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Lyotard's Missing Face

Review: Piotr Schollenberger,
Jednostkowość i wydarzenie. Studia z estetyki Lyotarda,
(Warszawa: Semper, 2019), 283 pages.

Piotr Schollenberger's book entitled *Jednostkowość i wydarzenie. Studia z estetyki Lyotarda* (*Singularity and the Event. Studies in Lyotard's Aesthetics*) is a thorough and extensive – nearly 300-page – philosophical analysis of a number of topics selected from the vast, polyphonic and complex body of Jean-François Lyotard's philosophy. It ought to be noted that Schollenberger does not focus his analysis on themes that prevail in the existing interpretations of the philosophy of Lyotard. The latter remains most widely known as the author of *The Postmodern Condition* and *The Differend*; his interpretations of the Kantian category of the sublime have also been studied, albeit rather superficially.

Let us begin by recalling three main themes of Lyotard's philosophy of art, which is the leitmotif of Schollenberger's book. These themes overlap and intertwine, and any attempt at establishment clear and absolute boundaries between them is bound to fail. First of all, there is a psychoanalytical thread – or Lyotard's fascination, although not entirely uncritical – with some of the concepts of Freudian psychoanalysis. The second theme is related to the interpretation of Kant's *Critique of Judgement* and to the analysis of the sublime. The third domain is the sensual materiality of art and the category of the Thing. This diversity reveals Lyotard's extraordinary ability to evolve and to maintain a critical distance with respect to his own ideas, aptly demon-

strated by the widely accepted division of Lyotard's philosophical path into five periods proposed by Jean-Michel Salanskis.¹ Let us briefly recall these here.

"The first" is Lyotard as, on the one hand, the author of the *Phenomenology* (1954) – a clear introduction into the meanderings of Husserl's philosophy and, on the other hand, a left-wing theorist and activist, actively involved in the Socialisme ou Barbarie group and in the fight for the liberation of Algeria. "The second" is as the author of *Discourse, Figure* (1971) and a participant of May 1968 in Paris, while "the third" is as the author of *Libidinal Economy* (1974), a trenchant critique of capitalism and an affirmation of ubiquitous desire and of revolution. "The fourth" is Lyotard as an attentive reader and interpreter of Kant; he undertakes Kantian studies around 1980, in preparation for the publication of *The Differend* (1983). Around 1990, "the fifth" is Lyotard as he emerges, philosophizing on "childhood," the melancholy of *il y a*, "the thought that becomes writing," and who leaves an unfinished, poetic text on St. Augustine. These divisions undoubtedly coincide with the periodization of texts on art but, *nolens volens*, they also blur the boundaries between them and mask the continuity of certain threads and their duration. After all, as Lyotard himself concludes in *What to paint?*,² periodization, subtle as it may be, is rarely of any use.

That is why Schollenberger presented Lyotard's philosophy in the context of Kant and Freud – two thinkers of the greatest importance for Lyotard. If only for this reason, Schollenberger's work is unique and invaluable, as it fills in a conspicuous gap, not only among studies on Lyotard published in Poland. For Kant and Freud are undoubtedly of key importance for reading and interpreting the philosophy of the author of *The Differend*. In his excellent analysis, Schollenberger shows art as the nerve of Lyotard's thought, while intertwining in an original way aesthetical analyses with political considerations, thus allowing the reader to look at Lyotard from a broader perspective and demonstrating his role in twentieth century philosophy.

Schollenberger begins by introducing the reader to the meaning of immanence and transcendence, transforming Giorgio Agamben's concept of their relationship, and resorting to it in order to outline his own interpretation of transcendence as understood by Lyotard. The author suggests that the main question to ask is whether, contrary to Deleuze's argument, it is possible to identify transcendence, which, while not being extra-worldly, remains filled with feeling and sensibility, a projection of consciousness that produces transcendence while remaining immersed in the field of immanence.

The author goes on to describe the meaning of a work of art as defined by Lyotard through the prism of some of his writings that are rarely analysed today, for example *Libidinal Economy* or *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud*. Art is here a crucial moment of circulation and intensification of desire, which encompasses reality in its entirety. This phase of Lyotard's philosophical creativity is often referred to as the univocity of desire. Schollenberger skilfully and expertly analyses these quite enigmatic (and certainly ambiguous, as evidenced by the variety of interpretations of Lyotard's writings) statements, referring to Freudian concepts and placing them in the context of conceptual tools developed by Freud, which greatly facilitates the understanding of Lyotard's thoughts.

Another important point of reference for Schollenberger is Lyotard's first book, *Discourse, Figure*. Schollenberger explores the concepts of the figural and of the figure, both of the essence for Lyotard's philosophy and succeeds in showing just how complex and elaborate this concept is. For it encompasses both the figural and of the figure – two orders that are not separated from each other, but rather mingled and interdependent. An interesting move is to include an analysis of Lyotard's writings on Jacques Monory and his painting, which

1) Jean-Michel Salanskis, "Preface. La philosophie de la possession," in *Lyotard à Nanterre*, ed. by Claire Pages, (Paris: Klincksieck, 2010), 18. This periodization is most clearly expounded in: Jean-Michel Salanskis', *Itinerarium Jeana-Francoisa Lyotarda*, trans. Monika Murawska (Warszawa: Semper, 2018).

2) Jean-François Lyotard, *Que peindre? Adami, Arakawa, Buren*, (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1987), 56.

is, as argued and demonstrated by the author, if not the assassination of experience itself, at least its entirely new conceptualization.

Another matter raised by the author is the experimental as determinant for postmodern art. In this respect, an important point of reference is Stanley Cavell and his book *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*. It seems particularly interesting given that Cavell, just as Lyotard, is regarded as a thinker combining analytic and continental philosophy. This section of Schollenberger's book also contains interesting and insightful analyses of Lyotard's texts on photography and "acinema" – Lyotard's philosophy of film.

In the following sections, however, a sudden volte-face in the intricately constructed story about Lyotard appears. The author himself refers to it as "a gloss on Derrida." In this chapter, entitled *Egzorcyzmy, autoafekcja i subjectile* (*Exorcisms, auto-affection and subjectile*), the author demonstrates that Lyotard did not create in a vacuum. His considerations are closely linked to what formed the intellectual world of his time, and what is known today as the *French Thought*. Schollenberger examines the concept of auto-affection, of the essence for Lyotard, as well as the meaning of *subjectile*, which is understood as a base that marks a frontier, or erects a barrier separating the outside from the inside, and what is above (surface) from what is below (substrate); these considerations are in line with comments on Artaud.

The final section of the book contains a reflection on the sign of history, which interestingly complements the semiotic sign and the tensor sign, both examined in detail in the preceding chapters. Lyotard appears to be a thinker who draws a line between the question concerning the conditions of possibility for a reflection on history, and an aesthetic analysis that would not result in an aestheticization of history. The question of how an event in history appears to us also leads to an analysis of Lyotard's *Enthusiasm: The Kantian Critique of History*, adding an important Derridean context to the examination of the power of judgment in Kant's philosophy. It is a masterly analysis of Lyotard's rather unorthodox interpretation of Kant's philosophy. Kant's work is a starting point from which Lyotard develops his own diagnoses and follows his own paths, as convincingly shown, and even emphasized by Schollenberger.

In this section of the book, it becomes important to clearly distinguish between the sublime and enthusiasm or, in the author's words, "quasi-madness." Part of the discussion is also an original attempt at presenting – in opposition to Hannah Arendt's view – the concept of *sensus communis* as a community of feeling. For Lyotard, *sensus communis* becomes a herald of communicability, which springs from what is absolutely individual, that is from the subject born into the world under the influence of sensual excitement.

The book is summarized by a chapter on two categories, essential for this ample "dictionary" of Lyotard's philosophy: childhood and phrase-affect, which seamlessly usher us into the final phase of his philosophy – reigned by the untamed; it is a sphere that emphasizes our dispossession and a condition that reveals our lack of control over the world of which we form a part. The eponymous, extensively discussed category of event is precisely what makes possible the existence of singularity, which is constantly in the state of being born, the minimal subjectivity, referred to by Lyotard as *anima minima*. However, it is art that makes singularity possible. As he summarizes it:

Art opens us up to silence, confronts us with our own inability to speak, with what Lyotard will later refer to as "stridence," recalling a piercing sound that hurts our ears. In language, in art, in any form of communication, the presence of this untamed, purely sensual element to which we are exposed while remaining completely helpless, is the reason why we begin to speak, to develop, to create.³

3) Piotr Schollenberger, *Jednostkowość i wydarzenie. Studia z estetyki Lyotarda*, (Warszawa: Semper, 2019), 260.

Schollenberger skilfully and thoughtfully shows Lyotard as a polyphonic, yet consistent philosopher, who follows various paths, constantly experimenting with the linguistic forms and exploring various fields of philosophy, as he writes about language, justice, politics, art and reflecting on philosophy itself. Jean-Michel Salanskis refers to him as a philosopher of “dispossession” (*depossession*);⁴ after all, just as other philosophers of his generation, he explores mechanisms that limit the sovereignty of the subject, and thus deprive it of its own territory. In the case of Lyotard, these are mechanisms, are language and affects; within the domain that we may call “weak ontology,” it is the mysterious “Thing” that commands the gesture, that is the act of painting or writing. It is the body that performs this mad gesture. For it is truly mad: the footage presenting the work of Karel Appel, to whom Lyotard dedicated a book about gesture,⁵ proves how wild and spontaneous his action is. It seems that, instead of creating a painting, the artist tries to destroy it by throwing himself at the canvas with his entire body. The body which, perhaps, contrary to Schollenberger's interpretations, in Lyotard's late studies ceases to be merely a phantasm and the seat of the Freudian affect.⁶ For in his late works, Lyotard refers to *l'intraversable*, by which he means something that resists and disturbs our body – this concrete and sensory body, excited and exposed to the danger of annihilation. What threatens us appears to be simply the black abyss of death, which drills the body and deepens the experience, as a black transcendence reflecting what we are destined to by fate in our openness to the world. For fate intends for us to disappear in it. This is one side of the coin which, according to Lyotard, is related to sensation and that goes beyond our ability to decide on our actions. Art brings us closer to this abyss without, however, letting us sink into it: it keeps us in a state of vivid emotions that we share with others.⁷

It would be difficult to mention all of the numerous thoughtful, detailed, and bold analyses contained in Schollenberger's book. The author confronts Lyotard with the texts he commented on, and adopts a critical approach to some well-known interpretations of his thoughts. Noteworthy are the interesting translation propositions supported with compelling arguments.

Schollenberger has decided against proceeding in a chronological order and, instead of following the usual, linear path and falling into the habitual interpretative pattern, he charts his own route through Lyotard's work, drawing on his own unconventional and ingenious interpretations. Just as the few existing monographs of Lyotard's philosophy, for example Geoffrey Bennington's excellent *Lyotard: Writing the Event* (2008), or the extensive (over 500 pages) *Logique du vif. Lyotard en éclaircisseur* (2016) by Gérald Sfez, Schollenberger's book focuses on selected aspects of the philosopher's oeuvre, adopting interpretation keys based on his own examination rather than commenting on the existing studies. This is what makes Schollenberger's work a philosophical work, rather than a book on the history of philosophy.

Is Schollenberger's book an introduction into Lyotard's philosophy? It is, and yet not quite.

It is, as it acquaints the reader with themes that remain largely unexplored, and which turn out to be essential for understanding Lyotard's philosophical work. Let us reiterate that references to Freud and Kant – read, analysed and commented on by Lyotard – are vitally important for his philosophy.

At the same time, Schollenberger's book cannot be regarded as a standard introduction to Lyotard's philosophy, as it is not a propaedeutic work. The author does not try to simplify the topics he presents, but rather immerses the reader in a broad philosophical context, where certain matters have already been explored, problematizes the examined points, poses difficult questions, and reveals the complexity of Lyotard's conclu-

4) Salanskis, “Preface. La philosophie de la possession,” 18.

5) Jean-François Lyotard, *Karel Appel. Un geste de couleur* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2009).

6) Jean-François Lyotard, “La phrase-affect. (D'un supplément au Différend),” in *Misère de la philosophie* (Paris: Galilée, 2000), 155.

7) Salanskis, “Preface. La philosophie de la possession,” 87.

sions. Schollenberger creates a polyphony of voices from which the seemingly unknown image of Lyotard emerges: not so much a coryphaeus of postmodernity, a commentator, but an attentive reader of classical and contemporary philosophy, a thinker who provides insightful descriptions, deviates at times from the chosen path, changes his mind, and who reserves a special place for aesthetics, or rather anti-aesthetics. This is where the great merit of this book lies: it shows the originality of Lyotard's philosophy, encouraging a new and more careful examination of his monumental oeuvre.

Schollenberger's book will fill a conspicuous gap and may help address certain interpretative issues and misunderstandings around Lyotard's philosophy. It reveals the unknown face of Lyotard as a consistent, profound, and original thinker, perfectly familiar with the Western philosophical tradition. Furthermore, the book demonstrates that the exploration of Lyotard's abundant legacy can also prove today a great intellectual adventure.

Translated by Małgorzata Dera