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## **Lesson of Darkness**

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## Lesson of Darkness: Phenomenology and Lyotard's Late Aesthetics

### Abstract

This paper examines the relationship of Jean-François Lyotard's aesthetics to phenomenology, especially the works of Mikel Dufrenne and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. It argues that this comparison allows a greater understanding of Lyotard's late aesthetic writings, which can appear gnomic and which have received relatively little critical attention. Lyotard credits Merleau-Ponty with opening the theme of *difference* in the aesthetic field, yet believes that the phenomenological approach can never adequately account for it. After outlining Lyotard's early critiques of Dufrenne and Merleau-Ponty, the paper will demonstrate how his late aesthetics can be understood as returning to phenomenological themes but in the form of a *reversal*. Lyotard's "lesson of darkness" is that the secret power of art can never be brought into the light of phenomenal appearance, and that artworks do not testify to the birth of perception, but to its death and resurrection.

**Keywords:** phenomenology, aesthetics, Jean-François Lyotard, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Mikel Dufrenne

**Word count:** 8, 100

Jean-François Lyotard, famous for "the postmodern," is typically not associated with phenomenology in the popular imagination. Yet Lyotard's philosophical roots were firmly planted in the phenomenological tradition, out of which his own original philosophical work grew. In his student days at the Lycée Louis Le Grand and the Sorbonne he studied Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger,<sup>1</sup> and his first book was an introductory text simply titled *Phenomenology*. At one time he considered himself a follower of Merleau-Ponty,<sup>2</sup> and his *Doctorat d'Etat* was supervised by the leading phenomenological aesthetician, Mikel Dufrenne. While his later philosophical peregrinations took him far afield of phenomenology, throughout his career Lyotard continued to return in particular to Merleau-Ponty, and one of his last essays is a discussion of the phenomenologist's notion of the flesh.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kiff Bamford, *Jean-François Lyotard*, 25.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *Peregrinations*, 11.

<sup>3</sup> Lyotard, 'Formule charnelle' in *Misère de la philosophie*.

I will argue here that Lyotard's approach to aesthetics can be understood as both an extension and a radical critical overturning of phenomenological aesthetics, such that we might characterise his aesthetics as "postphenomenological." (I don't intend this term in the sense in which it is associated with Don Ihde and North American developments in phenomenology, but rather use it to invoke the critical but constructive continuity we are used to hearing in the term "poststructuralist.")

In particular, what the analysis I propose here hopes to achieve is to increase understanding of Lyotard's late aesthetics (his writings on art in the 1990s), which have as yet received little attention in the secondary literature.<sup>4</sup> My strategy here will be to introduce problems by recounting Lyotard's early critical engagements with phenomenology, but then to by-pass his earlier answers in terms of radical psychoanalytic theory and Kantian aesthetics, and to pass straight to his late period, which we may see as responding to these very problems. We will see how his late aesthetics return to the ambit of phenomenological themes and echo phenomenological language, but constitute a *reversal* of the phenomenological approach.

What Lyotard consistently identified as being at stake in the arts – something "unpresentable" – takes its bearings at least in part from Merleau-Ponty's theme of the invisible – that which, *in* the visible, does not appear *as* visible. At the beginning of his first major book, Lyotard credits Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology with opening the problematic he is interested in, that of *difference* in the perceptual and aesthetic fields.<sup>5</sup> For Merleau-Ponty this difference is primarily that of the dimensions of perception which are its essential conditions for appearing but do not appear as such, being

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<sup>4</sup> The two main books in English so far dedicated to Lyotard's philosophy of art, Kiff Bamford's *Lyotard and the 'figural' in Performance, Art, and Writing* and Graham Jones' *Lyotard Reframed*, for all their many merits, both lack any discussion of Lyotard's writings on art in the nineteen-nineties. A few articles and book chapters are exceptions, yet they focus on specific aspects of Lyotard's late aesthetics rather than attempting a general characterization, which is my task here. See for example Andrew Benjamin, 'Colouring Philosophy'; Kas Saghafi, 'Lyotard's Gesture' and Kiff Bamford, 'No Place for Complacency: The Resistance of Gesture,' both in Gailard et. al. (eds.) *Traversals of Affect*; and Jean-François Nordmann, 'Anamnèse et création : les deux voies finales de sortie de l'esthétique chez Jean-François Lyotard' in Coblence and Michel Enaudeau (eds.) *Lyotard et les arts*. I have bracketed Lyotard's works on Malraux in the nineteen-nineties, which have garnered further critical attention, because although some of the themes are resonant, they are developed in terms (Malraux's own) quite different to the phenomenological ones I am drawing out here.

<sup>5</sup> See Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, 16.

eclipsed by what appears – dimensions such as depth, distance, and the hidden “underside” of things. The theory of perception needs to move away from the identity of the phenomenal thing which appears, towards the difference which is its condition.<sup>6</sup> It is this dimension of difference which points Merleau-Ponty to the invisible, and which he explores within a primarily phenomenological framework. For Lyotard, however, the “unpresentable” may be *approached* via phenomenology, but not *elaborated* by it.<sup>7</sup>

In his 1954 book *Phenomenology*, Lyotard notes how phenomenology contains its own contradiction and self-transcendence within it. He writes: “‘the phenomenality of the phenomena is never itself a phenomenal datum,’ as Eugen Fink rightly notes.”<sup>8</sup> And, furthermore: “Is there not, in sum, a phenomenological decision to assume a viewpoint where ‘the appearing of the being is not itself a thing that appears’?”<sup>9</sup> There is, in phenomenology from the start (that is, in Husserl’s own work) an inclination not to remain content with a description of appearances, but to move beyond to a knowledge of the conditions of what appears. This “moving beyond” involves a kind of transcendental thinking, and in many phenomenologists, as accentuated with Heidegger, seeks to attain knowledge of an ontological or metaphysical order. As we shall see, it is on the relation between what appears and what does not appear, and the related question of what we can know and what we cannot, that Lyotard takes issue with phenomenology. The upshot of his critique is that Lyotard does not believe phenomenology is capable of adequately accounting for the dimension of difference he thinks essential to the arts. As a defender of the avant-garde and experimental arts, Lyotard is primarily concerned with the emergence of the radically new, the way a work can strike us as something never before seen or heard. In this sense, he defines the work and its aesthetic reception as an *event*, an unpredictable singular occurrence, something of which escapes every attempt to familiarise it. While phenomenology

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<sup>6</sup> Merleau-Ponty writes: “We have to pass from the thing (spatial or temporal) as identity, to the thing (spatial or temporal) as difference, i.e. as transcendence, i.e. as always “behind,” beyond, far-off ...” *The Visible and the Invisible*, 195. In fact for Merleau-Ponty a very important part of the invisible is what the philosophical tradition calls the intelligible – the dimension of concepts, meaning, or sense – yet, for reasons which will become clear, Lyotard does not seek to elaborate this dimension of the invisible, but rather seeks a deeper underside to the sensible.

<sup>7</sup> Lyotard, ‘God and the Puppet’ in *The Inhuman*, 160.

<sup>8</sup> Lyotard, *Phenomenology*, 134.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

opens the theme of difference, which leads the way to thinking such an event, it forestalls this attempt by ultimately inscribing everything within a homogenising epistemological and metaphysical horizon. This is what leads Lyotard to depart from phenomenology, believing that the concerns and problems it evokes – to which he arguably remains faithful – cannot ultimately be done justice while remaining within a phenomenological perspective. It is precisely such concerns, we will see, which lead him to reverse phenomenology when he returns to echo its language and themes in his late aesthetics.

Let us begin to explore these issues through Lyotard's first critical encounters with phenomenology in the works of Dufrenne and Merleau-Ponty. It is Merleau-Ponty, and not Dufrenne, to whose works Lyotard would never cease to return, to test his developments in aesthetics against the touchstone of the great phenomenologist. Yet I will begin with Dufrenne because the same core issues on which Lyotard critiques Merleau-Ponty are also present in the former, and appear there in sharper relief: whilst not lacking in profundity, Dufrenne's works are not suffused in the same atmosphere of ambiguity as are Merleau-Ponty's, in both form and content. In the case of both phenomenologists, Lyotard critiques what he calls a "metaphysics of continuity."

### *Nature speaks*

Lyotard's explicit references to Dufrenne are few, and consist only of some brief but dense pages in *Discourse, Figure* and a long review of Dufrenne's book *Pour L'homme* from the same period.<sup>10</sup> In both he develops a critique of Dufrenne's thesis that "Nature speaks," a thesis we may approach through some key points in the development of Dufrenne's project. Edward S. Casey, Dufrenne's primary English translator, has astutely noted that in *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, Dufrenne outlines not only the structure of that book, but of his entire philosophical trajectory, when he writes: "We shall pass from the phenomenological to the

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<sup>10</sup> Lyotard, 'A la place de l'homme, l'expression.' A text by Lyotard published in a special journal issue dedicated to Dufrenne in 1996, under the title 'Language et nature,' is a slightly modified excerpt from the earlier article.

transcendental, and the transcendental will itself flow into the metaphysical.”<sup>11</sup> For him this means beginning with a phenomenological description of aesthetic experience, then moving to the transcendental in asking how aesthetic experience is possible, and then to the metaphysical in seeking an ontological grounding for this possibility.

For Dufrenne, aesthetic experience is the result of an “agreement” between the objective and subjective sides of such experience: the artwork and the one who appreciates it. How is this agreement possible? He argues for what he calls “affective *a priori*,” which are conditions common to the feeling subject and felt object which he believes are necessary for their unity in aesthetic experience. The subject, that is, must possess the same “affective *a priori*” in order to recognise and feel the affect the aesthetic object expresses. These affective *a priori* are the commonly known aesthetic categories such as the tragic, the comic, the sublime, the beautiful, and so on (though Dufrenne does not think we can draw up an exhaustive list of such categories; for him the *a priori* are only revealed *a posteriori*, and new artworks can bring to light new affective qualities).

The unity of subject and object in aesthetic feeling reveals a deeper unity of the human and the world, which leads Dufrenne to a more global and extensive consideration of the transcendental, which might account for this unity, in his book *The Notion of the A Priori*. Here he develops the idea that every *a priori* has both an ontic and a transcendental character. He explains this double aspect as follows:

It is transcendental so far as it is a virtual knowledge of the object, previous to and orienting experience, and ontic so far as it is a structure of the object. In this way the mind is at home [*se retrouve*] in the world without constituting it, and conversely the world is equally at home in the mind, without producing it.<sup>12</sup>

It is as if the human and the world were made for each other. This accord between the human and the world is thus a generalisation of the accord between a subjective and an objective *a priori* which Dufrenne drew from his analysis of aesthetic experience. Dufrenne then argues that in order for this accord to be possible, we have to assume an

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<sup>11</sup> Mikel Dufrenne, *Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, lxvi. Casey makes this point in his introductions to both Dufrenne’s *Phenomenology* and *The Notion of the A Priori*.

<sup>12</sup> Dufrenne, *The Notion of the A Priori*, 218.

“*a priori* of the *a priori*,” a deep ground for the commonality of subjective virtual knowledge and objective structure. While Dufrenne notes that this ground is what Heidegger calls Being and Merleau-Ponty calls flesh, he prefers to call it Nature, in Spinoza’s sense of *natura naturans*, nature as productive power or process. This is effectively the proposition of a monism prior to the dualism of subject and object which make the latter possible and from which they emerge.

However, a philosophical elaboration of Nature presents itself as a problem for Dufrenne. At the end of *The Notion of the A Priori*, he argues that philosophy, which proceeds by way of rational discourse, cannot furnish us with a knowledge of this unitary ground. In fact, according to him this dark ground “is something of which there is nothing to be known, because a consciousness that was one with the world would be a consciousness totally lost in the world. It would be as blind and as mute as a stone.”<sup>13</sup> Knowledge is only possible when the unity of Nature is separated into the duality of the human and the world, the subject and the object. In Lyotard’s formulation, according to Dufrenne the human is “chiasmed nature,”<sup>14</sup> that place where Nature separates itself from itself in order to know itself, to relate its two parts through a communication based on an affinity.

This problem is one which Lyotard had already, in his 1954 book, placed at the heart of phenomenology: how to express, in language, the truth of phenomena prior to language? (Or in Lyotard’s assessment, “the phenomenological enterprise is fundamentally contradictory as designation in language of a prelogical signified in being.”<sup>15</sup>) For Dufrenne, Nature is precisely this “prelogical signified in being,” something not amenable to rational or linguistic articulation because it precedes the separation of subject and object which allow being to appear to itself and to be known. In his words:

[H]ow can one think of a Nature that would be a world without man, before man, and consequently a world before the world, from which would proceed the world

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<sup>13</sup> Dufrenne, *Language and Philosophy*, 97.

<sup>14</sup> See the section ‘L’homme comme nature chiasmée’ in Lyotard, ‘A la place.’

<sup>15</sup> Lyotard, *Phenomenology*, 68-9.

and man, but which would have to be conceived first without reference to the world and to man? How can one think with no thought there to think?<sup>16</sup>

Invoking metaphors of light and darkness, day and night, which we will see resonate later, he elaborates the problem and broaches a solution as follows:

What is there to say of Nature, of that *Grund* of which the very idea forbids all discourse, of that Night that not even the natural light of a gaze lights up, and that no language can name in order to contrast it with Day? To have a presentiment of it, it may be necessary to put oneself in the moment when speech is silent or the gaze extinct, at the hour of death. We have to die to the world for the reign of raw being to come again, for Nature to be restored to itself; and that is why every authentic word is haunted by death and every work of art contains a core illegibility. There a muted murmuring is heard, the tireless murmur of “there is,” the inarticulate voice of the desert. The work of art speaks only to be given over to that silence.<sup>17</sup>

For Dufrenne, we can have something like a pre-subjective “experience” of Nature, and it can to some degree be articulated through us, because Nature expresses itself through the human. Or, as Lyotard sums up this thesis, according to Dufrenne “Nature speaks.”<sup>18</sup> For him, *the poetic* is what allows us some understanding of Nature: the poetic is “expression,” the primitive form of meaning part way between the mute meaning of Nature and the articulate language of propositional speech and writing. The poetic is a kind of primordial meaning which cannot be reduced to written or spoken poetry as such, although the later nevertheless serves as a privileged example. Poetry can serve this function because, rather than separate subject and object through the distancing effects of representation or designation (indicating from within language an object which exists outside of it), it makes language itself take on something of the affective quality of that of which it speaks, partially eliding the difference between subject and object. In Dufrenne’s words: “In poetry, words are like things, palpable

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<sup>16</sup> Dufrenne, ‘The A Priori and the Philosophy of Nature’ in *In the Presence of the Sensuous*, 16-17.

<sup>17</sup> Dufrenne, ‘The A Priori and the Philosophy of Nature’ in *In the Presence*, 18.

<sup>18</sup> See the section ‘Language et nature’ in Lyotard, ‘A la place.’



and tasty as a fruit.”<sup>19</sup> He extends this metaphor of the fruit to suggest that the term “expression” in the discussion of poetry should be understood in the same sense that we imagine the juice of an orange being expressed when it is squeezed: in poetry, the things themselves express themselves.<sup>20</sup> Poetry, then, brings us close to the language which Nature itself already in some sense speaks. Dufrenne writes that Nature

carries within it, at the heart of its inconceivable unity, the principle of openness, the germ of the mediation by which it will yield to daylight and to language. It is already articulating itself, preparing to be spoken.<sup>21</sup>

While the example of poetry may illuminate much about the poetic, the latter has a broader scope, and is a privileged *a priori* which indicates the link between the human being and the world, and the possibility of expression. The poetic is thus a state of the world as well as a state of the human. It is a state of *feeling* rather than thought. All art, according to Dufrenne, can attain the poetic in this sense, and thus the claims about poetry can be generalised to the claim that art is nature speaking, expressing itself.<sup>22</sup> If poetry remains a privileged example, however, it is because it indicates the *continuity* between feeling, perception, and linguistic modes of expression: it shows how despite their differences, there is no absolute foreclosure of access between the dark ground of Nature and articulate philosophical discourse because the expression of feeling acts as a mediator between them. (While visual or sonic art too are just as powerful and important forms of expression, they do not indicate the continuity with language that poetry does.)

Let us move now to Lyotard’s critical reception of Dufrenne. Lyotard characterises Dufrenne’s philosophy as a “metaphysics of continuity,” referring to the continuity between the mute meaning with which Nature is pregnant and the meanings which human knowledge articulates; a continuity, we have just seen, which is given by the poetic as the “expression” which lies in between. Lyotard argues against such a continuity, and invokes two orders of “facts” which he believes testify to the separation

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<sup>19</sup> Dufrenne, ‘The Phenomenological Approach to Poetry,’ 16.

<sup>20</sup> Dufrenne, ‘The Phenomenological Approach to Poetry,’ 17.

<sup>21</sup> Dufrenne, ‘The A Priori and the Philosophy of Nature’ in *In the Presence*, 20.

<sup>22</sup> Dufrenne writes: “all art is poetic, as soon as it ceases to be merely sensual or didactic and as soon as feeling ceases to have a definable object.” *The Notion of the A Priori*, 237.

of nature and language.<sup>23</sup> First, he argues that psychoanalysis (to which he complains Dufrenne has not done justice) shows that rather than a continuity between nature and language, there is a function of *repression*. Nature (which would be understood from the psychoanalytic point of view as desire which arises in the body) does not achieve expression in consciousness and language without censorship, deception and distortion. Thus rather than giving us access to a primordial experience of meaning, consciousness and language are subject to mechanisms which hide and cause us to misrecognise our deepest desires. As a counterpoint to Dufrenne's occasional evocations of a kind of primal unity expressed by myths of Nature, Lyotard claims that "[a]ll myths speak of an order conquered with difficulty on 'disorder,' which is desire."<sup>24</sup> Second, Lyotard asserts that language can't absorb the sensible, only indicate it by the function of designation, which points beyond the order of linguistic meaning to what, in the sensible world, it speaks *about*. This point is most pithily summed up in *Discourse, Figure* where he writes that "[o]ne can say that the tree is green, but saying so does not put colour in the sentence."<sup>25</sup> In short, Lyotard is deeply sceptical of Dufrenne's thesis that "Nature speaks," a thesis grounded in a metaphysics of continuity, and to the contrary insists on a *discontinuity* between Nature and meaning, between the sensible and language, and between the aesthetic event and knowledge.

Lyotard's disagreements with Dufrenne here do not just concern the abstractions of metaphysics or the philosophy of language; they have direct aesthetic, and also political, import, as we see in Lyotard's further arguments concerning the nature of poetry. First, Lyotard objects to Dufrenne's view of poetry by noting that "[i]f it were true that nature speaks, poetry would be the natural state for us, and it would not be poetry."<sup>26</sup> That is, Dufrenne's view makes us wonder why there is a distinction between ordinary language and poetic expression, which, as Lyotard will emphasise, seems to be precisely an extraordinary, artificial state of language. Lyotard then outlines this alternative view of the poetic function as follows. While he agrees that poetry is nonreferential language, he denies that it is the primordial language, in which Nature expresses itself. Rather, he sees it as a "second denaturation": the first

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<sup>23</sup> Lyotard, 'A la place,' 173.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* All translations from French texts cited are mine.

<sup>25</sup> Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, 50.

<sup>26</sup> Lyotard, 'A la place,' 176.

denaturation is articulate, signifying language, which emerges from a break with and repression of nature. The poetic is then the result of critical, deconstructive *work* on signifying language, which transgresses its syntactic and semantic rules. Lyotard writes that these transgressions are “operations which partially *undo* language, which dig into it in order to make images erupt from the substance itself.”<sup>27</sup> Understood as deconstructive work on signifying language, “poetry shows precisely that *there is no* continuity between nature and language, that the latter was won at the cost of the repression of the former.”<sup>28</sup>

For Lyotard, moreover, these views about poetry are not politically innocent. Dufrenne himself suggests that poetry can have a political vocation insofar as the return to nature as origin it affords reveals the arbitrary, and changeable, character of culture.<sup>29</sup> Yet for Lyotard Dufrenne’s approach implies a relatively conservative position which limits poetry’s critical capacity and political effectiveness. Lyotard explains that “this is a crucial point: the thesis of connaturality of poetry and the world inevitably rests on a certain poetic idea that privileges its power of reconciliation while ignoring its critical power of reversal.”<sup>30</sup> Lyotard points to passages in Dufrenne’s book *Le Poétique* where the author characterises the poetic state as a “soft” and docile one, one he describes as “a gentle and discreet flow of the imagination.”<sup>31</sup> Taking up Dufrenne’s emphasis on the bodily, affective dimension of the poetic, Lyotard raises questions about the nature of the body presumed here, questions which we will see repeated below in his encounter with Merleau-Ponty:

True, poetry always appeals to the body, but to which one? Exclusively to the cradled, caressed, seduced body, possessing or thinking itself in possession of the “good object,” convinced of its “good form”? Or also to the body capable of letting the “bad object” be, of surrendering to “bad” forms that are no less true than the good ones; to the body capable of having an ear for disharmonies, glissandos, and clashes, and of hearing meaning in these; of having an eye for dischromatisms, “abstractions” of value, and errant traces, and of seeing meaning in these? A body,

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<sup>27</sup> Lyotard, ‘A la place,’ 174.

<sup>28</sup> Lyotard, *ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Dufrenne, ‘The Phenomenological Approach to Poetry,’ 19.

<sup>30</sup> Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, 289.

<sup>31</sup> Dufrenne, *Le Poétique*, 82; quoted in Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, 289.

in other words, able to face non-conciliation without softness.<sup>32</sup>

The political rub of Lyotard's critique here is that the "soft" poetry of reconciliation, which tolerates only harmony and good form, lends itself to a sleepy pleasure which contributes to maintaining, rather than critically engaging, prevailing ideologies and political structures.

### *Linguistic gesture*

Now that we have seen the "metaphysics of continuity" outlined with Dufrenne, we may see how this theme manifests and is critiqued by Lyotard with respect to Merleau-Ponty. It is well-known that Merleau-Ponty sees art as phenomenology done by other means, and that it testifies to the birth of perception. The artist performs something like the phenomenological reduction, and is able to see the way in which appearance appears as such when we closely attend to phenomena at a level deeper than the natural attitude. The artist's ability to capture what we typically don't see gives us insight into the way meaning (*sens*) arises in primordial perception. In his famous example of Cézanne, Merleau-Ponty suggests that we see the way in which the visual field takes form, as patches of colour give rise to suggestions of line and shape.<sup>33</sup>

The continuity between the philosophical exercise of phenomenology (that is, the expression of primordial reality in language and concepts) and its artistic exercise (its expression in paint, bronze, etc.) may be understood as grounded in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy by his *gestural theory of meaning*. This theory posits the gesture – that is, a meaningful bodily movement or comportment – as the basic model of all meaning, including linguistic meaning. Merleau-Ponty argues that the most fundamental form of meaning develops in the operative intentionality of the body in its relation to the world, prior to the level of the intentionality of acts, conceptual thought, or linguistic expression. The way that the body makes sense of the world, and communicates this sense to other bodies, is gestural. Yet Merleau-Ponty also argues that linguistic expression is fundamentally gestural, suggesting that language signifies "the meaning

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<sup>32</sup> Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, 290.

<sup>33</sup> See Merleau-Ponty, 'Cézanne's Doubt' in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*.

of thought as a footprint signifies the movement and effort of a body.”<sup>34</sup> The gesture does not represent anything, but is itself meaning; its content and form are inseparable: what the gesture means is what it is or does as the body engages itself with the world. Words do not represent or “clothe” pre-existing ideas, but are themselves the bodies of thought which express meaning through their speaking gestures. The gesture thus acts as an analogical model for explaining how language is meaningful, but the idea of the “linguistic gesture” is more than this – it also indicates that the primal level of meaning from which language develops is gestural in the bodily sense, such that there is a continuity between bodily expression in the perceptual field and linguistic expression in the semantic field, the latter being founded on the former as the condition of its possibility.<sup>35</sup>

Like Dufrenne, Merleau-Ponty points to poetry, understood as the presence of the body, the perceptual, and feeling in language, as evidence for the continuity between bodily gesture and linguistic gesture.<sup>36</sup> In short, the upshot for Merleau-Ponty is that both bodily movements and linguistic acts have a common fundamental meaning as gestural expression. Sole responsibility for such a gestural meaning, of course, is not ascribed to the subject of the philosophical tradition: in *The Phenomenology of Perception* the lived body creates such meaning in dialogue with the world, and Merleau-Ponty refers it to an anonymous “One” below the level of the ego, while in his last ontology it is a matter of the reversibility and intertwining through which the flesh folds, articulates, and communicates with itself. As Lyotard explains:

gesture, as Merleau-Ponty understood it, is the experience of a meaning where the felt and feeling come together in a common rhythm—like the two folds of a single

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<sup>34</sup> Merleau-Ponty, ‘Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence’ in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, 82.

<sup>35</sup> See the sections on *The understand of gestures* and *The linguistic gesture* in Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*, 190-3.

<sup>36</sup> Merleau-Ponty points to the emotional dimension – which is the gestural dimension – essential to poetry, and observes: “We would then find that words, vowels, and phonemes are so many ways of singing the world, and that they are destined to represent objects, not through an objective resemblance, in the manner imagined by the naïve theory of onomatopoeia, but because they are extracted from them, and literally express their emotional essence.” *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 193.

furrow—and where the constituents of the sensory form an organic and diachronic totality.<sup>37</sup>

Merleau-Ponty's theory of expression then appears to have the same trait of continuity as Dufrenne's: ultimately what is expressed is Being or flesh: the undivided dividing itself yet criss-crossing, communicating itself to itself in a chiasmatic upsurge of meaning. Merleau-Ponty continued to emphasise terms such as ambiguity, reversibility, and the chiasm, which indicate an overlapping without absolute coincidence, because such an absolute coincidence would obliterate the gap or spacing (*écart*) which is necessary for Being to appear to itself: it would be the Night of Dufrenne's Nature "in itself." Lyotard notes that Dufrenne proceeds from duality to unity, and Merleau-Ponty from unity to duality<sup>38</sup>, yet both posit the same metaphysics of continuity in either direction: the continuity between a unity which is the ultimate source of meaning and the duality necessary to perceive and articulate this meaning. For both, *expression* is the passage of this continuity, through which unity becomes duality.

Lyotard argues that the notion of the gesture, while posited in an attempt to overcome the subject/object divide, nevertheless points back to a subjectivity which hinders an openness to alterity. He writes:

the gesture refers if not to a subject, then at least to a kind of subjectivity, however anonymous or "natural," as Mikel Dufrenne would put it: it is experienced, lived, or in any case structures lived life, partaking of an unconscious that is not object of repression but subject of constitution.<sup>39</sup>

Merleau-Ponty invokes the notion of the "One," in the sense of a nonpersonal subject, in order to point to the fact that our lived experience is not constituted by an active ego or consciousness, but by the body in its operative relation to the world. The One is anonymous and in a sense unconscious because it is posited as being prior to the emergence of conscious subjectivity and reflective self-awareness.<sup>40</sup> In this, Merleau-

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<sup>37</sup> Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, 15.

<sup>38</sup> Lyotard, 'Language et nature,' 48.

<sup>39</sup> Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, 15.

<sup>40</sup> See for example Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Part Two, Chapter I,

Ponty pursues the path of passivity opened by Husserl through the notion of passive synthesis, and Lyotard notes that Merleau-Ponty takes this path as far as it can go in the essay 'Eye and Mind.' Yet for Lyotard, this is still not far enough. He contrasts Merleau-Ponty's attempts to locate the unconscious underside of conscious experience with that of Freud's, and again points to the difference between the harmonious continuity of meaning the phenomenologist posits and the disruptive order of repression posited by the psychoanalyst. What is at stake here is the capacity to locate something like the transcendental condition of possibility for the event, the principle of radical alterity which would account for the emergence of the truly unexpected and disruptive. Lyotard explains:

The "One" does not constitute an event in relation to the "I," on the contrary. What would this direction of anonymity lead to? At best the organization of the forms of sensibility, a space-time admittedly buried deeper than that of lived experience and less beholden to the laws of physical knowledge than the one Kant described, but notwithstanding a space and time that make up the *frame* in which the given gives itself, in which the event erupts, but which could never be the principle of an event. However preconceptual a system, like every system it is likely to testify not to the fact that something eventful has taken place (in the visual field or elsewhere), but precisely that the event (the bestowal) has been absorbed, received, perceived, integrated as world (or as history, etc.).<sup>41</sup>

Lyotard further argues that while Merleau-Ponty's notion of the "lived body" is an attempt to reach this preconscious level, it also has a homogenising effect and cannot account for the eruption of the event. Merleau-Ponty's view of the body is one which is attuned to the world in meaning, and through which meaning is made in dialogue with

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'Sensing,' section d. *Generality and particularity of the "senses"*, where we read: "Every perception takes place within an atmosphere of generality and is presented to us as anonymous. ... if I wanted to express perceptual experience with precision, I would have to say that *one* perceives in me, and not that I perceive. ... I experience sensation as a modality of a general existence, already destined to a physical world, which flows through me without my being its author." (223-4) This theme persists up to *The Visible and the Invisible* where we find, among other references, the following in the working notes: "*I* must be there in order to perceive - - But in what sense? As *one* --" (190) and "The I really is nobody, is the anonymous; it must be so, prior to all objectification, denomination, in order to be the Operator, or the one to whom all this occurs. The named I, the I named (*Le Je dénommé, le dénommé Je*) is an object. The primary I, of which this one is the objectification, is the unknown *to whom* all is given to see or to think, to whom everything appeals, before whom ... there is something." (246)

<sup>41</sup> Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, 16-17.

the world. For Lyotard there is too much *harmony* in this body, as there is in the body appealed to in Dufrenne's view of the poetic. He argues that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body fails to take account of the way the body can be dispossessed, the way it can lose its grip on the world and fail to make meaning with it, as in such common experiences as sleep and orgasm.<sup>42</sup> And he faults Merleau-Ponty for not doing justice to the radically disconcerting effects of emotion, to the point of claiming that there is no emotive body in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception.<sup>43</sup>

The ultimate significance of Lyotard's critiques of the metaphysics of continuity underlying the phenomenological theories of expression come into focus with his reflections on the *epistemological* privilege characteristic of phenomenology. For it is the supposed continuity between primordial reality, perception, art, and language which allow the inscription of all these concerns within a horizon of *knowledge*. Under the likely influence of Levinas, Lyotard asserts that "[p]henomenology cannot possibly reach the bestowal [of the event] since, faithful to the West's philosophical tradition, it remains a reflection on *knowledge*, and the purpose of such a reflection is to absorb the event, to recuperate the Other into the Same."<sup>44</sup> Typically, and as often seems to be the case with Dufrenne and Merleau-Ponty, phenomenologists make art and aesthetics a stage on the way to knowledge, ultimately the presumptuous knowledge of Being itself. This tendency is confirmed and clearly expressed by a somewhat later phenomenologist, Michel Henry, who writes in his 1988 book *Seeing the Invisible: On Kandinsky*:

What the greatest minds have ultimately sought from art is knowledge, a true or 'metaphysical' knowledge, capable of reaching beyond the external appearance of phenomena in order to lead us to their intimate essence.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Lyotard writes: "It would be false to contend that we are always immersed in the world as though in a bath of perceptions and meanings. Nor have we said the last word on the subject of our spatiotemporal experience by characterizing it as an enwrapped depth, an immanent transcendence, a chiasm. The world, too, is open to events: it is prey to slips, to surges of non-immersive zones, to crises of 'transcendence' without counterpart; worldly space and time can fail us, just as language can." *Discourse, Figure*, 130.

<sup>43</sup> Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, 424 n.3.

<sup>44</sup> Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, 17. Daniel Charles has also noted that Levinas comes to mind on reading the passage quoted here. 'Chair et Lyse,' 64.

<sup>45</sup> Michel Henry, *Seeing the Invisible*, 3.



Ultimately this knowledge, as Henry indicates, is the metaphysical or ontological knowledge of something which exceeds the phenomena themselves; a knowledge of what does *not* appear. As we have seen, this knowledge is supposedly made possible, according to Dufrenne and Merleau-Ponty, by the continuity between the human being and the world, between Being and meaning, which is also the continuity between perception, expression, and signification. This continuity is in turn grounded and accounted for by the supposition of an ultimately monistic ontology (Nature or flesh, or, in the case of Henry, life).

In returns to Merleau-Ponty in writings after *Discourse, Figure*, Lyotard demonstrates the implications of these critical points regarding the metaphysics of continuity for a philosophy of art. Firstly of note is Lyotard's ultimate scepticism (despite all his evident admiration) of Merleau-Ponty's treatment of Cézanne. In the essay 'Freud According to Cézanne,' he cites in this context the phenomenological concern with knowledge just mentioned. Lyotard writes that Merleau-Ponty's "analysis remains subordinate to a philosophy of perception that allows him to rediscover the true order of the sensible in Cézannean disorder, and to lift the veil that Cartesian and Galilean rationalism had thrown over the world of experience."<sup>46</sup> To this approach he then objects that

[w]e have no reason to believe that the curvature of Cézannean space, its intrinsic disequilibrium [...] more properly restores to us in person the phenomenality of the sensible than were Uccello's passion for perspective, Leonardo's for the model, or Klee's for plastic possibility.<sup>47</sup>

Moreover, Lyotard asserts that what Cézanne was after was not knowledge but the event: "Cézanne desires nothing more than to have Mount Sainte-Victoire cease to be an object of sight to become an event in the visual field: this is what the phenomenologist hopes to understand, and which I believe he cannot."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Lyotard, 'Freud According to Cézanne,' 33.

<sup>47</sup> Lyotard, 'Freud According to Cézanne,' 33-4.

<sup>48</sup> Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, 16.

The suspicion of Merleau-Ponty's valorisation of one artist over another on the basis of an *epistemological* or *metaphysical* criterion – their capacity to reveal “the true order of the sensible” – comes more fully to light in Lyotard's later essay ‘Philosophy and Painting in the Age of their Experimentation.’<sup>49</sup> Here he argues that the phenomenological assumption that we can have access to a true knowledge of Being or Nature (even if indirect, oblique, or ambiguous) leads us to a distorted perspective on art which fails to appreciate the full range of its power. After opining that metaphysics is the arrogance of philosophers, Lyotard writes that

Merleau-Ponty, one of the least arrogant of philosophers, still is unable to say that the eye's relation to the visible which is the relation of Being to itself in its primordial “enfolding,” finds expression in Cézanne or Giacometti, without immediately devalorizing other experimentations, such as Marey's, the cubists', or Duchamp's. He does so because they are unaware, he believes, of the “paradoxical” arrangement, the dischryony of elements as they relate to the whole, which alone, according to Rodin whom the philosopher follows here, can restore the being of movement or being as movement. This peculiar intolerance causes Merleau-Ponty to misjudge experiments on the perceptible and the speaker in works that require the commentator to exert just as strong a pressure on language as the pressure exerted by a Cézanne. Such inflexibility in the name of Being ...<sup>50</sup>

In sum, the upshot of Lyotard's critiques of the phenomenologists Dufrenne and Merleau-Ponty is that they are unable to carry their transcendental enquires far enough to account for the radical alterity which bestows the event and makes art possible. We might say that for Lyotard, phenomenology's attempt to move beyond the phenomena that appear to the conditions of appearing as such is both too ambitious, and not ambitious enough. It is too ambitious in proposing, according to the “metaphysics of continuity,” that we can have *knowledge* of the things themselves because the being of what doesn't appear is continuous with what does. Yet it is not ambitious enough because it cannot think the radical alterity of aesthetic phenomena, the way that we have “access” to things themselves through sensation and feeling, through their sheer

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<sup>49</sup> In *The Lyotard Reader*.

<sup>50</sup> Lyotard, ‘Philosophy and Painting in the Age of Their Experimentation: Contribution to an Idea of Postmodernity’ in *The Lyotard Reader*, 331.

unknowability, but ability to impinge on our faculties in a negative manner. Merleau-Ponty is unable to think the *difference* in the aesthetic field he opens us to because his reflections always return to a harmonious economy of the Same.

The metaphysics of continuity organises all meaning, including aesthetic meaning, according to a kind of teleology, that of the expression of a “natural meaning” towards the “good forms” of our habitual experience of the world. If art is limited to the supposed expression of Nature, or to the capturing of the process of perception’s organisation, then artistic experimentation is drastically limited: all art is a series of perspectives on an ultimately unified Being, and there is no room for radical invention, the eruption of the genuinely new.

In *Discourse, Figure*, Lyotard locates the principle of difference which he believes *can* account for the bestowal of the event and the character of avant-garde art in *desire*.<sup>51</sup> Throughout the late nineteen-sixties and early ‘seventies, he developed this theme of desire in radical psychoanalytic terms, through his “figural” and then “libidinal economic” aesthetics. In the later ‘seventies and ‘eighties, he abandoned desire in favour of linguistic pragmatics and Kantian aesthetics. This trajectory seems to leave phenomenology far behind, and I will not pursue it here. Instead, I want to move in the next section straight to Lyotard’s last period, where, I will argue, we see the return of phenomenological language and themes, but in the form of a reversal. By way of transition (and in order to demonstrate that this characterisation is not arbitrary) we may briefly note that Lyotard himself suggests that just such a reversal of phenomenology was already at work in *Discourse, Figure*. In the book itself he writes that “one can walk the same path as Merleau-Ponty, but in the opposite direction, our back toward him.”<sup>52</sup> Reflecting back on *Discourse, Figure* in his 1987 book *What to Paint?*, Lyotard focuses on his critique of the way Merleau-Ponty attempted to reconcile the Freudian unconscious with his own ontology of the flesh (a critique which boils down to the same essential issues as the metaphysics of continuity discussed above). He then explains that his own strategy in *Discourse, Figure* was to

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<sup>51</sup> “The event cannot be situated elsewhere than in the vacant space opened up by desire. This vacancy of space is precisely the preferred site of the bestowal.” Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, 18.

<sup>52</sup> Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, 54.

“invert the movement of phenomenologisation of the unconscious: not ground the symptom in an ontology of the invisible of the visible, but dramatise the visual work – painting first and foremost – by identifying the search for an unrepresentable event, as invisible as the primal scene can be.”<sup>53</sup>

### *Apparition*

As I indicated at the outset, there has so far been little attempt in the existing secondary literature to account for the noticeable shifts in themes and terminology of Lyotard’s late writings in aesthetics.<sup>54</sup> Yet there is indeed such a shift: in the very late nineteen-eighties and early nineteen-nineties, Lyotard’s last discussions of aesthetics in predominantly Kantian terms coincide with the introduction of new terms which begin to dominate: allusive terms that are only briefly outlined, and which can appear gnomic unless illuminated by a broader context. This broader context, I am suggesting, is precisely phenomenology and Lyotard’s earlier critical engagements with it. I propose to call this Lyotard’s “Dark period” because of the themes of darkness, blindness, death, and dark affect (melancholy, despair, terror, anger, etc.) which characterise many of these late writings. His aesthetics in this period might be considered to return to a phenomenological perspective insofar as it is governed by a thematic of *appearing*. This is signalled by the term “apparition” as the leading, privileged term to describe the artwork. Lyotard distinguishes between the *apparition* and the *appearance*: the latter indicates what appears in ordinary perception, while the former indicates what is proper to art. In a characteristic passage, he now explains such propriety as follows:

What is played out [in the artwork] is the mutation of sight into vision and appearance into apparition. Apparition is appearance stamped with the seal of its disappearance. Art puts death’s insignia on the sensible. It ravishes sensation

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<sup>53</sup> Lyotard, *What to Paint?*, 239. Italics mine.

<sup>54</sup> One reason for this lack of attention is probably that many of these writings have not been widely available until relatively recently. The main book from this period is *Karel Appel*, available in neither French or English (only German) before 2009. Many of the essays on art and artists from this period have also only become available recently with the other volumes of the Louven series, especially *Miscellaneous Texts 2*. Available for somewhat longer have been the essays on aesthetics – of which ‘Music, Mute’ and ‘Anima Minima’ are especially notable in relation to our concerns here – in *Postmodern Fables*.

from the night and impresses the seal of darkness upon it.<sup>55</sup>

Along the same lines, Lyotard also makes a distinction between the *visible* – a term he applies to “ordinary” sight – and the *visual*, the apparitional qualities of visual art. These visual, apparitional qualities are explicitly associated in one essay from this period<sup>56</sup> with what Merleau-Ponty calls, in ‘Eye and Mind,’ the “ghost-like” qualities of artworks:

Light, lighting, shadows, reflections, color, all these objects of [the painter’s] quest are not altogether real objects; like ghosts, they have only visual existence. In fact they only exist at the threshold of profane vision: they are not ordinarily seen.<sup>57</sup>

The visual is what is usually *invisible* in the visible, and the task of visual art is to make the invisible visible, to testify to the visual in the visible.

In his “Dark period,” Lyotard further describes the artwork as *the trace of a gesture in space-time-matter*.<sup>58</sup> This recalling of the Merleau-Pontian term “gesture” indicates that the meaning and authorship of the work are not to be ascribed to a creating subject alone: it is space-time-matter expressing itself through or with the artist, in a unity of sensing and sensed. The gesture is the bestowal of the event itself, an “absolutely emotive power,”<sup>59</sup> while its trace is registered in the artwork that is presented to perception, as the visual in the visible. Lyotard invokes a paradox here (something he never shied away from) with respect to immanence and transcendence: the artwork differs from an object of “ordinary perception” insofar as it bears the trace of a *beyond*, of *another* space-time-matter than that of everyday, constituted experience, and in this it is transcendent. Yet this transcendence is nothing spiritual, supernatural, or even metaphysical – it is not the passage to another world – but merely a dimension of “ordinary” space-time-matter, and in this sense the artwork remains immanent to our everyday world. Lyotard writes:

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<sup>55</sup> Lyotard, ‘Anima Minima’ in *Postmodern Fables*, 246.

<sup>56</sup> Lyotard, ‘Because Colour is a Case of Dust’ in *Miscellaneous Texts II*, 661.

<sup>57</sup> Merleau-Ponty, ‘Eye and Mind’ in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, 128.

<sup>58</sup> See for example ‘Music, Mute’ in *Postmodern Fables*, 217-18 and *Karel Appel*, 39-43.

<sup>59</sup> Lyotard, ‘Music, Mute’ in *Postmodern Fables*, 218.

The work is an appearance in which *apparition* happens. From it emanates a space, a time, a palette, that are irreducible to their visual and cultural context. Another world? No, a world that remains sensible, made of *aisthèta*. [...] Visual rather than simply visible.<sup>60</sup>

This paradox may be further elaborated through Lyotard's discussions of form and matter.

For Lyotard, the artwork is nothing other than *matter* (not, for example, as an empiricist epistemology would conceive it, in terms of causally related, formed objects, but as it may be received and thought aesthetically). In painting, Lyotard tells us, colour is matter in this aesthetic sense. In his book *Karel Appel: A Gesture of Colour*, he writes that the task of painting is to

let "colour itself" show through. In its truth, colour says nothing to form or forms. It is matter. But what is matter without form? That is hardly conceivable, and even imperceptible. In short, immaterial. Very good, says Appel, this is what one must *render*, that which the mind cannot conceive nor the eye perceive.<sup>61</sup>

Thus the task of the painter is to render colour in a way which "transcends" our ordinary experience of it, which is the experience of matter subordinated to form. Yet this "transcendence" remains entirely immanent to the material world; it merely allows to surface a dimension which is difficult to perceive or to think in habitual terms.

The invocation of gesture in Lyotard's late aesthetics does not imply an embrace of a theory of expression reliant on a metaphysics of continuity. To the contrary, there is every indication that Lyotard's earlier arguments against continuity and in favour of repression and misrecognition are still in force, despite the abandonment of the analytics of desire. Other key Freudian themes persist in these late works, especially the concepts of *Nachträglichkeit* (deferred action) and *anamnesis*. Their significance in Lyotard's late aesthetics is especially evident in the latter term, where the phrase

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<sup>60</sup> Lyotard, 'The Pictorial Event Today' in *Miscellaneous Texts I*, 227-9.

<sup>61</sup> Lyotard, *Karel Appel*, 71.

‘Anamnesis of the Visible,’ which had already been used to title an essay on Valerio Adami in the ‘eighties, is reused for an essay on Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger.<sup>62</sup> Anamnesis, of course, with its Freudian inflection, means to recall what has been repressed. This invocation of anamnesis signals precisely the fact that the visual cannot be thought as something in continuity with the visible (however obliquely), but only as subject to the distortions repression imposes. Moreover, Lyotard’s work on *Nachträglichkeit* emphasises that what is recalled through anamnesis is not simply an experience which was already well-formed before it was repressed: what Freud calls “primary repression” suggests that with the occurrence of a traumatic event, the organism was unprepared to receive that event and so couldn’t constitute it as a coherent experience. It can therefore only be recalled as a traumatic trace, and pieced together after the fact, on the basis of its deferred action.<sup>63</sup> The “anamnesis of the visible” suggests that the visual is precisely such an unrepresentable *in* the visible, which can never be captured as well-formed presentation. A “true origin” of the visible will always elude us. The deformation of monstrous artworks testifies to this incommensurable order of sensation.

Notably, many of the themes and terms that Lyotard uses in this late period are already present in Dufrenne’s writings, albeit with an ultimately different significance. For example, Dufrenne identifies the artwork (or more properly, for him, the aesthetic object) as an apparition: “What [art] produces is an apparition, thereby revealing the power of appearing.”<sup>64</sup> And in particular, as we saw above, he announces the themes of death and night Lyotard will make central to his reflections in this period. Yet Lyotard deploys these terms in ways quite different to Dufrenne, to Merleau-Ponty, and indeed to other phenomenologists such as Henry who also employ metaphors of visible and invisible, day and night, life and death.

The darkness into which we are continually plunged in the late works of Jean-François Lyotard, is an obscure avatar of the phenomenological reduction. We need to become blind to the *visible*, the world of vision as it is perceived according to the natural attitude, in order to become sensitive to the *visual*, that which shines through in the

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<sup>62</sup> Collected in *Miscellaneous Texts II*.

<sup>63</sup> For Lyotard’s discussion of these themes, see for example *Heidegger and “the jews.”*

<sup>64</sup> Dufrenne, *In the Presence of the Sensuous*, xi.

apparition after the bracketing has taken place. Moreover, what “comes to light” through this passage of death and rebirth is something close to the transcendental revealed in “traditional” phenomenological reduction: what *bestows* the given. Lyotard writes that “[t]he point is always not to succumb to the temptation of the visible and to honour in it the obscure power of what makes it possible.”<sup>65</sup> This “obscure power” sounds much like a transcendental condition of possibility. However, it is not an *a priori* structure which conditions the reception of the event; it is the singular event itself, a power of disruption which can only be indicated laterally or negatively: the mark of disappearance on appearance.

Lyotard’s tropes of apparition and night in his late aesthetics in fact indicate a *reversal* of the phenomenological problematic: art does not show the *birth* of the world, its perceptual organisation or constitution, but its *death*, its deconstitution – the death of our habitual ways of perceiving and the opening to matter “prior” to form. Of the visual in works of art, Lyotard writes: “Merleau-Ponty said: nascent state. But it is equally their dying state.”<sup>66</sup> According to Dufrenne’s sympathetic elaboration of Merleau-Ponty’s aesthetics, “Cézanne does not deconstruct, he pre-constructs. He does not shatter the fruit bowl, he shows us its genesis...it’s coming into the visible.”<sup>67</sup> But Lyotard would have us consider that Cézanne does shatter the fruit bowl; that what he reveals is a loss of the visible, its death, rather than its birth. Lyotard now describes artworks as “monsters,” which he defines precisely as objects that show that they are not constituted.<sup>68</sup> So, instead of plunging phenomena into night in order to witness how they are born, Lyotard sees artworks as returning from the night, shining in the light but bearing the sign of their death or deconstitution. For him, art does not give us knowledge of how habitual perception or the so-called natural world is organised or constituted, it shows us different and unexpected ways of perceiving by deconstituting such habitual perceptions, by disharmonizing the apparent natural accord between self and world. Lyotard does not believe that art’s vocation is to capture an origin, a primordial nature, and he is sceptical of any attempt to view things this way because it is a reconciliation fantasy, because it involves the contradiction of bringing darkness to

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<sup>65</sup> Lyotard, *Sam Francis*, §6 (unpaginated).

<sup>66</sup> Lyotard, ‘The Pictorial Event Today’ in *Miscellaneous Texts I*, 231.

<sup>67</sup> Dufrenne, ‘Eye and Mind’ in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, 260.

<sup>68</sup> Lyotard, ‘The Pictorial Event Today’ in *Miscellaneous Texts I*, 231.



light, and because it unduly limits the range of arts we can consider legitimate and their critical, political power. Instead of the artist's plunge into blindness returning us to nature, Lyotard sees it as a "second denaturation," a deconstruction of the visible which would bring new invisibles to light rather than reveal a natural order of the visible in its primordial state. Art does not show the genesis of "good forms," the emergence of order, but the invention of monstrous "bad forms," the irruption of disorder.

The "lesson of darkness" I have used as the title for this article is taken from Lyotard's book *Sam Francis: Lesson of Darkness: 'like the paintings of a blind man.'* The term itself (*leçons de ténèbres*) refers originally to a form of baroque music dedicated to the commemoration of the period between the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. Significantly, Lyotard also uses the figure of Lazarus to characterise artworks: they are something come back from the dead.<sup>69</sup> The lesson of darkness the artist gives us is testimony to the visual in the visible, a lesson won at the cost of a self-imposed blindness to the visible world, a death of sensibility. Yet the artwork is not simply the death of the visible, but its resurrection: it returns something to the light. We cannot access perception at the point of its birth; we have always already lived perception, and we must plunge into its death and then resurrect it in order to see something other than our habitual constitution or organisation of experience. This is because, according to Lyotard, we cannot think or perceive the event in and of itself; it is the unrepresentable something that always eludes presentation, yet makes presentation possible. The event can only be apprehended through presentation, but laterally or negatively, as that which in appearance does not fully or clearly appear. Here we see the persistence of the theme of *différance* in the visual field, or the invisible in the visible. In Lyotard's last writings these invisibles are indicated by the "mark of disappearance" in the apparition. Lyotard's "lesson of darkness" is that art testifies to the death of the world and its resurrection, rather than to its birth.

In a sense Lyotard's aesthetics unfolds phenomenology's own movement beyond itself, to seek the conditions of appearance which do not themselves appear. Yet Lyotard differs significantly from the phenomenologists insofar as he sees phenomenology as

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<sup>69</sup> See in particular the essay 'Fait Pictural [Necessity of Lazarus]' in *Miscellaneous Texts II*.

wedded to *epistemological* and *metaphysical* commitments: it seeks knowledge, ultimately of Being itself. Lyotard's philosophy is animated by a doubt about the possibility of such knowledge, a doubt which manifests in his refusal of the thesis of *continuity* between Being and meaning which Dufrenne and Merleau-Ponty entertain, in favour of the rupture of the event. For Lyotard, the investigation into the conditions of possibility of appearance in the aesthetic field is no longer the search for a knowledge of the organisation or constitution of the good forms of ordinary experience. Rather, it is the search for what *bestows* the event, which for Lyotard is the obscure secret of art's power.

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