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## Postmodernism, Knowledge and J-F Lyotard

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**Abstract:** This paper is an adaptation of a lecture delivered in seminar for the Department of Humanistic Datology at Aalborg University on postmodernism and knowledge. Its focus is the status of knowledge in postmodern society and culture as framed by J-F Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* and *The Postmodern Explained*. It emphasizes the ideas of "computerization" and "information society" against the backdrop of postmodern concepts of the cultural quotation. Futhermore – after offering a general introduction to the idea of postmodernism – it attempts to explore the political implications of the interaction of quotation, computerization and information as well as offer a criticism of Lyotard's general approach to these concepts.

**Keywords:** postmodernism, *bricolage*, database, narrative, morality, struggle.

### I. Introduction

The key issues of this paper are direct: postmodernism, knowledge and J-F Lyotard. Simply put, postmodernism and knowledge have been perhaps the driving social, cultural, political and economic concerns of the past twenty years, and J-F Lyotard may be the individual most responsible for putting them on our cultural map, specifically in combination with each other. Adapted from the keynote lecture for the seminar I conducted on the topic for the Department of Communications at Aalborg University in January 2001, this paper relies on a

degree of foreknowledge about the texts it focuses on – *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) and *The Postmodern Explained* (1986). In general, however, the paper attempts to put Lyotard's conception of the postmodern in front of us, with an emphasis on problems of communication, computerization and technologization in the context of cultural criticism. The paper begins with a short history of the term "postmodernism," followed by an attempt to explicate Lyotard's definition of this concept. The central components to this definition are the concepts of *bricolage*, or patchwork and what Lyotard describes as "incredulity toward metanarratives." This comes into connection with problems of communication, computerization and technologization in the context of the atomization of knowledge and identity in the age of the database and digital information.

I also make, however, an attempt to criticize Lyotard's conception of the postmodern by pointing out a fundamental tension within his political program for postmodern society. Lyotard wants to maintain incredulity toward metanarratives at the same time that he offers radically free and immediate access to information. In one way, this is an ultra-postmodern position; the identity and knowledge flexibility offered by hyper-immediate and open digital information cuts against the singularized modes of modern identity and knowledge. However, the grounds for asking/demanding radically free access to information are utopian and thus rely on a metanarrative themselves. Therein, I suggest that Lyotard misses the political opportunities presented by his own idea of the postmodern: the possibilities of genuine resistance and class-based struggle.

## II. Early Postmodernisms, Into Lyotard and at the Gates of the Winter Palace

It is the case, we might note, that the term "postmodernism" has a longer history than we might expect. If we follow Perry Anderson, whose *The Origins of Postmodernity* (1998) provides probably the most thoroughgoing etymological history of the term, the word first appeared in a commentary by the British artist John Waitkins Chapman in the 1870s. Chapman, who is otherwise forgotten, charged the new modernism – which he, of course, saw in terms of the arts – with an over-formal, over-intellectual method. At the time, this was a relatively strange idea. The new modernism, to Chapman represented by figures such as the British painter J.M.W. Turner, supposedly opposed the old modernism's own overly formal methods, with old modernism standing as the post-Renaissance schools of Mannerist and Baroque painting. Nonetheless – albeit unintentionally – Chapman began a sort of tradition for the use of the word "postmodernism": the notion that modernism was more limiting than liberating, that we should imagine a world after modernism (the postmodern world) and that such a world demanded dynamic criticism.<sup>1</sup>

In the following several decades, although hardly forming a "discourse" or connected discussion of any kind, "postmodernism" was used in more or less the same manner. The Spanish poet and critic Federico de Onís used the word in the context of high literature in the 1930s. Again, the charge was that modernism was too formal and abstract; here, he had in mind figures such as the poet T.H. Eliot. Arnold Toynbee, the British historian, used "postmodernism" in a cultural context. Essentially, he criticized the conformity of technological

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<sup>1</sup> See Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (New York: Verso, 1998), 3-15.

mass society, a commentary he too made in the 1930s. In the 1950s, American artist Pico Miran reinvoked a Chapman-esque use of the term, saying that we should establish a new art that would take painting back from the purely intellectual domain – a domain that with its lineage running from post-Impressionism through Cubism to the New York studio movement, had only become *more* dominant after Chapman's time. However, there were also other early usages of "postmodernism" that give us a sense of the problems attached to this type of criticism. The German philosopher Rudolf Pannwitz argued in 1917 that postmodernism meant not only opposition to formality and conformity, but also the arrival of a new mystical, nationalistic soul to create this new culture (Pannwitz saw himself developing on Nietzsche in this context). Finally, the American theologian Bernard Iddings Bell explained postmodernism in the 1920s in the context of spirituality, suggesting that we should find a new, Christian experience that would transcend the hardheaded formalism of the modern world.<sup>2</sup>

At any rate, however, "postmodernism," though in use, remained a seldom-used term until the 1960s and '70s. The change came with three figures. The first was American literary critic Leslie Fielder. In his essay "The New Mutants" (1965) published in the journal *Partisan Review*, Fielder tied postmodernism to the growing counter-culture in the United States and Europe. The point was that we needed to do more than imagine a new culture. We needed to realize that a new culture was, in fact, on the way. This was a culture that was post-identity – "post-humanist, post-white, post-male, post-heroic." This transformation extended essentially from the reformulation of our political and cultural map in the post-War years. With spates of new independences and the emergence of multiplicitous local conflicts in the crumbling spaces of old empires – both diplomatically and psychically – we had a cultural sense that the classic identity categories did not function any more and that we were in the process of new categories. Their form – the form of our new identities – would reflect what Fielder referred to as our "social schizophrenia," or the reality that, on one hand, we always have a culture, yet we are always in the process of creating cultural identity.<sup>3</sup> What is created always lies in the future, held Fielder, meaning that culture is always "post-," or always beyond itself. The more creative are individuals and cultures, the more "post" they become; the more in the future they exist. With the 1960s counter-culture, we were more future-oriented, more schizophrenic, and therein more postmodernist, than ever.

Fielder's ideas received a new formulation in the 1970s from the Egyptian-American literature professor Ihab Hassan. Over several books and articles in that decade, Hassan developed Fielder's idea that there was a connection between the new counter-culture and the idea of postmodernism. On one hand, he was more specific than Fielder. It was not just to vague notions of a counter-culture that Hassan referred, but to specific groups and individuals such as the American Weather Underground and the French *gauchistes*, American writer Thomas Pynchon and Italian author Italo Calvino. Hassan also tied postmodernism to post-structuralism, since Foucault's *The Order of Things* (1966) the rising trend in western philosophy. Post-structuralism represented something of a philosophical counter-culture, argued Hassan, explicitly seeking to peel back, layer by layer, two hundred-odd years of *philosophical* identity, revealing the falsity of objectivist certitude. Central to the new philosophical identity,

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<sup>2</sup> See Federico de Onís, *Antología de la Poesía española e hispanoamericana* (Madrid, 1934), Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, vol. 8 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), Pico Miran, *A Manifesto for Post-Modern Art* (New York: American Art Gallery, 1951), Rudolf Pannwitz, *Die Krisis der Europäischen Kultur* (Munich: Hans Karl, 1921) and B.I. Bell, *Postmodernism and Other Essays* (Milwaukee: Morehouse, 1926).

<sup>3</sup> See Leslie Fielder, "The New Mutants," *Partisan Review* 32, no. 4 (1965), 524.

he argued, was the notion of difference – the idea of a necessary yet productive communicative breakdown between any two cognizant entities, extending from the basic *dissimilarity* of all things and individuals. Offering an overture to what has more or less become a central postmodern tenet, Hassan suggested that truth as we knew it was no longer there to be had. Even truth as we made it and lost it was only ours momentarily.<sup>4</sup>

The story has it that it was from Ihab Hassan that Jean-François Lyotard first heard the term postmodernism. In *The Postmodern Condition*, one of the two texts that we will be focusing on today (and which I will privilege over *The Postmodern Explained*, although I will make reference to the latter text), Lyotard argued that the word had been in "current use on the American continent among sociologists and critics," and it seems to have been largely Hassan to whom he was referring.<sup>5</sup> Hassan, who for the past thirty years has been professor of literature at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, hosted a conference in 1972 on contemporary performance and literature. Lyotard delivered a paper at that conference entitled "The Unconscious as Mise-en-Scène," in which, through a post-Freudian approach, he described the unconscious as the place in which appearance is generated. At the conclusion of the paper, Hassan, who paneled Lyotard's paper, supposedly commented on the general state of our "postmodernity" to Lyotard. What was postmodern about Lyotard's paper was the insistence of the inaccessibility of the unconscious. His paper was Freudian – and thus necessarily modern – by arguing for the primacy of the unconscious. It was post-Freudian – and thus tending toward the postmodern – by arguing that there was not a science that could stabilize the operations of the unconscious, or take us into its domain in the first place.<sup>6</sup>

The importance of such criticisms of Freud's notion of the unconscious – whether one is familiar with Freud or not – is that they disrupt the notion of a unified source for true knowledge. What was revolutionary about Freud in his own time was his assertion that the factual root of the world did not lie outside of us, à la Galileo or Tycho Brahe suggesting that we might take a telescope to it (or Leeuwenhoek a microscope), but rather that the truth of the world was within us – moreover in a space that was difficult to access. However, it was accessible for Freud; this, of course, was the meaning of psychoanalysis. From this space came truth, at least about who we are, how we know and what we know. Lyotard, however – along with many theorists, French and otherwise – questioned that. Human truth was not simply about opening our hidden machine room, but realizing that either we cannot get into that room, we might get into it and there would be nothing in it, or that the things we find might change every time we open the door.

Such, in a certain way, are the themes of *The Postmodern Condition*. The importance of the text cannot be underestimated. *The Postmodern Condition* is, along with Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) and David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989), the most referred to text in terms of defining postmodernism, and placed the problematic of knowledge and postmodernism *in conjunction* in front of us, rather than simply postmodernism as a cultural state or attitude. This is not to say

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<sup>4</sup> See Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1987).

<sup>5</sup> J-F Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, tr. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiii.

<sup>6</sup> See Lyotard, "The Unconscious as Mise-an-Scène" in *Performance in Postmodern Culture*, ed. Michael Benamou and Charles Caramille (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977). The anecdote about the exchange between Lyotard and Hassan is recounted in Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity*, 15-47

that Lyotard did not maintain the cultural – he surely did. However, the blending he made of cultural, technological and epistemological questions was unique, very much setting table for the contemporary, cross-disciplinary discussion on postmodernism. Indeed, the text, as it were, has some surprising qualities. Written at the request of the president of the Council of Universities for the government of Quebec, it was, in fact, intended to be precisely a report on knowledge as it stood in 1979. (In fact, Lyotard notes in his introduction that it was intended to be a report on knowledge in "the most highly developed societies." The meaning of this, though, must be taken up later.)<sup>7</sup> And a report it was. One of the attributes of the text that can surprise the contemporary reader is how objective it is in its assessment of the condition of knowledge in the late twentieth century. Twenty-three years after its publication, and with the solidification of Lyotard's reputation as perhaps the leading "postmodernist," we expect him to have been partisan, in terms of wanting to dismantle the modern. He clearly did. However, the assessments and objectives related to this goal were far more critical and subtle than we might expect.

We might, though, in order to get into the text, consider some of the thoughts imbedded in the title a bit more – *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. It is a substantive title, and it opens several possibilities with regard to thinking about the relationship between postmodernism and knowledge. Let us take a slightly "postmodern" grammatical approach ourselves and concentrate on the colon that breaks *The Postmodern Condition* apart from *A Report on Knowledge*. The intriguing part about this break, I would suggest, is the triangulation of three terms – postmodern, condition and knowledge. They have a relationship to one another, but precisely what is it? Postmodernity – the state of being postmodern – Lyotard wants to say, involves a condition. A condition is a state. Thus, the postmodern condition is the state of being postmodern. Knowledge – if we move to the other side of the colon – is involved in the state of being postmodern. Precisely in which manner, though, is unclear. Is knowledge simply one part (among many) of "postmodern culture," as Lyotard phrases it? Or is knowledge *the* part of culture, whereby making a report on knowledge becomes required for making a report on postmodernity? In the text, Lyotard delineates between "postindustrial society" (on the Daniel Bell model) and "postmodern culture," and this seems to give us a hint.<sup>8</sup> Both postindustrial society and postmodern culture are part of postmodernity, or the general state of being postmodern. Postindustrialism, as Lyotard constantly drives home, is the economic circumstance surrounding postmodern culture – that is, not only the commodification of information, but the coming to dominance of the information product (over the material product). But, given the plasticity of the word "culture," and hence its ability to stretch quite far, it is the postmodern rather than the postindustrial that seems to preoccupy Lyotard. It, more than the postindustrial, is the sign for our historical moment. The postindustrial may set up the postmodern, but the postmodern incorporates the postindustrial. Within the vast and varied terrain of "culture," knowledge would seem to be just one part. "Our working hypothesis," Lyotard writes, "is that the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age."<sup>9</sup> Knowledge is thus *within* postmodern culture. It alone is *not* postmodern culture.

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<sup>7</sup> Op. cit., xxv.

<sup>8</sup> Key features of Bell's model are increasing distances between producers and the object produced, the multinational corporation, the production of increasing numbers of intangible commodities and the radical shrinking of the classical proletariat. See Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon, 1969).

<sup>9</sup> Op. cit., 3.

Yet the interrogation that Lyotard gave to certitude in his 1972 "The Unconscious as Mise-en-Scène" raises its head again in relation to the idea of knowledge in *The Postmodern Condition*. Research, Lyotard tells us, which, in both modern *and* postmodern settings, is the basin of knowledge and is purchased "not to find truth, but to augment power."<sup>10</sup> Knowledge is one of the platforms on which power operates, thus re-delineating "postindustrial society" and "postmodern culture." We move into the specific domain of multi-national economics, nuclearized militaries and commercialized data services that characterize the postindustrial. Yet, their legitimation, as Lyotard phrases it – by which he means their right to exist, their justness – comes from their coincidence with the facticity of the research, or objective knowledge of the world, that supports and makes them possible. Lyotard is careful to mark this legitimation as happening within the context of *petit récit* rather than *grand récit* (as a historian, I would invoke *petit histoire* and *grand histoire*); that is to say that they happen within local contexts rather than in the context of larger narratives, such as helping a national or shared human destiny. After all, it is, as Lyotard writes, "incredulity toward metanarratives" that he takes as defining the postmodern; we no longer believe the larger stories.<sup>11</sup> Yet, whatever the context for knowledge, without it and the access it provides us to truth (whether that access is false or not), power and the postindustrial are eroded. And insofar as they set up postmodern culture, it would be eroded as well. Thus, to a certain extent, knowledge *may* be equated with postmodern culture.

Indeed, we should strengthen this "may." The equatability of knowledge with postmodern culture is, in fact, very much the point of *The Postmodern Condition*. Lyotard is aware enough of the dangers of the project, the argument, the thesis statement, to be aware that, as Georges Bataille put it, that "the announcement of a vast project is always its betrayal."<sup>12</sup> As Lyotard phrased it in "The Subject of the Course of Philosophy" in the supplementary *The Postmodern Explained*, "You cannot open a question without leaving yourself open to it."<sup>13</sup> (Thus, I might point out, the notion of his text as *A Report on Knowledge* takes on a double meaning. The idea of a report, an objective telling of the the facts, plays precisely into the standards of hyper-objectivity that he, in his own project, would like to criticize – an objectivity, he feels, that followed long enough would take us to the ends of man. On the other hand, *rapport*, in its objectivity, shields Lyotard from the teleology of grand narrative that has also been one of the great problems of modernity.) Nonetheless, Lyotard clearly wants to tell us a few things. One is that knowledge is the new product at the end of the twentieth century (and we as readers would certainly have to add the start of the twenty-first). This is not to say that knowledge has replaced material production. Yet, in a way, it has. In computerized society, where knowledge is mercantiled, it invades a space formerly occupied only by material production. Thus, knowledge is the only new product worth noticing, at any rate; it is really the only new element (or non-element, as the case might be) emerging from capitalist productivity. However, that knowledge has become a product is also noticeable. This is so not only because it changes the scenery of the capitalist landscape, but because it effects a transformation in the meaning and use of knowledge. It no longer functions within grand narrative – again, the larger stories Lyotard suggests that we want to tell ourselves, and from which we find our identity.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., xiv.

<sup>12</sup> Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, tr. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone, 1985), 9.

<sup>13</sup> Lyotard, "The Subject of the Course of Philosophy," in *The Postmodern Explained*, tr. Julian Pefanis and Morgan Thomas (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 100.

Knowledge becomes atomized, isomorphic and isolated. It depends on being placed within a network, indexed and cross-referenced to have context.

This situation presents an interesting paradox for Lyotard. It tells us who we are, but, because of our dismissal of grand narrative, “who we are” is defined by the fact that we have stopped telling ourselves who we are. It is thus that we get the state of future anteriority (literally, after beforeness) that Lyotard tells us in "What is the Postmodern?" is the key to understanding postmodernism as both a term and state of being.<sup>14</sup> We have, on one hand, a constant reference to the past – the antecedent to the present. Underneath our dismissal of grand narrative is our nostalgia for it. We wish we had a direction and participated in a story; stories and directions are what grand narrative. This is Warhol's Campbell's soup cans [see attached illustration] – a reference to days past (post-War, Eisenhower America) where the meaning and direction of life was clear (prosperity, anti-Communism). We have, however, replaced narrative with facticity. Insofar there is promise in the future now, facticity is it. Campbell's soup is, it functions and everyone can have it. That is the future. But the can of soup has no place in time – thus Warhol's representation of it with no background, no context. It only is in the empty space that narrative, or a story to participate in, should have filled for us. We try to recreate narrative by connecting the factual with innumerable other domains of the factual. It was thus that the soup can series was in fact a series, as were Warhol's Marilyn Monroes; we want the matrix to do what the narrative did. But we instead live in a loss of time, and a dispersion of identity.

We see, then, how we try to fill this loss. In "What is the Postmodern?" – written in 1982 – Lyotard offers the following description of contemporary culture.

Eclecticism is the degree zero of contemporary general culture: you listen to reggae; you watch a western, you eat McDonald's at midday and local cuisine at night; you wear Paris perfume in Tokyo and dress retro in Hong Kong; knowledge is the stuff of TV game shows.<sup>15</sup>

The enduring power of his observations for the contemporary period is remarkable. The twenty-first century citizen recognizes this culture immediately. It *is* our culture. In fact, at the time of writing "What is the Postmodern?" Lyotard may not have known how right he was. McDonald's is a larger company selling more hamburgers to more people in more places in the world than it ever has. The *chic* of local cuisine and world music has also never been greater. Retro dress is an interesting phenomenon; in the '90s, 1960s hippie retro fashion was the thing. Come the new millennium, '70s disco fashion is in. As we run toward the future, we gather in the past, yet also keep it at arm's length so that it may remain nostalgic. Our culture is not our culture. It is, as Lyotard says, *bricolage*. It is somebody else's culture pasted on to our own time.

The interesting thing, however, is that nowhere is this more the case than with computerization. It is interesting that Lyotard never gives an explicit definition of this term. Already in 1979 he seemed to assume that we knew what it meant – and it seems to mean the construction of societies whose economies are increasingly IT-driven and in which large, or at least increasing, numbers of people have access to computers. One way or the other, though, the notion of the computer as *bricolage* seems strange because computerization appears so

<sup>14</sup> Lyotard, "What is the Postmodern?" in *The Postmodern Explained*, 15.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

obviously to be the property of the past few decades; depending on one's age, one probably remembers their first exposure to either a MacIntosh, and Apple II, a Commodor 64, or a room-sized database that one had to put on a winter coat to enter (kept cold as they had to be). The computer seems to be the one invention that might be said to be truly ours. Indeed, when Lyotard talks about the commodification of information, one might also say that he is just talking about "information society," where the commodification of information is hardly surprising – and which, again, seems to be something that is genuinely the property of the end of the twentieth century/beginning of the twenty-first. This is and is not true. It is true in the sense that computerization – information society, if you will – is the most recent playing out of an enormous historical logic. The partialization, or atomization, of knowledge outside of narrative, in flat, factual units, is our conceptualization of it, and informed by the practices through which we engage it. The database is king. However, *it* is also a part of a historical logic. It is, in fact, part of a *grand histoire* that we may tell – and Lyotard does – about the evolution of knowledge since the idea of knowledge and the idea of science became so closely bound. That is to say that postmodernity emerges from the historical logic of modernity.

In *The Postmodern Condition* the historical logic of modernity is a bit tricky to discern. This is because, on the one hand, Lyotard wants to separate narrative knowledge from scientific knowledge. One is about facticity, the other is about morality; “it is impossible to judge the existence or validity of narrative knowledge on scientific knowledge, and vice versa,” he writes.<sup>16</sup> One is general and inclusive, the other specific and exclusive. One needs an empirically observable phenomenon and the other simply needs a teller. However, this is also not completely the case. In fact, following the odd yet intriguing play of oppositions that are bound part in parcel of Lyotard's conceptual framework, it is not at all the case. Scientific knowledge, notes Lyotard, only became legitimated as a primary mode of knowledge once it began to fit itself into narratives – narratives about nations, empires, races, ethnicities, cultures and civilizations. Shortly put, science only became legitimated once it became about human meaning. This is the terrain of morality. Narratives have morals.

However, the demands of scientific productivity – we should remember that by evolution or revolution, industrialization happened – changed the status of narratives. Narratives spurred on science to the extent that their morals had to be proven. Man *should* be masterful of the world around him and able to tell the truth of a situation. Man *should* arrange his world to reflect the truth of his own nature and the circumstances that surround him (and I intentionally masculinize these sentences). Thus, we needed methods and technologies to achieve that mastery, tell those truths and make those arrangements. Yet in the process, narratives themselves became subject to the burden of proof. The academic discipline that I come from, history, provides a paradigmatic example. In the nineteenth century, history became divorced from philosophy and literature. Under the model of the University of Berlin, which became dominant (and which Lyotard refers to), there were no more moral stories to be told about the past, only truths. (This, by the way, very much remains the model for historical study.) We moved from Lyotard's example of the Cashinuhua story-teller proclaiming that “I will now tell you the story of \_\_\_\_\_” to “the story of \_\_\_\_\_ is,” with its anonymous referent, and its referential marks to footnotes and tables of authorities.<sup>17</sup> In short, we were on the road to the de-narrativization of truth.

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<sup>16</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 26.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

Yet, as Lyotard notes in “Missive on Universal History” (from *The Postmodern Explained*), that de-narrativization has its own narrative. What we sought with de-narrativization was a freeing from mysticism and irrationality. (Here we may see a dialectical movement to history. Industrialization and state centralization demanded our freedom from mysticism. Neither revelation nor hallucination helped a state or a machine run smoothly. And our freeing from mysticism allowed us to see the state and the machine – rational modes of human organization and production.) Mysticism restrained us from reaching our final destination as human peoples, which could only be in accordance with what science *proved* to be our basic characteristic as human peoples. This, of course, was reason. Herein lay the new narrative that we both wanted to admit and did not. Humanity was moving, through the exercise of reason, toward universal freedom. We were to reach that point, however, by pretending that we did not consider ourselves to be moving anywhere.<sup>18</sup>

Of course, this means that once scientific knowledge – through the unfolding dialectic between science and narrative – finally staticized narrative as a conscious standard for truth and dynamicized it as an unconscious fetish-object, we would leave the age of narrative for good. This, according to the Lyotard, is computerized society, information society. Here we get the supreme irony and – in my view – the key to the argument of *The Postmodern Condition*. Because ultimate scientificity is the ultimate attempt to replace lost meaning by appealing to fact, it too is *bricolage*. The computer is pastiched nostalgia. It is Warhol’s soup can. It stands alone and empty except for those longings and desires we invest it with. Its value in the moment is nill. It has no moment. As the ultimate artifact of high-technology (what Lyotard terms “technoscience”), it would deny all other modes of knowing the world. That denial, however, reflects a longing for the past and a desire for the future – a state of future anteriority – that carves out the empty space of the present that defines the postmodern.

Here, however, enter the philosopher and the avant-garde. The thing about postmodernism as future anteriority, as pure nostalgia combined with a false future and no present, is that it is pretty bleak. (Of course, this statement itself reveals our continued reliance on grand narrative.) It is quite existential. It does not even provide us with being toward death in Heidegger’s sense. It rather provides us being and nothingness. Unlike Sartre, though, the notion of an unqualifiedly positive choice in the face of this situation is not possible. This is because, of course, the idea of an unqualifiedly positive choice, as we just parenthetically remarked, involves grand narrative. It involves a destination, a morality. However, as with the inversion of the purpose of infusing grand narrative with science – in the sense of taking us no closer to legitimate truth than grand narrative did alone – so too has there been an inversion of the intended result of the full dismissal (at least at the level of consciousness) of grand narrative.

This inversion creates a retrograde relationship to the freedom that the scientificization of knowledge was supposed to give us. Lyotard phrases it as follows:

The thought and action of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are ruled by the idea of the emancipation of humanity...The progress of the sciences, technologies, the arts and political freedoms will liberate the whole of humanity from ignorance, poverty,

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<sup>18</sup> It seems appropriate to mention Susan Bordo’s book *The Flight to Objectivity* at this point. Although ostensibly about Descartes’ *Meditations*, Bordo offers an extremely acute sense of this double-edged effect in relation to reason and scientific knowledge in the context of possibly the most important text for either of those concepts. See Susan Bordo, *The Flight to Objectivity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987).

backwardness, despotism....it will produce enlightened citizens, masters of their own destiny.

From these sources spring all the political currents of the last two centuries, with the exception of traditional reaction and Nazism. The sometimes violent divergences [among different political ideologies] count for little next to the abiding unanimity about the end to be attained. Everyone thinks that they are moving toward a humanity transparent to itself, toward a world citizenry.<sup>19</sup>

According to Lyotard, this is, of course, is not what we got. The coming to dominance of science was our effective colonization by objectivity, and fixed images of morality, economics and social structure. We became boxed-in, our possibilities limited. (Even the European Union, by way of example, for all of its border breaking, functions on the same model of individual enlightenment, rationalized economics, industrialism and technologism as did the old nationalisms.) The database has become our one possibility for truth. The other varieties of knowledge that Lyotard points to – *savoir faire*, *savoir vivre*, *savoir-écouter* – have left us. The sustenance of those institutions and economies that support the database are prime, even at the expense of peoples and cultures. This is “the entire history of cultural imperialism,” writes Lyotard.<sup>20</sup> The fact is, aside from the injustice of this situation, that we have little control over our historical destiny, and of the ways in which knowledge operates on us and forms us.

It is the avant gardist and the philosopher, he charges, who recognize this, or at least provide us with the chance for its undoing. This is not to say that the arts and philosophy have not participated in perpetuating the naïve optimism of enlightened progress – they may, in fact, be the prime culprits in the increasing limitation of knowledge that Lyotard claims as the history of the past two hundred years; the entire idea of Enlightenment was generated from the philosophical field, and the *avant* arts, be they Romanticism, Futurism or Cubism, all subscribed to the teleology of improvement. They, however – and especially philosophy – also have a unique opportunity. As Lyotard phrases it in “The Subject of the Course of Philosophy,” they must always return to the “childhood of thought.”<sup>21</sup> The history of philosophy, from Socrates to Descartes to, in certain ways, Lyotard himself, bears this out. Socratic dialectics, the *cogito* and even Lyotard’s *differend* are all attempts to reformulate the entire field of knowledge, the entire process knowing. They return to the base of the tree of knowledge and remake it, root and branch. If they did not, knowledge would have no history – nothing would be made because nothing could be remade. History has happened; even the most detached postmodernist would have to admit that. The avant-gardist reinstalls history into postmodern culture. According to Lyotard, as long as philosophy and art continue to happen in forward looking modes – in fact, in quite modern modes – we will continue to generate a future and a past.

However, the innocence of the avant-garde, or at least their potential return to the *naissance* of knowledge, in Lyotard’s opinion, can be open to all of us. That is to say that we are all philosophers in waiting. This is a matter, Lyotard argues, of “giving the public free access to the memory and data banks.”<sup>22</sup> For the technologists among us, this is the perdurable hope – that precisely the tools of technology that create new social problematics (e.g., the “information gap,” the “technology gap”) will be used to overcome those problematics as the tools that caused

<sup>19</sup> Lyotard, “Tickets for a New Stage,” in *The Postmodern Explained*, 81-2.

<sup>20</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 27.

<sup>21</sup> Lyotard, “The Subject of the Course of Philosophy,” in *The Postmodern Explained*, 105.

<sup>22</sup> Op. cit., 67.

them become democratized. The exclusivity of information, its location within specific institutions, nations, classes and cultures, prevents us from accessing precisely the languages and factums we need to reconsider and reformulate them. We may all watch television. In fact, it is the rare one of us who does not. But we – in the widest sense of the public – are by no means all on the Internet, to discuss perhaps the hottest example. Fewer of us use it in a facile manner. Access to information on the Internet, at any rate, is not fully open. Services cost. Domains are restricted. And, in fact, the Internet is not the only database. In the postmodern setting, knowledge from multiple mediums has to be cross-referenced and marticized. Thus, it is in the name of complexity that information in the digital mode is kept in the hands of the few. "Only a professional understands that," we say. Or, "there is too much information; it must be parceled out." What we do not realize, however – and perhaps not even the technologists recognize the extent to which this is so – is that postmodern culture, in all of its dehistoricized emptiness, has prepared the public for immersion in the open database. In fact, I would dare to say, it has perhaps prepared them too well. As with the masses in the Bastille or the Winter Palace, the entry of the public into the databases may have irrevocable consequences.<sup>23</sup>

### III. The Politics of the New Republic

Let us say that the public had no access to the databases. For the sake of argument, let us divorce the history of technology from the history of culture. In postmodern culture, I think, the public would still hold explosive possibilities with regard to engaging the database. The singular data-cized piece of information, notes Lyotard, is essentially what we work with in the domain of culture as it is. The quotation out of context surrounds us everywhere we look. Let us consider, for example, the Georges Pompidou Center in Paris, which is France's National Museum of Modern Art [see attached illustration]. The "inside" of the building is brought to the outside; apparent supporting structural elements are placed external to the main frame of the building, rather than internally, as we would expect. We thus get an interesting effect. The totality of the building is real enough, but it is taken apart for us visually and thus to some extent experientially. The architectural elements of the building themselves become self-referential quotations. Again, we are drawn back to the accuracy of Lyotard's observation that eclecticism is the ground zero of contemporary general culture. It is, in fact. Regarding postmodern architecture, Robert Venturi, in one of the seminal texts on that terrain, points to Las Vegas in the United States as the ultimate space of the postmodern because of its use of the quotation. (In fact, suggests Venturi, there is no Las Vegas as Las Vegas is simply amalgamated quotations of the world around it – the "ugly" tastes of the common man.)<sup>24</sup> He seems to be right. How many of us, as Lyotard observed, *will* eat McDonald's for lunch and local cuisine for dinner? And this does not even take into account that McDonald's, generic as it has come to be, has come to be generic precisely because it is so much of an appetizing (or perhaps somewhat less-than-appetizing) quotation of a particular culture. The fact out of context, Lyotard tells us, is the terrain of the new knowledge. It is, at least according to its own standards, the triumph of the scientific ideal. No story necessary – no legends, no heros, no

<sup>23</sup> Any historians looking at this article will, of course, know that the Eisenstein-esque scenes we hold about the Russian and French Revolutions, at least with regard to the Bastille and the Winter Palace, are not true. Their metaphorical power – and this could well be deconstructed along Lyotardian lines as well – as great moments in the history of popular revolution still holds, though.

<sup>24</sup> See Robert Venturi, et. al., *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1972).

destinies, no nations. In postmodern culture, we are fully internationalized, ready to incorporate all with a blasé turn of the head and tweak of a fashion. We are ready for the free access to the storehouses of out-of-context knowledge that Lyotard asked for twenty-two years ago.

However, this only accounts for how it is that the public would be able to take itself over the database threshold and continue to exist once inside. It does not explain what would happen once so many millions – indeed, billions – had the automatic, facile access to all information that Lyotard suggests would make language games, or the communicative interplay in which he (via Wittgenstein) suggests that we are all engaged, “games of perfect information at all times.”<sup>25</sup> Simply put, the change would be permanent. This is what makes Lyotard's proposal revolutionary. There would be no basis for the continuing exclusivity of information, and no hierchicalization of social rank based upon it. Automatic facile access to all information by all individuals means that any move to appropriate or restrict within the information domain is immediately detectable and immediately counteractable. It is not, we should say, counteractable to the extent of the exclusion of the perpetrator. That depends on that group or individual no longer being considered part of the public, which is a matter for another time and place – specifically, for lawyers and judges (although we do have to consider the possibilities and meaning of popular justice here). It does mean, however, in relation to the information commodity, a leveling of living standards. It would be the realization of a vision of a new International.

The possibility of this happening, however, hangs on two factors. The first is whether or not Lyotard's recommendation is heeded. There are several levels to this problem as well. First, we need to deal with those who say that this is already the case, or at least it is well on its way to becoming the case. That is to say that there are those among us who would argue that information is free and open and no one excluded. This is not so. Such things are more than a matter of producing enough PCs, or even getting institutions such as the World Bank to commit enough funds or the United Nations to commit an institutional and political framework. There needs to be a global culture that tends irrevocably toward the equality of nation with nation, people with people, culture with culture and, ultimately, individual with individual. The state of global culture continues to involve occupation, colonization and decimation. Thus, information on the scale and in the modes that we – and Lyotard – are talking about is meaningless to many, and a degrading discussion to have in the presence of those whose needs are more pressing and basic. This is a failing in Lyotard's report. He is, to return to a point that we made earlier, discussing the state of knowledge in “the most advanced societies.” Yet, on the terms of the commodification of knowledge that he proposes, the opening of memory and the data banks can only happen in a global context or not at all.

Therein, we are left with two other possibilities. Either his recommendation is heeded by decree (from above, by politicians), or made reality by force (from below, by the public). As to the first possibility, Lyotard gives us few reasons to be optimistic, and I tend to agree with him. To restate a quotation of Lyotard's we referred to earlier in the paper, “knowledge is purchased not to find truth, but to augment power.” This is a relatively typical postmodern proposition, especially in the wake of Foucault. However, one of the reasons for Foucault's lasting importance, or at least relevance to our times – as well as Lyotard's overture to him in this case – is precisely because of the fact that much of what he says rings true. To put it in Lyotard's terms, those left without buying power, which, if we think in relative terms, is still most of us,

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<sup>25</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 67.

will have little leverage by which to effect structural change in a system in which the effectuality of the ballot box is limited precisely because of the power-knowledge systematic. That is to say that it is tough to break through the firewall put up between the public and power by money, media and “factual” information mobilized to support political opinions. In the capitalist world, there is little to be gained by opening the floodgates of knowledge, except when it helps in the production and sale of the knowledge product. Of course, the IT worker needs to be facile with the PC, the Internet, and other forms of media. It is preferable that they are literate, in the sense of well read, as well. This does not necessarily hold true for laborers. In modern times, the narrative of the laborer’s emancipation was at least written, even if we knew that the writing was false. In postmodern times, because we have gotten rid of grand narrative at any rate, the narrative of the worker’s emancipation is his or hers to write alone.

This means, then, that we are left with only one possibility in terms of affecting an entry into the Winter Palace of knowledge. This is the public taking matters into its own hands. The problem, however, is conceiving of why they would do such a thing. A full-on engagement with knowledge in its digitized form – an engagement to the extent where we can say that our language games are “games of perfect information at all times” – hardly seems necessary. The conditions that Marx and Engels observed in relation to the English proletariat in the mid nineteenth century hardly exist anymore. Class consciousness driven by the hardships of material production has been reduced as the increased mechanization and technologization that led us to our current point in the history of knowledge has had certain of its desired effects. As a historian, I might note that this is one of the great historical tensions of the modern period – the fact that since the industrial revolution (again, wherever in Western chronology one wants to place it), living standards have increased for all, although the gap between rich and poor has grown increasingly large.<sup>26</sup> This is perhaps less noticeable in the Scandinavian countries (from where I am writing) where high tax rates have reduced the gap between the richest and the poorest over the past half-century. However, if we expand our view of the West to include France, Great Britain, Germany and the United States, or indeed all of the G8 countries, the situation becomes drastically different. Disparities of wealth and living standards are extremely high – especially in the United States. This contrasts with the reality that for many – although hardly all – the demands of physical labor have been reduced and the recompense for engagement in it in the first place has been improved. It can be difficult to explain to someone whose conditions are improving how it is that power and freedom are slipping further and further from their grasp.

I would also add that this situation is exacerbated by the fact that there has been an allowance of the working classes into the domain of computerization – precisely the trend that leads some to say that the revolution (or evolution, depending on how one looks at it) is under way. We are allowed to participate in what Jean Baudrillard, Lyotard’s contemporary, calls “the ecstasy of communication.” This is more or less the jazzed-up feeling we get when we find our television program, answer our telephone, open our e-mail or find the right web-site. The quantities of information available to us at the speed at which they are available – if only a drop in the bucket of what is out there – are nonetheless unprecedented. More and more of us devote our time taking them in and communicating our knowledge of them and of ourselves electronically. Class-consciousness is difficult to form when one is not working shoulder to shoulder with another worker, or discussing one’s experiences at the tavern at the end of the day.

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<sup>26</sup> This is a point that the classic historian Eric Hobsbawm brings out well in his *The Age of Capital* (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1975).

The public is being atomized. It is difficult to demand entry into the palace if you cannot all gather in front of its gates to do so.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, we can note that the same culture that would prepare us for our full entry into the memory and data banks also reduces our possibilities for organization. The British historian E.P. Thompson has theorized that central to class-consciousness is not only productive activity, but also customs in common.<sup>28</sup> That is to say that there needs to be a central culture and sets of social routines and traditions. If Lyotard is right about postmodern society – and I think that he very much is – it is the lack of such things that is its defining element. Therein, we become atomized even further – to the extent where a false nostalgizing of revolutionary moments themselves (especially those of the ‘60s and ‘70s) becomes part of the pastiche that we label our “culture.”

Who, then, would realize Lyotard’s “outline for a politics that would both respect the desire for justice and the desire for the unknown?”<sup>29</sup> That is to say that if it is not to be the politicians, and not the public itself, who might do such a thing? Here we might contradict Lyotard again, because we must think about the artist and the avant-garde. As Lyotard conceives of it, the entirety of postmodern culture is on the cusp of philosophy. In fact, though he inveighs against Habermas, it is Habermas’ vision of society minus the consensus element that Lyotard maintains.<sup>30</sup> This a perfectly contemporary, perfectly educated, perfectly communicating society where the hierchicalization of power is diminished if not eradicated. However, atomized under the auspices of the knowledge product and the ecstasy of communication, the possibilities of reaching this moment – as opposed to the question of whether or not we have the tools to operate within it were we to reach it – are slim. We may well, and I happen to think we do, all have the potential for philosophy. However, our culture is far from it. Here we might wish that Lyotard’s *rappor*t was less *rappor*t and more partisan than it is. The transition beyond power structures and into the domain of truly unrestricted communication seems unlikely to happen automatically. Artists, philosophers and avant-gardists must not disappear into our midst. When we can, we must give them extra-broad spaces for operation. We must provide them with the greatest possible number of outlets for their voices.

In very simple terms, this means a special place for universities and other institutions of learning in the coming years. They are conduits that the public can access, which have wide but not exclusive involvement with memory and data banks and, because of the need to validate the objective knowledge of technology, they have power (though not nearly as much of it as we wish we had). Politics needs the university to say that its claims are true. This puts a specific onus on the left-wing intellectual. Lyotard, like Foucault, devotes some time and space to decrying the sense of privilege held by this figure in our world. They should not think of themselves as the standard-bearer of truth, they claim, nor imagine themselves to function outside of the domains of power in which we all must operate. This is certainly true. However, the problem, I think, is not diminishing their status, but rather making them realize the level at which they participate in the struggle for democratization. As Walter Benjamin suggested in “The Author as Producer,” it is a matter of realizing that their lot lies with the working class. This is not because the institution of the university will not be sustained without public support

<sup>27</sup> See Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), 126-34.

<sup>28</sup> See E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (New York: The New York Press, 1993).

<sup>29</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 67.

<sup>30</sup> This is well-described in Habermas’ *Legitimation Crisis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), 95-163.

– it still is, after all, a relatively elitist institution – but that “however revolutionary [the left wing intellectual] may seem, [they] have a counter-revolutionary function as long as the [intellectual] feels his solidarity with the proletariat only in his attitudes, but not as a producer.”<sup>31</sup> The production of the intellectual must be open, and must facilitate openness both in the space of his or her own work as well as in relation to society in general. The left wing intellectual must attempt to utilize all leverage that the university has within the power-knowledge systematic to the end of opening that systematic to the public and eventually eradicating its power component.

Of course, this is the stuff of grand narrative, *grand récit*, *grand histoire* or however one prefers to phrase it. Yet, herein lies the secret to both *The Postmodern Condition* and Lyotard’s private thoughts in *The Postmodern Explained*: it is grand narrative that he wants to recover. The invocation of the possibility of language games functioning as “games of perfect information at any given moment” immediately dismisses what he himself denotes as the central element of their functioning – their imperfection. “To speak is to fight,” says Lyotard, and fighting has very little to do with perfect transference.<sup>32</sup> Lyotard and an unabashed modernist like Habermas, then, have very little quarrel. They would both participate in the metanarrative that Lyotard describes in “Tickets to a New Stage” where he outlines the evolution of modern society and ideology: “the thought and action of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are ruled by the idea of the emancipation of humanity...”

It is still possible to believe Lyotard when he says at the end of “What is the Postmodern?” – which is where I think he gives his clearest and most meaningful description of the concept – that he wants to “activate the differences and save the honor of the name.” These ideas are embedded in the metanarrative of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – in the metanarrative of modernity. They are present even in Marx. In essence, they amount to the emancipation of the individual through socially guaranteed freedom. But here we come up against the scope of this dream and its relevance to the concept of the postmodern. Realizing this dream is a never-ending process and may only be done internationally. Viewed on this scale, the differences are already activated, and will be for a long time to come. The question is to what extent power accompanies difference and to what extent we facilitate its seizure by the powerless to the end of wielding it against those who would eradicate them in the name of sameness and nihilism. We have heard talk of permanent revolution before, and seen its dangers. But the danger in Lyotard's return to grand narrative is greater. The modern assertion is that transformation happens within a limited horizon. Realized in its best form, the postmodern would reject that assertion and leave us exposed only to the horizon of the infinite – the sun that never sets, the struggle that never stops.

#### IV. Conclusion

There are several gains to be had from addressing Lyotard in the overview/critical manner that we have here. The first is a reengagement with the text of *The Postmodern Condition* itself. It is a vastly important text, intended to be or not. The ‘70s generation of Ph.D.s that took university positions in the 1980s had it with them as they entered their posts. The new generation should as well. This is especially so because the new generation is the twenty-first

<sup>31</sup> Benjamin, “The Author as Producer,” in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebardt (New York: Continuum, 1997), 260.

<sup>32</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 10.

century generation, and it is in their milieu that Lyotard's predictions and analyses may *really* becoming reality.

However, they should not take to Lyotard uncritically, and those who know *The Postmodern Condition* well should not forget to engage it actively. If the new generation – out of the reality of their world in cultural, technological and philosophical terms – might establish a closer relationship with Lyotard than did the previous wave of students and faculty, we become further challenged politically to investigate the triangulation of *rapport*, postmodernism and knowledge that he proposes. This is a triangulation that unquestionably expands on old modes of knowing. For one, it acknowledges that we may know outside of narrative. It also reveals the tensions within the idea of narrative, and even gives us the bases to criticize the idea that we can live in the absence of narrative in the sense that Lyotard shows us how “incredulity toward metanarrative” demands certain narratives itself. Yet, this is a pitfall Lyotard himself falls into. He who would reveal the irony of this situation is more than a minor believer in its basic principles. *This* irony does not mean much except at literary and philosophic levels as long as we stay at the level of theory. However, Lyotard, by hook or by crook, is involved in a variety of activism, wrapped within *rapport* though it may be. Indeed, so are we all, occupying – again, by hook or by crook – spaces within the processes of legitimation. We need, then, to resist all tendencies within those systems that would lead to deactivism and the deadening of the possibility of resistance. Thus, while Lyotard limits the possibilities of his own discourse, we can, through understanding his texts, come to open them again.

## Images



**Fig. 1** Warhol's Campbell Soup Can



**Fig. 2** The Georges Pompidou Center, Paris

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