

THE KANTIAN SUBLIME, THE AVANT-GARDE, AND  
THE POSTMODERN

A CRITIQUE OF LYOTARD

I

In recent years Kant's aesthetic theory has undergone a considerable revival. In particular, Jean-Francois Lyotard has assigned a crucial significance to Kant's theory of the sublime in relation to our misunderstanding of the avant-garde and postmodernism. In this discussion, I shall first outline the salient features of Kant's theory of the sublime, and will show how it might be revised to function independently of Kant's philosophical idealism. In the light of this revision I shall then consider the connections which Lyotard makes between the Kantian sublime, the avant-garde, and the postmodern, and will argue that serious difficulties accrue to Lyotard's claims. Finally, I will suggest that whilst Lyotard's overall philosophical strategy is unsuccessful, his exhibition *Les Immatériaux* shows how the postmodern sensibility *can* be linked to a Kantian notion of sublimity.

Kant's mature theory of the sublime is to be found in *The Critique of Judgement* (1790).<sup>1</sup> Kant divides sublimity into two modes - the mathematical and the dynamical. The former arises when some vast object overwhelms our capacity to comprehend it *as a totality* in terms of sense-perception or imagination; the latter arises when we encounter an object so powerful that it would overwhelm us with fear for our lives - *if* we were in a position where it was directly threatening us. Now since, for Kant, the sublime is a 'mental movement', these negative moments give way to positive ones. In the case of the mathematical mode, our very incapacity to comprehend the vastness of an object through sense-perception or imagination, serves to make all the more vivid the fact that we *can* comprehend it *as a totality* in purely rational terms. In the case of the dynamical mode, the very fearfulness of the object leads us to imagine defying it in moral terms. We conceive ourselves as facing destruction unflinchingly and with resolve - as indeed befits our status as rational and moral beings, rather than mere animals.

There are many issues raised by Kant's position. I shall mention two. First, Kant's theory hinges on a dichotomy between cognition grounded in our bodily capacities (sense-perception and imagination) and cognition which is a function of our purely rational and moral self - which is outside the spatio-temporal framework of natural causality. When a vast or powerful object exceeds the former set of capacities it makes us all the more aware of the power of our 'supersensible' capacities, our powers as rational and moral

beings. Hence Kant makes the unlikely claim that it is not the vast or powerful object which is sublime, but rather the supersensible cast of mind which enables us to cope with it. The second point to note is that Kant's account is nature orientated, and he explicitly (if somewhat inconsistently) discounts the products of human artifice from figuring in experiences of the sublime. This, of course, makes his position extremely restrictive.

Kant's theory can, however, be stated in relatively simple terms that free it from these problems. This revision takes the following form. Clearly there are objects which are so vast or powerful as to completely overwhelm our powers of perception and imagination. We can nevertheless comprehend them as overwhelming totalities in rational terms. (Indeed, we can frame the rational idea of infinity itself - even though we could never hope to have sense-perceptions or images which would adequately present such an idea.) Given, then, the fact that the overwhelmingly vast or powerful object can be comprehended in rational thought, we feel ourselves, accordingly, as transcending the limitations imposed by our embodied existence. It should be noted that whilst this reformulation of Kant's theory does hinge on an enriched awareness of the scope of our rational powers, it does not commit us to the view that our rational being is located outside the spatio-temporal world. Nor does it entail that we must regard rational comprehension, rather than the object itself, as sublime. This is because it is not *every* object which succeeds in overwhelming our perception and imagination, in a way that vivifies the scope of our rational comprehension. We are therefore quite entitled to call objects which stimulate this privileged effect sublime.

Stated in these terms, Kant's theory can encompass the domain of human artifice, without much further modification. If some human artefact is of colossal size or of terrifying power, or employs images which successfully invoke a sense of such overwhelming properties, then this can serve to make vivid the extraordinary scope of human *artifice* itself. Something, in other words, which is encountered as problematic from the viewpoint of sense-perception, enables the rich scope of a rational capacity - in this case artifice - to become all the more manifest and enjoyable.

## II

With these points in mind, we can now turn to the important links made by Lyotard between the Kantian sublime, and our understanding of the avant-garde and postmodernism. As Lyotard's arguments are both complex and highly generalized, I shall first summarize their salient points.

Lyotard holds that the function of painting since the quattrocento has been to document the socio-political and religious order of things, by means of the laws of perspective - thus enabling the audience to identify both with the order represented, and with the artist's mastery of it. This tendency continues even into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the guise of various 'realist' styles (interpreting the term 'realist' here *very* broadly). However, this conventional form of art faces two difficulties. First, it conceals the shifting and elusive nature of visual reality itself, by presenting a world of stable and

secure law-governed existents - a 'natural' order of things. This, according to Lyotard, means that 'it intends to avoid the question of reality implicated in that of art'.<sup>2</sup> Second, the development of photography and film has, in any case, surpassed and thereby vitiated the documentary function of art. Indeed the development of photography points in the direction of a wholly transformed aesthetic sensibility, in so far as the images created by mechanical reproduction have a 'hardness' that points towards their origins in scientific and technological endeavour. As Lyotard puts it:

The ready-made in the techno-sciences presents itself as a potential for infinite production, and so does the photograph.<sup>3</sup>

The technologically produced image, in other words, points towards technology's capacity for unlimited progress and development. Its hard beauty is thus rendered ambiguous and unstable. We no longer have artefacts that can be judged by the consensus of established taste.

It is with the impact of photography and techno-scientific culture that we find the historical beginnings of a postmodern sensibility wherein our conceptions of art and the aesthetic are transformed. However, it is in his tracing of the path of this development that Lyotard is most difficult to follow.<sup>4</sup> It must be stressed, therefore, that what comes next is a very liberal interpretation of his argument. The story seems to proceed as follows.

Conventional 'realist' art was under threat even before the impact of photography. Since the late eighteenth century a 'modernist' avant-garde mode of art had been developing, which recognized that painting cannot simply be the reflections of a given order of things. These painters ask, *in effect*, the question 'What is painting?' Lyotard elaborates this as follows.

'Modern painters' discovered that they had to represent the existence of that which was not demonstrable if the perspectival laws . . . were followed. They set about to revolutionise the supposed visual givens in order to reveal that the field of vision simultaneously conceals and needs the invisible, that it relates therefore not only to the eye, but to the spirit as well.

Thus they introduced painting into the field opened up by the aesthetics of the sublime - which is not governed by a consensus of taste.<sup>5</sup>

Hence Lyotard's claim that 'it is in the aesthetic of the sublime that modern art (including literature) finds its impetus and the logic of avant-garde finds its axioms'.<sup>6</sup>

It is interesting that Lyotard invokes the sublime here, on the basis of Kant's theory. But why Kant? In this respect, Lyotard rightly points out that in Kant's terms

We can conceive the infinitely great, the infinitely powerful, but every presentation of an object destined to 'make visible' this absolute greatness of power appears to us painfully inadequate. Those are Ideas of which no presentation is possible.<sup>7</sup>

Such ideas, however, can be suggested or *alluded* to by visible things.

Kant himself shows the way when he names 'formlessness, the absence of form' as a possible index to the unrepresentable. He also says of the empty 'abstraction' which the imagination experiences when in search for a presentation of the infinite (another unrepresentable) that this abstraction is itself like a presentation of the infinite, its 'negative presentation'. He cites the commandment, 'Thou shalt not make graven images' (Exodus), as the most sublime passage in the Bible, in that it forbids all presentation of the absolute. Little needs to be added to those observations to outline an aesthetic of sublime paintings.<sup>8</sup>

Lyotard's reasoning here is based on the fact that because modernist works can be 'formless' or 'abstract' (in comparison with conventional representation) this enables them to allude to the 'unrepresentable' and 'invisible'. But whilst we know what Kant regards as 'unrepresentable' (namely ideas of totality) it is rather more difficult to determine what Lyotard means by such a term. Some light is cast on this by a further crucial distinction which Lyotard makes between two forms of sublimity. The first of these is 'melancholic' - a 'nostalgia' for presence, wherein an emphasis is placed on 'the powerlessness of the faculty of presentation, on the nostalgia for presence felt by the human subject, on the obscure and futile will which inhabits him in spite of everything'.<sup>9</sup>

Lyotard's meaning here is, I think, best clarified by the artists he mentions in relation to this mode of sublimity: Fuseli, Friedrich, Delacroix, Malevich, the German expressionists, Proust, and de Chirico. In the paintings or writings (or both) of these artists, we find a Romantic striving for a deep level of subjectivity - a striving for communion with an absolute self which can be conceived as existing, but which cannot be directly encountered in perception. In Lyotard's terms, it is this unrepresentable and 'invisible' level of spiritual being which elements of formlessness or abstraction in their painting or writing allude to.

Now, as I have shown, for Lyotard the aesthetics of sublimity defines 'modernist' painting. However, the nostalgic mode of sublimity just outlined (even though it continues into the twentieth century) is not an adequate response to the changes and aesthetic instability brought about by the impact of photography. As Lyotard puts it:

It allows the unrepresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents; but the form, because of its recognisable consistency, continues to offer to the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure. Yet these sentiments do not constitute the real sublime sentiment, which is an intrinsic combination of pleasure and pain.<sup>10</sup>

However, there is another mode of sublimity in art - 'novatio' (sometimes encountered in combination with the nostalgic), which does constitute an adequate response to photography, and changing sensibility, through the fact

that it asks the question 'What is painting?' (or literature, etc.), in a direct and uncompromising manner. Here, an emphasis is placed

on the increase of being and the jubilation which result from the invention of new rules of the game, be it pictorial, artistic, or any other.<sup>11</sup>

What Lyotard seems to have in mind here are the radical stylistic changes that take place in the transition from impressionism to Cezanne and cubism, and which are consummated by the rise of abstraction from about 1910 onwards. In relation to Cezanne, the Delaunays, and Mondrian, for example, we are told that:

Their sublime was fundamentally not nostalgic and tended towards the infinity of plastic experiment rather than towards the representation of any lost absolute. In this, their work belongs to the contemporary industrial, techno-scientific world.<sup>12</sup>

We are now in a position to grasp Lyotard's fundamental claim - which is that postmodernism 'is not modernism at its end, but in the nascent state, and this state is constant'.<sup>13</sup> As we have seen, for Lyotard modernism in art involves an orientation towards the sublime. However, 'nostalgic' works do not fulfil their sublime potential. The fulfilment of such potential is achieved, rather, by those works of 'novatio' which make the nature of art explicitly problematic through *striving* to present it as a possibility of infinite (and thence unrepresentable) experiment and development. Since, therefore, this avant-garde sublime anticipates the sensibility of a contemporary culture which is permeated by a sense of techno-science's infinite possibilities, we must regard it as a nascent state of postmodernism - rather than the mere highpoint of an outdated modernist sensibility.

### III

Lyotard's theory is an attempt to legitimize avant-garde art in relation to the needs and structure of contemporary postmodern culture. The Kantian sublime provides the mediating link. His arguments, however, raise a great number of difficulties. I shall confine myself to the more salient ones.

First, Lyotard's account of the function of conventional 'realist' art is derived from communication theory - a theory devised primarily to explain the workings of *mass media*. However, art even of the most blatantly realist sort is surely not reducible to the transmission of 'messages' about the order of things. Lyotard, in effect, turns away from a crucial distinction made by Kant himself - namely between *fine art* and that *mechanical* art which is created simply by following some technical rule, for the purpose of conveying information. If we accept this familiar distinction, then Lyotard's claim that photography renders realist art obsolete loses its force. A realist work may not communicate information about its subject-matter as efficiently as a photograph could, but from an aesthetic point of view this is irrelevant. What interests us

is *how* the work represents, and not what it represents. We look for changes and transformations of the subject-matter, for technical and stylistic innovations, and reappraisals of the past. Indeed, the question 'What is painting?' is, *in effect*, asked by any work in any genre, in so far as it counts as an original development - an expansion of the medium's possibilities.

Lyotard's use of the Kantian sublime also has its worrying aspects. Clearly, he is not using it without qualification. The distinction between the mathematical and dynamical modes is not utilized; he ignores Kant's reservations about sublimity in art; and he makes no reference to the supersensible - an awareness of which (it will be remembered) is, for Kant, the source of the pleasurable aspect of the sublime. This last point directs us towards a crucial flaw in Lyotard's approach. Consider the following passage.

The sublime is not simply gratification, but the gratification of effort. It is impossible to represent the absolute, which is ungratifying: but one knows that one has to, that the faculty of feeling or of imagining is called upon to make the perceptible represent the ineffable - and even if this fails, and even if that causes suffering, a pure gratification will emerge from this tension.<sup>14</sup>

But why should such gratification emerge? Presumably because although the idea of painting being infinitely developable is an unrepresentable idea, one has at least shown something of this possibility through transforming the rules of painting. If, however, this jubilant transformation of painting can gratify us, why should there be any question of us (or the artist) striving to present what is unrepresentable? It may be that *exceptionally* our enjoyment of innovation is accompanied by a sense of painting's infinite possibilities of development, but even if this does occur, it is only contingently related to our enjoyment, i.e. our enjoyment of innovation is one experience, and our sense of infinite possibility is another. This means, of course, that we would here be dealing with two psychologically successive, but logically distinct, experiences, rather than a single experience. But if the sublime is a genuine and *distinct* mode of experience, we must surely demand that its complex elements have *at least* a logical bearing on one another. Now the way round this problem would be to invoke the reconstructed version of Kant's theory proposed earlier on in this study. However, this leads to further problems for Lyotard's two modes of the sublime - 'nostalgia' and 'novatio'. I argued that the term 'sublime' is aptly applied to art when it is of colossal size or terrifying power, or employs form or imagery which successfully invoke such overwhelming associations. This, I would also suggest, broadly reflects our customary usage of the term sublime in relation to art. Lyotard's modes, however, do not fit this usage, and do not, indeed, square with the historical role he assigns to them. In respect of 'nostalgia', for example, to use the term sublime to describe any artists who incline towards colouristic painterliness, or whose writings show that they aspire through their painting towards some spiritual reality, is so general as to be useless. It could embrace artists as far apart as El Greco and Malevich. Matters lie similarly with 'novatio'. As I suggested a little earlier, any

innovatory work, in effect, asks the question 'What is painting?' through its expanding the possibilities of the medium. Lyotard, of course, might well say that radical avant-garde artists ask this question more directly and insistently, but it is difficult to see what is gained by this. For (as I also noted earlier) whilst *some* superlative avant-garde works may evoke an overwhelming sense of the medium being latent with infinite possibilities of development, this is surely a striking exception rather than a rule which defines what counts as authentically avant-garde. Indeed there is no intrinsic reason why the best non-avant-garde works should not also sometimes achieve this.

#### IV

I have argued that Lyotard's linking of the Kantian sublime to avant-garde art and the postmodern sensibility is unsuccessful. Ironically, the *real* direction in which Lyotard's theory of the avant-garde is tending, is towards an aspect of Kant's aesthetics which he does not explicitly consider - namely the theory of genius.<sup>15</sup> For Kant, the art of genius is that whose primary quality is *originality*; in other words, that art which cannot simply be reduced to the following of established rules of creation and artifice. Since, however, as Kant also admits, there can be 'original nonsense', the art of genius must also be 'exemplary'. It must involve not just a breaking with old rules, but also the invention of *new* ones. Now in the light of this theory we can locate Lyotard's account of the avant-garde within a rather more amenable theoretical context. For with the rise of Romanticism, and more so with the advent of the modernist avant-garde, there has been a reorientation of art towards the unrepresentable, by means of the wholesale and continuing invention of new rules for art. *This* unrepresentable is the creative individuality of the artist - a phenomenon which is constituted and manifested not simply in the work as such, but rather in its relation both to the tradition with which it is breaking, and to the space of possibility which it is opening up. To enjoy the creative individuality of the artist's rule transformations, we must bring to bear knowledge which is not directly presented in the work itself. This, however, does not entail anything like that *striving* for the unattainable which Lyotard sees as a definitive characteristic of the sublime.

It is important to make several qualifications at this point. First, Kant himself uses genius as one of the means for defining fine art as a *category*. He does not use the term in any historical sense. My point, however, is that whilst all art of any quality may entail genius in Kant's sense of the term, it is only with the rise of modernism that the wholesale invention of new rules for art seems to be the fundamental dynamic of artistic change. Kant's theory of genius, then, would have given a more useful theoretical framework for locating the main features in terms of which Lyotard defines the avant-garde. This would, of course, involve the abandoning of the exact links which Lyotard wishes to make between the avant-garde, the sublime and the postmodern, but such abandonment would move Lyotard only in the direction of *greater plausibility*.

I want finally to suggest that whilst Lyotard's overall connective philosophical

strategy is flawed, another aspect of his work has shown how the Kantian sublime might be linked at least to the idea of a distinctive contemporary postmodern sensibility. What this sensibility involves was given its fullest evocation in an exhibition organized by Lyotard at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris in 1985. The exhibition was entitled *Les Immatériaux*. As we have seen, for Lyotard avant-garde art of the 'novatio' sort supposedly anticipates a sensibility which, through the dramatic development in science, technology, and media of communication since the late 1950s and 1960s, has become a 'spirit of the times'. In a sense, what now determines sensibility is, in effect, the question 'What is reality?' It is the relationship between this question and sensibility which *Les Immatériaux* sought to address. For example, one of the leaflets advertising the exhibition stated that:

Our objective is to rouse a sensitivity that already exists in all of us, to make one feel the strange in the familiar, and how difficult it is to imagine what's challenging.

In these respects, the exhibition succeeded to a remarkable degree. The visitor was thrust into a labyrinth of different zones and sites, each exemplifying the complexity which underlies and sustains the surface of everyday contemporary life. For example, a number of sites took as their theme the nature of human embodiment - and showed how complex our attitude to it has become through the impact of ideas about diet and sexuality, and through medical, biochemical, and genetic data provided by ultra-advanced technology. The body is, as it were, no longer simply a 'lived' material surface, it has 'dematerialized' into a complex web of data about its social and microscopic structure and processes. Of course, people in previous times have had an inkling of this complexity, but in the postmodern era, saturated as it is with data available from the mass media, such complexity is thrust to the forefront of our attention.

*Les Immatériaux*, in other words, functioned as a kind of model for the postmodern condition. It showed us how familiar 'material' aspects of experience dissolve, when mediated by techno-scientific data, into an infinity of processes and relations that cannot be grasped in perceptual or imaginative terms. Infinity is inscribed in the familiar. Now, earlier on, I argued that Kant's theory of the sublime can be reconstructed free from the constraints of his philosophical idealism. Broadly speaking, something is sublime if its vastness or destructive powers overwhelm our powers of perceptual and imaginative comprehension, but, in so doing, make vivid the scope of rational cognition or human artifice. This kind of experience can arise either from nature *or* from such products of human artifice as views of cities, wars, mass parades and the like. However, the merit of Lyotard's more general approach is to extend this and show how the experience of the sublime can arise through the mediation of knowledge and data, from objects which, in themselves, may not be physically vast or destructive but, rather, overwhelm us by their *complexity*. It no longer takes a Blake to see infinity in a grain of sand - the electron microscope or photographs taken from it can do the job just as well.



Modern techno-scientific culture has, therefore, created a genuine postmodern sensibility. We take pleasure not simply in the beauty of phenomenal surfaces, but in the de-materialization of these by techno-science. A realm that is perceptually and imaginatively ungraspable as a totality, in other words, not only vivifies, but, indeed, is opened up by the project of rational endeavour itself. The sublime can now be created in the laboratory, as well as in the artist's studio.

#### NOTES

- 1 Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. C. Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973) especially Book One, §§25, 26, and 17.
- 2 Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 75.
- 3 Jean-François Lyotard, 'Presenting the unrepresentable: the sublime', *Artforum* (April 1982), 67.
- 4 The problems accrue mainly from his linking of both modernism and postmodernism to the sublime, and in his use of the term 'avant-garde'. We customarily associate the latter term with twentieth-century painting, especially abstraction, and at times Lyotard seems to be using it in this way. However, at other times he seems to use it more broadly, in a way that encompasses the Romantics. This, interestingly, is not a wholly arbitrary usage, in so far as the term 'avant-garde' seems to have been first used, in relation to the arts, in the 1830s.
- 5 Lyotard, 'Presenting the unrepresentable', 68.
- 6 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 77.
- 7 *ibid.*, 78.
- 8 *ibid.*
- 9 *ibid.*, 79.
- 10 *ibid.*, 81.
- 11 *ibid.*, 80.
- 12 Lyotard, 'Presenting the unrepresentable', 69.
- 13 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 79.
- 14 Lyotard, 'Presenting the unrepresentable', 69.
- 15 See Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, especially Book One, §§46 and 47.

For each of them, the contemporary importance of the experience of sublimity, as well as the central problematic of its concept, concerns the issue of what Kant in the Critique of the Power of Judgment calls *Darstellung*: the process through which the imagination presents sensible intuition to rational thought. For this reason, the thinkers of the postmodern sublime focus almost exclusively on Kant's interpretation and reject both pre-Kantian and German Idealist and Romantic discourses of the sublime; the latter tend to resolve the conflict between presentation and what cannot be presented, whereas the former ignore the issue altogether. Kant proposed two types of sublimity: the mathematical and the dynamical. With the mathematical sublime, one is faced with the magnitude of nature, and one's imagination cannot adequately comprehend the vastness. Kant argues, though, that our faculty of reason kicks in and allows us to comprehend the sense of infinity before us; the feeling of the mathematical sublime, then, is the feeling of reason's superiority over nature and our imagination. The dynamical sublime is also a feeling of reason's superiority to nature, but via a different avenue. He wrote, "The avant-garde task is to undo spiritual assumptions regarding time. The sense of the sublime is the name of the dismantling." Avant-garde art, exemplifying the novatio sublime, is the possibility of infinite experiment and development which, by virtue of being infinite, is itself unrepresentable. The nature of art, in other words, becomes problematic. Painting, for example, is no longer a mere reflection of the socio-political and religious order of things; rather, it becomes solely a reflexive endeavor to determine what painting is. The aesthetic of the sublime, then, serves as a mediating link between the avant-garde and postmodern culture. Lyotard also portrays it as the means by which art may find its true destiny in a way similar to how thought finds its destiny in criticism. The aesthetic of the sublime, first of all, reclaims art from its merely documentary function.