophers. This all remains plausible, provided that no discourse claims to be the meta-language of the other; as it happens, provided that philosophy gives up any idea of prescribing and having the last word. Is Lyotard capable of proceeding thus? Readers will judge for themselves. Let us just recognize that these overlapping forms of discourse can only succeed in part. In the anthology, there is an encounter between two figures and two

styles. In Lyotard's "Commentary on Baruchello's *Notebooks*" (pp. 173-205), he inserts his discourse in the drawings, as if it were a matter of producing a common or at least parallel work. Further on, with regard to Ruth Francken (pp. 370-423), Lyotard talks as a philosopher enlightening us about the content of a work by talking on behalf of the artist: "[...] Ruth declares: my whole work is a failure. The thing remains inaccessible to every form of representation, it remains on the retreat; but it is this failure which gives the work its value."<sup>5</sup>

- 8 For its part, *Les Transformateurs Lyotard* brings together the minutes of the conference held at the Collège International de Philosophie in 2007. The book offers not only an almost exhaustive overview of Lyotard's work (apart from the militant Marxist period of 1954 to 1971, which, for reasons both subjective and objective, remains overshadowed by his legitimate work—even if the editors modestly pinpoint other lacunae). The editors have opted for this most felicitous formula of "transformers" which aims at once at the metamorphic dimension of his thought and the designation of its geography, but which also demonstrates its specificity in relation to the other representatives of French theory. From these minutes, we see to what extent Lyotard remained a more classical philosopher than he cared to admit. (cf. Jean-Michel Salanskis's article on the problem of reference, illustrating the Lyotardian tussle with Ludwig Wittgenstein and Gottlob Frege, and his close link with the Anglo-Saxon analytical tradition). He has the capacity—rare among philosophers—to recommence his work with each object and area of reflection, whereas he could shrewdly re-incorporate the whole thing in his previously established philosophical empire.
- 9 So *Les Transformateurs Lyotard* presides over turf as diverse as ethics, politics, psychoanalysis, aesthetics and conceptual issues peculiar to philosophy. Because it is not a matter of rediscovering a Lyotard system or even a central point in his method, it is much more a question of understanding a style, a body language, positions, drifts and, at the very same time, the concepts and arguments which go hand in hand with them. It might have been possible to set about the task differently by proposing or imposing a dialectic or a system, but that would have been to the detriment of remaining close to the texts and their complexity. What is worth grasping is Lyotard's rationality. The challenge is a major one, because the "postmodern" is very easily associated with a return to the irrational which does not exist with him. There is no more talk of boundaries, changes, plurality and historicity of the rational.
- 10 These Lyotard readings prompt me to set forth three difficulties I encounter in relation to what we might call Jean-François Lyotard's practical rationality.
- 11 The first difficulty has to do with the figure of the intellectual which he sets in motion. His commitment (whose importance he never questions) must be seen as distinct from "aggressive and all-encompassing [commitment] (in the manner of Jean-Paul Sartre, organic [commitment] (in the manner of Antonio Gramsci), and even specific [commitment] (in the manner of Michel Foucault)"<sup>6</sup>, and this in the name of indeterminacy and against the prescriptive.<sup>7</sup> But does indeterminacy not stem from the privilege of intellectuals?
- 12 Secondly, there would seem to exist, in Lyotard, a constant tension between the quest for the optimum energy of desire (comparable to that of Georges Bataille and Gilles Deleuze), and a politics (comparable, this time, to Theodor W. Adorno and Giorgio Agamben) of concern about everything that is weak, dominated, and dispossessed. These two avenues

can perhaps be reconciled, but Lyotard tells us little about to do that. Maybe they must be thought about separately?

- 13 By way of conclusion, there is something to be desired in his approach to art. At the time of controversy over the origins and the social functions of art (especially around the theses of Pierre Bourdieu and the replies given by Jacques Rancière), Lyotard refused to offer his opinion. While, today, the notion of creativity is once again at the heart of the debate about capitalism, subjectivity and justice, Lyotard's contribution is wanting. "The work, as trace of a spasmodic gesture, is thus generally threatened with eradication for the sake of its feature as cultural merchandise",<sup>8</sup> he wrote in 1993. This is saying too much, or too little.

---

## NOTES

1. Lyotard, Jean-François. *Textes dispersés I : esthétique et théorie de l'art = Miscellaneous Texts I: Aesthetics and Theory of Art*, Louvain : Leuven University Press, 2012, p. 123
2. *Ibid.*, p. 220
3. *Ibid.*, p. 192
4. Lyotard, Jean-François. *Textes dispersés II : artistes contemporains = Miscellaneous Texts II: = Contemporary Artists*, Louvain : Leuven University Press, 2012, p. 51
5. *Ibid.*, p. 407
6. Zaoui, Pierre, "Jean-François Lyotard, un philosophe à la dérive", *Les Transformateurs Lyotard*, Paris : Sens & Tonka, 2008, (Collège international de philosophie), p. 301
7. Bernard, Gaëlle. *Ibid.*, pp. 165-167
8. Lyotard, Jean-François. *Textes dispersés I : esthétique et théorie de l'art = Miscellaneous Texts I: Aesthetics and Theory of Art*, Louvain : Leuven University Press, 2012, p. 239