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LYOTARD'S LIBIDINAL MODERNISM

Abstract: The article discusses Jean-François Lyotard's conception of modernist-postmodernist shift and its dynamics in the light of Lyotard's studies concerning the energetic, libidinal potential of art and artistic structure (or apparatus, *dispositive*). According to Lyotard, the postmodern would constitute a continuous "quasi-analytical" process of exploration of the elements "repressed" by the modernist project in a struggle to gain freedom from the mechanism of repetition. Only in such context will we be able to draw some serious artistic consequences from his analysis of the cultural and philosophical changes. The second part of the article focuses on Lyotard's book *The Assassination of Experience by Painting, Monory* devoted to the French hyperrealist painter Jacques Monory with whom Lyotard collaborated in the late 1970s. The book was described by Lyotard as the "contribution of the paintings of Jacques Monory to the understanding of the libidinal set-up, and vice versa".

Keywords: Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Monory, modernism, postmodernism, libidinal apparatus, hyperrealism.

With the publication in 1979 of his famous "report" on the *Postmodern condition*, Jean-François Lyotard was hailed by some cultural critics as "the Pope of postmodernism" and by some of the less sophisticated critics as the main proponent of the "anti-modernist" movement. It is important to remember that neither Lyotard's definition of postmodernism, nor his attitude towards modernism and postmodernism allow us to easily put him in the "postmodernist", i.e. notoriously "nihilist", frame. Lyotard's statement that what we could call "postmodern" is an "incredulity toward metanarratives"¹ should be supplemented

¹ „Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives” J.-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, transl. G. Bennington. B. Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1984, p. XXIV.

with the definition proposed in another, less often quoted essay “Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?” from 1982. We can read there that “A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant”.² The first thesis stresses the scepticism towards the “transcendental illusion” of totalization³, of any kind of unity that would reconcile various language games, forms of life. One must remember that Lyotard does not write about “the fall of metanarratives” as it is sometimes misquoted. In fact he writes about the “ethical” attitude towards the scientific, political, and social, projects that are grounded in the all-embracing vision of any kind of “oneness”. He points out that “The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and the communicable experience”.⁴ For Lyotard to rebel against totality (and this is the Frankfurt trace in his thought, although not an obvious one) is to look for the new rules, but if one goes on a search for new principles, one has to be aware that such quest is “blind” – i.e. based on experimentation rather than implementation of something that has already been established. “The artist and the writer” – Lyotard continues – “are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*”.⁵ To follow the rules, to believe in an achievement of any positive project is to be modern. To look for the rules, to rebel against any established order, to experiment and to confront oneself with what is “unpresentable” in the material singularity of the “event” is to be postmodern. That is why for Lyotard any true artist, any true philosopher who wants to touch the “unknown”, that is something genuinely new, in his/her art or thought first has to become post-modern (has to be disappointed with what s/he comes across) to become “modern”: “*Post modern* would have to be understood according to the paradox of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*)”⁶. Lyotard’s definition is definitely affirmative, and not negative. In “Rewriting Modernity”, he introduces the important Freudian concept of *Durcharbitung* (“working through”)⁸. As Laplanche and Pontalis explain, “working through”

² J.-F. Lyotard, “Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?”, transl. I. Hassan, in: *The Lyotard Reader* ed. K. Crome, J. Williams, Columbia University Press, New York 2006, p. 130.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 132.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ See R. Rorty, *Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity*, „Praxis International”, vol. 4, no. 1, 1984.

⁸ J.-F. Lyotard, *Rewriting Modernity in: Inhuman. Reflections on Time*, transl. G. Bennington, R. Bowlby, Stanford University Press, Stanford California, 1988, p. 29.

is the “process by means of which analysis implants an interpretation and overcomes the resistances to which it has given rise. Working-through is taken to be a sort of psychological work which allows the subject to accept certain repressed elements and to free himself from the grip of mechanisms of repetition”⁹. Analogously, the postmodern would constitute the continuous “quasi-analytical” process of exploration of the elements “repressed” by the modernist project in a struggle to gain freedom from the mechanism of repetition, of what has already been. As Lyotard puts it:

If we understand 'rewriting modernity' in this way, like seeking out, designating and naming the hidden facts that one imagines to be the source of the ills that ail one, i.e. as a simple process of remembering, one cannot fail to perpetuate the crime, and perpetrate it anew instead of putting an end to it. Far from really rewriting it, supposing that to be possible, all one is doing is writing again, and making real, modernity itself. The point being that writing it is always rewriting it. Modernity is written, inscribes itself on itself, in a perpetual rewriting¹⁰.

It is worth noting that for the “pre-postmodernist” Lyotard, i.e. for Lyotard as the author of the two important books written in the 1970s: *Discourse, figure* (1971) and *Économie libidinale* (1974) one of the main announcements of theoretical and practical changes that showed up together with the acceptance of “certain repressed elements” was May 1968 in France. The revolt of 1968 was described by Lyotard as

a grand political narrative of emancipation. It was modern. [...] under its other guise, it escaped the grand narratives; it took life from another condition, one that we could call postmodern. To students, artists, writers, and scholars, developed capitalism commanded: be intelligent, be clever, your ideas are my future commodity. Prescription that the concerned parties ignored: devoting their care to the imagination rather than to the market, they urged themselves to experiment without limits¹¹.

This is important to stress because very often Lyotard’s diagnosis is treated as purely negative – as the rejection of any “positive” (implicitly modernist) values. What I would like to touch upon is the less described “energetic supply

⁹ J. Laplanche, J.B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, transl. D. Nicholson Smith, The Hogarth Press, London 1973, p. 488.

¹⁰ J.-F. Lyotard, *Rewriting Modernity*, op.cit., p. 26.

¹¹ J.-F. Lyotard *Des dispositifs pullionnels*, Galilée, 1994, p. 9.

base”, so to speak, of the modernist – postmodernist dialectics. I would like to link Lyotard’s reflection upon the dynamics of the modernist – postmodernist shift with his studies concerning the energetic, libidinal potential of art and artistic structure (or apparatus, *dispositive*). Only then, I believe, will we be able to draw some serious artistic consequences from his analysis of the cultural and philosophical changes. I am going to focus on Lyotard’s book about the French hyperrealist painter Jacques Monory with whom Lyotard collaborated in the late 1970s. The book, *The Assassination of Experience by Painting, Monory* was described by Lyotard as the “contribution of the paintings of Jacques Monory to the understanding of the libidinal set-up, and vice versa”¹².

But what exactly is this “libidinal energy”? *Libidinal Economy* opens with the strange “Joycean” sentence (I quote only the beginning):

Open the so called body and spread out all its surfaces: not only the skin with each of its folds, wrinkles, scars, with its great velvety planes, and contiguous to that, the scalp and its mane of hair, the tender pubic fur, nipples, nails, hard transparent skin under the heel, the light frills of the eyelids, set with lashes...¹³

Thus transformed body is turned into a strip which, if one would connect and twist its two ends, would resemble the Moebius band¹⁴. This is the place where desire (*désir, Wunsch*), i.e. pure energy incessantly circulates. Lyotard calls it the “Zero point” – one cannot go any further. When you touch the surface, when any kind of stimulus appears, the desire stops circulating, freezes and takes shape. It becomes something specified. It starts re-presenting something else: “Far from taking the great Zero as the ontological motif, imposed on desire, forever deferring, re-presenting and simulating everything in an endless postponement, we, libidinal economists, affirm that this zero is itself a figure...”¹⁵. Lyotard uses this figure as heuristic fiction in order to show how pulsional, instinctual (Freud’s *Trieb*) energy constitutes and supports the life of the living organisms. Such a hypothesis is rooted in Freud’s distinction of “primary” and “secondary” processes. The “primary process” (*Primärvorgang*) is a process

¹² J.-F. Lyotard, *Figurations*, 1973, p. 154, cited in: H. Parret, *Preface* in: J.F. Lyotard, *L’assassinat de l’expérience par la peinture, Monory / The Assassination of Experience by Painting, Monory*, bilingual edition, English translation R. Bowlby, J. Bouniort, P. W. Milne, Leuven University Press, Leuven 2013, p. 30.

¹³ J.-F. Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, transl. I. Hamilton Grant, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indiana, 1993, p. 1.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

where “psychical energy flows freely, passing unhindered, by means of the mechanisms of condensation and displacement, from one idea to another and tending to completely recathect the ideas attached to those satisfying experiences which are at the root of unconscious wishes (primitive hallucination)”¹⁶. In the „secondary process”, free energy is bound, “cathected” to some representation, it flows in a controlled manner. For Lyotard, art and artistic creation originate from the “primary process”, and this pulsional origin determines art’s ability to destabilize any given order, to experiment and to search for the radically new.

By introducing desire into the question of painting we in fact have recourse to a libidinal economy. And, by virtue of this fact, we also immediately have recourse to a political economy, because it is wholly impossible to take up one without taking up the other, wholly impossible to attempt to articulate one without articulating its connection with the other. It is necessary to think of desire as an energy that works (...). The important thing is energy insofar as it is metamorphic, metamorphosing and metamorphosed. (...) energy both as order and disorder, as Eros and death drive, and both always together¹⁷.

For Lyotard works of art can be treated as pulsional, or libidinal apparatuses (*dispositifs pulsionnels*), that is, as a means or systems that allow one to canalise, transform and transfer libidinal energy. That is why they have economic and political importance. Contrary to the established and petrified “dead” forms of exchange they can provoke radically new order, they possess the ability to introduce novelty. This is the affirmative side of any true work of art.

Modern ‘painting’ and ‘music’ are exemplary because they actively decompose and dissolve set-ups (*des dispositifs*) that govern individual regions (regimes, rules), including the region of ‘painting’ etc., showing the retroactively (*après coup*) as figures, arrangements. [...] The number of apparatuses is immense! The apparatus (*le dispositif*) is the system of connections that canalizes and regulates emerging and expenditure of energy *in all of the regions*¹⁸.

According to such view, art, especially the painting is the one of many forms of discharging primal instinctual forces in order to release the tension. Contrary to other spheres, modern, that is, contemporary, art can also show the

¹⁶ J. Laplanche, J.B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, op.cit., p. 339.

¹⁷ J.-F. Lyotard, *Painting as a Libidinal Set-up*, in: *The Lyotard Reader*, op.cit., p. 304.

¹⁸ J.-F. Lyotard, *Sur une figure de discours*, in: *Des dispositifs pulsionnels*, Galilée, Paris 1994, p. 120.

very existence of those mechanisms and by attracting our attention can show us their conventional rules. This enables a radical change. One can become aware that in reality there are no pre-established, “objective” and unchangeable rules. The belief that there are such rules and divisions is a metaphysical premise. In reality there are neither divisions, nor oppositions between inside and outside, between figure and discourse, between *logos* and *mythos*. What is given is only the constant flux of energy, the “primary process”, and what comes as the second, that is, what is stable, because it stands for something else according to certain symbolic system, what re-presents follows from such undifferentiated energy. Such critical consciousness can save our culture from illusions of the metaphysical thinking. As Geoffrey Bennington remarked:

It would be a gross mistake to assume that because Lyotard is engaged in questioning unities and totalities, he is necessarily promoting some form of individualism. If it is true that totality is negatively marked term in his thought, the corresponding positive term is, rather, singularity. A singularity is not so much an individual, as an event...¹⁹

For Lyotard the ephemeral, eventual, passing desire is not a dark, Dionysian force that wants to destroy the rational order. It rather has a critical function. By looking at its artistic manifestations we can learn that any kind of community is relative and the rules that govern social and political life can be changed. By observing the artistic, aesthetic *différend*, we learn to act and to think differently. The analysis of the mechanisms of desire in artistic creation and artistic apparatuses is not regressive, it does not lead to the chthonic world of Thanatos, but rather has a critical function. It manifests the presence of affirmative, creative ever-changing forces that can be used to build a completely new order again and again and again.

But what about the art of Jacques Monory? Lyotard met one of the leaders of the French Narrative Figuration movement around 1972, as noted by Herman Parret²⁰. Both men shared the same experience: going abroad to the United States and confronting its open spaces and free market. Lyotard gave his testimony in 1974, when he wrote *Pacific Wall*, a book about his Californian experience, in which he claimed that “American presidents are emperors, Washington is Rome, the United States of America is Italy, and Europe is their

¹⁹ G. Bennington, *Lyotard. Writing the Event*, Columbia University Press, Manchester University Press, Columbia 1988, p. 9.

²⁰ H. Parret, *Preface in: J.F. Lyotard, L'assassinat de l'expérience par la peinture, Monory / The Assassination of Experience by Painting, Monory*, op.cit., p. 30.

Greece... Visiting professors on campus are mere Greek tutors: liberated slaves, clients proteges of Rome, sponsored with grants by American capital”²¹.

The book *The Assassination of Experience by Painting, Monory* consists of two essays: “Libidinal Economy of the Dandy” and “Sublime Aesthetic of the Contract Killer”. The first one, written in 1973 overlaps with the introduction Lyotard wrote to the French translation of Anton Ehrenzweig’s book on psychoanalytical aesthetics entitled *The Hidden Order of Art: A Study in the Psychology of Artistic Imagination*²². This is important because by referring to this text we can retrace the basic methodological traits of Lyotard’s analysis of Monory’s paintings.

Works of art: literary, painterly, musical and others are not signs and should not be treated as symbols. There is no such thing as the “language of art”. It is “methodological nihilism” to transform works of art into signs that stand for something else. Such an attitude is nihilistic because it treats the work of art as a vicarious object – it exists because something is missing, it should be penetrated in order to get something else, it is not independent but relies on a certain lack. For Lyotard, Ehrenzweig’s proposal of “applied psychoanalysis” is exceptional:

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, the function through their material and its organization. Their subject is nothing other than possible formal organization (...); and it conceals no content, no libidinal secret of the work, whose force lies entirely in its surface²³.

The aesthetic experience of works of art is pleasurable not because it allows us to experience what is missing (content, hidden meaning, original presence), but because the libidinal content – the works’ energy – lies in “the formal labour that produces them on the one hand and in the work of various kinds that they stimulate on the other (...) we are dealing with transformations of libidinal energy and devices governing these transformations”²⁴.

²¹ J.-F. Lyotard, *Pacific Wall*, transl. B. Boone, Lapis Press, Venice California, 1990.

²² A. Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art: A Study in the Psychology of Artistic Imagination*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1967.

²³ J.-F. Lyotard, *Beyond Representation*, in: J.-F. Lyotard, *Textes dispersés I: esthétique et théorie de l’art. / Miscellaneous Texts: Aesthetics and Theory of Art.*, transl. V. Ionescu, E. Harris, P.W. Milne, Leuven University Press, Leuven 2012, p. 123 - 125.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 127.

Also the capitalist American society that becomes the main object of Monory's large-scale, blue monochromatic paintings, painted from photographs, is a form of stabilized energy: "The desire which forms and sustains institutions is maintained by investments of energy in the body, language, the earth, cities, sexual and generational differences etc. Capitalism is one of these investments"²⁵. Hyper-realist painters do not seek the unity of experience, they do not try to grasp "the origins", "being", something that lies outside the world of the exchange of goods. There is no nature, but only commodity, and many artists "are producing works which are affirmative and not critical"²⁶. The hyper-realist strategy is not to oppose the commodified society's "critical", i.e. utopian or transcendent order or origin. Rather it grasps and firmly holds in an affirmative kind of way "the brave new world", it seeks something not "outside" the given order, but "inside" it:

(...) from now on it will be said – argues Lyotard – that it is not a question of nature, of a thing over there, but only of an object, whatever it may be (...) which is nothing if not re-presented, which therefore has no presence but which is never given here, on this canvas, if not in a second turn, so to speak, one already there not in the sense of an anteriority-exteriority but, on the contrary, in the sense of a given always already known at the moment it is given...²⁷.

What makes such a diagnosis different from the one proposed for example by such critical postmodernist theoreticians as Jean Baudrillard²⁸ is that Lyotard does not reject the "simulacral" in the name of the lost reality. His approach is "affirmative", which means that he tries to show that one can find means within a given order to experiment. In the case of hyper-realism, as Lyotard writes, "If this painting has any force, it is due to the fact that is simply affirmative, repetitive and, because of this repetition, intensive. By painting photos, but powerful ones, hyperrealism shows how desire organizes itself in the process of production..."²⁹. Hyper-realist practice can be treated then as the postmodernist counterpart to the modernist artistic process, for example that of Merleau-Ponty's Cézanne. On the other hand, since it puts stress on the manifestation of the organization of libidinal forces within the capitalist

²⁵ J.-F. Lyotard, *Derivé à partir de Marx et Freud*, Union Générale des Editions 10/18, Paris 1973, p. 16.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

²⁷ J.-F. Lyotard, *Sketch of an Economy of Hyperrealism*, J.-F. Lyotard, *Textes dispersés I: esthétique et théorie de l'art. / Miscellaneous Texts: Aesthetics and Theory of Art*, op.cit., pp. 103-105.

²⁸ J. Baudrillard, *America*, transl. Ch. Turner, Verso, London, New York 1989.

²⁹ J.-F. Lyotard, *Sketch of an Economy of Hyperrealism*, op.cit., p. 115.

society, it can be treated as the symptom of “libidinal modernism”, that is as the modernism at the nascent postmodernism from its libidinal origins. As pointed out by Bill Readings, “The understanding of postmodernity in terms of the event that Lyotard’s (...) writings propose is radically different from the thought of the postmodern as that of the contemporary historical moment. The figural force of the event disrupts the possibility of thinking of history as a succession of moments”³⁰. Metamorphic libidinal forces in their ever changing flux do not allow for the formation of any linear order. By transforming himself into the mechanism of reproduction (a hyper-realist artist only represents what he has already seen through the lens of his camera that was pointed at the objects that had also already been seen by everyone everywhere) Monory manages to “return” – if this is a right word – to the libidinal forces that oscillate on the surface of any institution, any object.

That the techno-scientific capitalist world should be faithfully reproduced as an illustration, but with the paint-brush, is enough to establish the divide that is necessary to make visible what is not seen in illustrations, the quantitative infinite of knowledge and powers which has eaten away experiences and made us into survivors or experimenters³¹.

Hence his art is both modern, since it seeks the origin, although sceptically (Sarah Wilson calls him “postmodern romantic”³²), and postmodern, since what it discovers is eventual, ephemeral, metamorphic like the present and the libido.

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³⁰ B. Readings, *Introducing Lyotard. Art And Politics*, Routledge, London 2006, p. 41.

³¹ J.-F. Lyotard, *L'assassinat de l'expérience par la peinture, Monory / The Assassination of Experience by Painting, Monory*, p. 193.

³² S. Wilson, *The Visual World of French Theory*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2010, p. 156.

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MODERNIZM LIBIDINALNY LYOTARDA (streszczenie)

W artykule została przedstawiona koncepcja autorstwa Jean-François Lyotarda dotycząca przełomu modernistyczno-postmodernistycznego w kontekście studiów Lyotarda nad energetycznym, libidinalnym potencjałem sztuki i struktury artystycznej (bądź artystycznego urządzenia, *dispositive*). Wedle Lyotarda, postmodernizm wytwarza ciągły "quasi-analityczny" proces umożliwiający badanie elementów "zreprejonowanych" przez projekt modernistyczny w celu wyzwolenia się od mechanizmów powtórzenia. Jedynie w takim kontekście uda się wywieść poważne artystyczne konsekwencje z analizy zmian kulturowych przedstawionych przez filozofa. W drugiej części artykułu skupiam się na książce Lyotarda poświęconej francuskiemu hiperrealistycznemu malarzowi Jacques'owi Monory, z którym współpracował w latach 1970-tych. Lyotard w książce *The Assassination of Experience by Painting, Monory* opisał "wkład dzieł malarskich Jacques'a Monory w rozumienie urządzeń libidinalnych i vice versa".

Słowa kluczowe: Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Monory, modernizm, postmodernizm, urządzenie libidinalne, hiperrealizm.