

LYOTARD AND THE “SECOND COPERNICAN TURN”

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At first glance it would seem that to even mention the name of Jean-François Lyotard in company with Nicolaus Copernicus is utterly out of place. What could a famous Polish astronomer and a notorious French contemporary philosopher have at all common? Lyotard's special theory of Copernicus' does not exist and there is nothing in particular in Copernicus' writings that could elucidate Lyotard's. But there is, however, a certain link between the two which could be of some help here. Is Copernicus' theoretical gesture in its very nature revolutionary? There are two more popular contemporary answers. On one side there are those who claim that the emergence of Copernican astronomy is “a particularly famous case of paradigm change”,¹ on the other hand there are those scholars who claim that Copernicus himself is rather a conservative thinker, that the “Copernican revolution”, if there ever was one, did not take place in its full sense until Kepler and Newton. “For the sciences, the real impact of Copernican astronomy did not even begin to occur until some half to three-quarters of a century after the publication of Copernicus' treatise (1543), when in the early seventeenth century considerations of the physics of a moving earth posed problems for the science of motion. These problems were not solved until a radical new inertial physics arose that was in no way Copernican but was rather associated with Galileo, Descartes, Kepler, Gassendi, and Newton. Furthermore, during the seventeenth century the Copernican astronomical system became completely outmoded and was replaced by the Keplerian system. In short, the idea that a Copernican revolution in science occurred goes counter to the evidence [...] and is an invention of later historians. [...] There is an obvious parallel here with the so-called English revolution of the mid-seventeenth century, which

¹ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Third Edition, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1996, p. 68.

was not generally conceived to have been a revolution until after the French Revolution, a century and a half later.”²

There are then two major positions personified by Kuhn and I. B. Cohen concerning Copernicus’ place in the history of science. There are many more, of course, as the present volume of *Filozofski vestnik* clearly and vividly testifies to. What if we add another possible approach and try to say “something completely different” as the Monty Pythons would say, i.e. how would it be, if we tried to tell the same old story from another point of view. In other words, it is time for Lyotard to make his entry on the scene. Not only because his major work *The Differend* is centered on the problem of testimony, but also because he constantly discusses themes that are tightly linked and which might throw new light on our discussion about Copernicus’ theoretical gesture, and the themes of enthusiasm and the transition in art and literature from the invisible to the visible. Apparently this topic has nothing to do with science or Copernicus’ gesture as such. But if even if we carefully distinguish between a Copernican and a scientific revolution as Cohen does in his otherwise brilliant work, nobody can deny the fact that the scientific revolution was at least partly carried out in the belief that with Copernicus something *did* happen. Whatever that something may have been, perhaps even for the wrong reasons, it has always been accompanied by a certain feeling, a feeling that we are perhaps dealing with *the event* in science. Here we are already on Lyotard’s terrain, for his theory claims that an event is always accompanied by a feeling. This feeling “informs consciousness *that* there is something, without being able to tell *what* it is. It indicates the *quod* without the *quid*. The essence of the event: that *there is* ‘comes before’ *what* there is.”³ Does not our dilemma here concern the very status of Copernicus’ gesture in exactly the same manner? Was it not only later elaborated what there was in Copernicus’ original gesture? Even more, was not the scientific revolution also possible only because of the very enthusiasm of the spectators of the Copernican revolution, in other words, were Copernicus’ successors not always driven by the belief that as regards Copernicus, something did happen, a belief which was crucial for the scientific revolution, which was going to make “the Copernican astronomical system completely outmoded” and “replaced it with the Keplerian system”? This feeling that something did happen with Copernicus – be it “turn”, “revolution”, “turning point”, “paradigm-shift” – bears *a name*,

² I. B. Cohen, *Revolution in Science*, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Ma.) and London 1985, p. 106–107.

³ Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger and “the jews”*, translated by Andreas Michel and Mark S. Roberts, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis 1990, p. 16.

Copernicus’ name. Many thinkers from Kant⁴ to Freud⁵ used this name not only to reinforce the image of Copernicus as a brave thinker whose gesture changed the world, but also believed that their gesture was revolutionary, too. There are others, such as Nietzsche, for whom Copernicus also marks a turning point in Man, it is, however, uncertain whether we are dealing here with nihilism or a resort to an old Ideal.⁶ But here, with Kant, Freud and Nietzsche, we have already slightly changed the terrain – we are no longer on the terrain of Copernicus, but the terrain of the “Copernican turn”. But first a remark or two.

So, with Copernicus something undoubtedly occurred, something did happen, but this something, if there had not been others to develop it further, if there had not been a scientific revolution, would today be meaningless. This problematic of something which is too soon and shocking interests Lyotard, or, as he puts it in a different context, “something, however, *will make* itself understood, ‘later’”.⁷ In his late opus Lyotard thus thematized the very emergence of something new and different, of something that had until then been thought to be impossible. This something not only emerges, so to speak, out of nothing, but also reformulates, or better stated, demands a reconfiguration of the entire situation.⁸ Didn’t exactly that happen with and especially after Copernicus in the field of science? Here we have three dimensions of the same problem: firstly, the emergence of something disrupting, something which throws new light on a particular problem, secondly, the elapse of some time between the “original” impact and later consequences, and thirdly, someone who will carry out what the original invention did not succeed in doing. This problem has different faces in Lyotard, for instance, when he in *The Differend* claims that “every wrong ought to be able to be put into phrases”, he is mainly focusing on the ethical and legal territory, however, is not the very same thing happening in the field of science – every break, every invention must be followed, if we are allowed to use Lyotard’s terminol-

⁴ In the Preface to the second edition of *Critique of Pure Reason* (1787, B XVI). See Volker Gerhardt, “Kants kopernikanische Wende”, in *Kant-Studien*, No. 78, Vol. 2, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin & New York 1987, pp. 133–151.

⁵ See Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, Lecture XVIII, in: *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XVI, Hogarth Press, London 1953–74, p. 285.

⁶ See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, III, 25.

⁷ Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger and “the jews”*, p. 13.

⁸ One is tempted here to evoke the theory of the perhaps leading contemporary philosopher, Alain Badiou, for whom truth is always fidelity to an event. For further reading see: Peter Hallward, *Badiou. A Subject to Truth*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis & London 2003.

ogy, by inventing new rules for the formation and linking of the phrases and new genres of discourse. The same happens in painting concerning transition from the hitherto invisible to the visible. This transition, as we will see further on, is for Lyotard possible only if the subject himself retreats, retracts, withdraws, makes a void, a blank, so that the heterogeneous might appear. This demands a different role of the subject, it demands a new conception of the subject, a conception which would present another turn regarding the so-called “Copernican turn”.

In the name of the Second Copernican turn

In philosophy the Copernican turn is usually connected with the Kantian revolution, which puts the subject in the center – cognition no longer follows the object, the constitution of objectivity itself becomes dependent upon the subject. It is T. W. Adorno, famous member of the Frankfurt school of Marxism, who first formulated the task of philosophy as being to accomplish the second Copernican turn, a turn which would turn the hierarchy of object and subject upside down, a turn that would give primacy to the object. Is not the whole history of philosophy in the twentieth century – from Heidegger to Adorno, Wittgenstein to Austin, structuralism and post-structuralism, nothing but an elaboration of this task? Adorno’s leading premise, however, is that the first Copernican turn *has* already taken place and that it actually enthroned the entity called Subject. But today it is clear that things are far more complicated than that. To make a long story short, let us say that all this “leads one to ask skeptically: has there ever existed a unified conscious subject, a watertight Cartesian ego? Or is subject some phantasy or abstraction that is retrospectively attributed to a past that one wants either to exceed, betray or ignore? That is to say, is not the subject a fiction that Kant finds in Descartes without being in Descartes, that Heidegger finds in Kant without being in Kant, or that Derrida finds in Husserl without being in Husserl?”⁹ Even for Kant things are far more complicated: after the publication of all three *Critiques*, which were suppose to form a system, Kant was still not satisfied – as his *Opus posthumum* testifies. His successors, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, were all convinced that “everything is already there” (in Lacanese, Kant was their “subject suppose to know”) and that in the name of fidelity to Kant only strict elaboration is needed. It was Nietzsche who, in the already mentioned interpretation of Copernicus, clearly influenced both authors of the *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno, as well as Heidegger,

⁹ Simon Chritchley, *Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity*, Verso, London & New York 1999, p. 59.

so Copernicus and the Copernican turn gained its place within a fatal diagnosis of modern and of Western civilization. It is in this context that one has to understand Lyotard’s constant insistence on “guarding heterogeneity” and multiplicity against negativity, dialectics and subjectivity. Lyotard’s thought always tries to maintain and preserve a gap between object and subject. Concepts of void, the elaboration of blankness, self-erasure and silence represent the main thread of his unfinished opus and are closely linked with the search for a new conception of the subject.

This may actually seem to be a surprise as Lyotard’s project remains to be infamous for his declaring “the end of grand narratives”. What actually proclaims this end? When this or that meta-discourse explicitly takes refuge in this or that grand narrative, states Lyotard, such as the dialectics of Spirit, hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or laborious subject, the development of wealth, then with the expression ‘modern’ we decide to name a science which refers to those narratives in order to legitimate itself.¹⁰ The problem of a “narrative” – be it “grand” or “little” narratives – is namely for Lyotard always a problem of a “social bond”. In other words, knowledge ceases to be an end in itself, it loses its “use-value” and it has to speak and interact with others in a normative way through *savoir-entendre*, *savoir-dire*, and *savoir-vivre*. This topic is something which Lyotard already conceptualized in his work *Libidinal Economy*, published six years earlier: “The modern scientist no longer exists as a knower, that is to say as a subject, but as a small transitory region in a process of energetic metamorphosis, incredibly refined; he exists only as a ‘researcher’, which means on the one hand, of course, as part of a bureaucratic power.”¹¹ Philosophy and science therefore cannot avoid some relationship with the community; terror is in a way unavoidable. Knowledge is therefore faced with the following alternative – be operative, commensurable or simply vanish!¹² The main topics of *The Differend* are already there: terror, erasure, and incommensurability. The basic aim and task of philosophy in *The Differend* is: “to defend and illustrate philosophy in its differend with its two adversaries: on its outside, the genre of economic discourse (exchange, capital); on its inside, the genre of academic discourse (mastery)”.¹³ There are two main

¹⁰ See Jean-François Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge*, translated by Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1984, p. 8.

¹¹ Jean-François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, translated by Iain Hamilton Grant, Athlone Press, London 1993, p. 253–254.

¹² See *Postmodern Condition*, p. 8.

¹³ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend. Phrases in Dispute*, translated by Georges Van Den Abbelee, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1988, p. xiii.

dangers that lurk on the edge of philosophy: the outer world governed by the principle of efficiency, capitalism, and academic discourse with its hierarchical structure. There are many scientists, says Lyotard in the *Postmodern Condition*, whose singular novelties were suppressed sometimes even for decades because they would destabilize the established positions not just within the scholarly and scientific world but also within the given problematic.¹⁴ Terror is for Lyotard not only a terror of the universal over the particular or singular, but also the terror of efficiency that threatens to eliminate those who do not cooperate – they are simply excluded. The arrogant message of those in power to scientists is: Adjust your efforts to our goals or else...¹⁵ Though philosophy was always struggling with the outer world and competing with its rivals, its fight today has new and unprecedented dimensions, the struggle is today on the level of the “anonymous infinity which organizes and disorganizes a particular subject which regardless of its social rank is its voluntary or involuntary servant.”¹⁶ This danger of anonymous force is to be understood in connection with the following programmatic question: “Marxism has not come to an end, but how does it continue? [...] Even if the wrong is not universal (but how you can prove it? it’s an Idea, the silent feeling that signals a differend remains to be listened to. Responsibility to thought requires it. This is the way in which Marxism has not come to an end, as the feeling of the differend.”¹⁷

The broader theoretical context of Lyotard’s theoretical gesture with its claims that consensus is executing a violence upon heterogeneity,¹⁸ that post-modern science does not produce a known but an unknown,¹⁹ that little narratives are nothing but imaginative innovation and that inventions are always the result of disagreement,²⁰ would not be something completely original among his contemporaries. Take, for instance, Gilles Deleuze with his formulation that the task of philosophy is to create new concepts and to resist the present, the already known, then the other pole of Lyotard’s opus, the theme of silence, silencing, the absence of a common denominator, idiom, or platform, would meet the principal program of Michel Foucault’s work *Madness and Civilization: a History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, that is, to write down an archeology of silence, a paradoxical program which was justifiably criticized by the recently deceased Jacques Derrida. There are many

¹⁴ See *Postmodern Condition*, p. 108.

¹⁵ See *ibid.*

¹⁶ Jean Françoise Lyotard, *Moralités postmodernes*, Galilée, Paris 1993, p. 135.

¹⁷ *Differend*, p. 171.

¹⁸ See *Postmodern Condition*, p. 9.

¹⁹ See *ibid.*, p. 102.

²⁰ See *ibid.*, p. 9.

other themes in Lyotard which would be interesting to compare with other contemporary philosophers such as Jacques Rancière, Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben etc., and, of course, also Adorno and Heidegger with Lyotard's incessant polemics with them.²¹

But to limit the originality of Lyotard's gesture only and foremost to the contemporary context would also be in a way misleading. Let us take Deleuze, for instance. For him philosophy can lead to heavy internal fights but it is still not such a force as religions, states or medias are. Philosophy for Deleuze can lead its war against them only as a kind of guerilla, it has nothing to tell them so it does not debate with them but leads them to what Deleuze calls "negotiations". These forces are traversing everyone; since they are too strong and too powerful for us, everyone experiences a kind of this excess. It is exactly this feeling, this sensation of "ce qui m'arrive est trop grand pour moi" which Lyotard conceptualizes in his treatment of the Kantian notion of the sublime. But precisely at the point where he seems to be nearest to Deleuze he is also the furthest from him. For Deleuze this point coincides with the theme of (artistic) creation, and of the compromise we are always forced into, while Lyotard is headed in a completely different direction. Even if "negotiations" for Deleuze can never lead to consensus, even if he too like Lyotard is a ferocious enemy of the categories of One, Totality, identity etc., it seems that for him "negotiations" silently presuppose two already existing sides with their more or less defined positions, identities, desires, a kind of "we know what we want or don't want" – while for Lyotard exactly this is a problem. What if there is no "other side", what if those which are supposed to be on the other side are eliminated either physically or legally? What if even their status is denied? What if we do not know who is on any side at all? What if we are a blank, a whiteness on the white background, a kind of *White Square on White Square*, what if we are nothing but forever erased and nullified as victims of gas chambers are? And if finally we manage to obtain two sides – what if an unsettled "issue" between them does not exist at all? What if the idioms, concepts, even the language that would serve as a medium of articulation have yet to be invented?

All these questions raised are faced with the original double bind described in *The Differend*:

This is what a wrong [tort] would then be: a damage [dommage] accompanied by the loss of the means to prove the damage. This is the case if the victim is deprived of life, or of all his or her liberties, or of the

²¹ See Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger and "the jews"*, pp. 3–5, 51–94.

freedom to make his or her ideas or opinions public, or simply the right to testify to the damage, or even more simply, if the testifying phrase is itself deprived of authority. In all of these cases, to the privation constituted by the damage there is added the impossibility of bringing it to the knowledge of others, and in particular to the knowledge of a tribunal. Should the victim seek to bypass this impossibility and testify anyway to the wrong done to him or to her, he or she comes up against the following argumentation: either the damages you complain about never took place, and your testimony is false; or else they took place, and since you are able to testify to them, it is not a wrong that has been done to you, but merely a damage, and your testimony is still false.²²

In other words, “I would like to call a differend [différend] the case where the plaintiff is divested of the means to argue and becomes for that reason a victim.”²³ The differend thus cannot be solved in advance, however, the task is “to give the differend its due to institute new addressees, new addressors, new significations, and new referents in order for the wrong to find an expression and for the plaintiff to cease being a victim. This requires new rules for the formation and linking of phrases. No one doubts that language is capable of admitting these new phrase families or new genres of discourse. Every wrong ought to be able to be put into phrases. A new competence (or ‘prudence’) must be found”²⁴ The task of philosophy is not to forget, to repress, to put aside, to minimize – “one’s responsibility before thought, but consists, on the contrary, in detecting differends and in finding the (impossible) idiom for phrasing them. This is what a philosopher does. An intellectual is someone who helps forget differends, by advocating a given genre, whichever one it may be (including the ecstasy of sacrifice), for the sake of political hegemony”.²⁵ The only necessary task is then to make *enchainements*, to make linkages: “It is necessary to make a linkage. This is not an obligation, a *Sollen*, but a necessity, a *Müssen*. To link is necessary, but how to link is not.”²⁶ In other words, the rule of philosophical discourse is “to discover its rule: its *a priori* is what is at stake. It is a matter of formulating this rule, which can only be done in the end, if there is an end.”²⁷ This attempt to discover and formulate a rule – forerun by Kant’s distinction between determinate

²² Jean-François Lyotard, *Differend*, p. 5.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 30–31.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

and reflective judgments in his *Critique of Judgment* – presents perhaps the main trait of Lyotard’s philosophical project.

On two events or Lyotard’s version of the modern

In essence this trait is connected with the task of making the invisible visible, of presenting the unrepresentable. We should, however, admit that Lyotard is here more ambiguous than he seems – since every presentation is for him a “relativization”,²⁸ since every witness is already a traitor”,²⁹ it seems that a critique of representation in Lyotard’s opus is faced with the same ambiguity as, for instance, in Deleuze, who hesitates between “thought without image” and the “new image of thought”. The very same ambiguity is at work in Lyotard’s interpretation of Auschwitz – “representing ‘Auschwitz’ in images and words is a way of making us forget this. I am not thinking here only of bad movies and widely distributed TV series, of bad novels or ‘eyewitness accounts’. I am thinking of those very cases that, by their exactitude, their severity, are, or should be, best qualified not to let us forget. But even they represent what, in order not to be forgotten as that which is forgotten itself, must remain unrepresentable. Claude Lanzmann’s film *Shoah* is an exception, maybe the only one. [...] Whenever one represents, one inscribes in memory, and this might seem a good defense against forgetting. It is, I believe, just the opposite. Only that which has been inscribed can, in the current sense of the term, be forgotten, because it could be effaced. But what is not inscribed, through the lack of an inscribable surface, of duration and a place for the inscription to be situated, what has no place in the space nor in the time of domination, in the geography, and the diachrony of the self-assured spirit, because it is not synthesizable [...] cannot be forgotten, does not offer a hold to forgetting, and remains present ‘only’ as an affection that one cannot even qualify, like a state of death in the life of the spirit. One *must*, certainly inscribe in words, images. One cannot escape the necessity of representing. It would be sin itself to believe oneself safe and sound. But it is one thing to do it in view of saving memory, and quite another to try to preserve the remainder, the unforgettable forgotten, in writing.”³⁰

As was recently shown by Gérard Wajcman³¹, the Shoah is an event which

²⁸ Jean-François Lyotard, *L’Inhumain. Causeries sur le temps*, Galilée, Paris 1988, p. 138.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

³⁰ Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger and “the jews”*, p. 26.

³¹ See Gérard Wajcman, “L’art, la psychanalyse, le siècle”, in: Aubert, Cheng, Milner, Regnault, Wajcman, *Lacan, l’écrit, l’image*, Flammarion, Paris 2000, pp. 27–78, and Gérard Wajcman, *L’objet du siècle*, Verdier, Paris 1998.

does not have the same status as any other event. The first reason for this being the fact that there are no documents or images, there are no archives. This absence is not accidental: the Nazis took every precaution and care to leave no trace, no documents, photographs or ruins. The Uniqueness of the Shoah for Wajcman is not to be found in the extensiveness of the crime, its systematicness and number of victims. The Shoah is incomparable to any other event because of the very effort of the Nazis who tried to erase the crime from every representation and from every possible memory. To erase the Jews not only from the face of the earth, but also from history, memory, past and future. Primo Levi reports that one German officer said to the newcomers in the camp: “Whatever the end of the war may be, we have already won and you have lost: no one will be alive among you to testify to it. Even if some of you might escape, the world will not believe you. Maybe there will be some suspicions, some doubts, discussions, maybe historians will investigate and research it, but there will be no certainty: because in destroying you, we are destroying the evidence itself. In case some proofs or any of you might get through all this, people won’t believe you, what you will talk about will be too monstrous for people to believe.”³² It is this problematic that lies at the heart of *The Differend* and it is this that almost the entire history of contemporary art is about – i.e. how to make the invisible visible and how to render the uniqueness of the object. That is also one of the major reasons why Lyotard was so obsessed with painting, what he was looking in it for,³³ and why he went to look back in Freud and Kant. The reason for his elaboration of the Kantian theses on history, politics and enthusiasm might lie in the fact that for Lyotard “enthusiasm as such sees nothing, or better, sees nothing and connects it with the unrepresentable”.³⁴ In this transition from the invisible to the visible we can see a Lyotardian version of the famous Freudian dictum *Wo Es war, soll ich werden*: where there was the unrepresentable, a presentation should emerge, where there was the invisible, something visible should be, where there was nothing, a subject should occur. This is exactly the problem in, for instance, Malevitch’s painting *Black Square on White Square* (1915). The mark of Malevitch’s genius

³² See Gérard Wajcman, “L’art, la psychanalyse, le siècle”, p. 37.

³³ The task of the avant-garde painter is according to Lyotard’s essay “Représentation, présentation, imprésentable” to show that within the visual there is the invisible-unrepresentable, which for its object has an Idea. This presentation is a product of hard work, the audience does not understand that “we need one year sometimes to make a white square [carré blanc], that is, to represent nothing”. See *Inhumain*, p. 133.

³⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, *Enthousiasme. La critique kantienne de l’histoire*, Galilée, Paris 1986, p. 55.

precisely consists of giving body to the nothing: this nothing is seen on the surface of the picture – as a black square. By seeing the depth we see nothing that is not already there: there, that is, in the foreground, on the surface, in the black square. Materialistically, how can nothing that is ‘behind’ the surface be seen? How can one see the transcendence that is at the heart of the immanence itself? Only by seeing/realizing that behind the surface there is nothing – but the surface itself. In this precise sense it can be said that, by seeing a black square on a white square, we see nothing as something.³⁵

However, is it not paradoxical that Lyotard is interested in such dissimilar phenomena as the Shoah and enthusiasm embody? Let’s take a look. If, on the one hand, Shoah is something unrepresentable, immeasurable, unique, precarious, on the other enthusiasm (of the spectators of the French Revolution), is a phenomenon that for Kant cannot be forgotten. Two extremities, then: here something impossible, unrepresentable, nothing in itself which resists every memory and which every rendering betrays; there something that cannot be annihilated, negated, abolished. Here terror and horror; there enthusiasm, excitement, joy, elation. Here horror without witnesses, unbelievable horror which separates forever not only victims and executioners, but also those who survived from the others; there, contagious elation which integrates, friendship, brotherhood. Furthermore. Horror and petrifying anxiety for something that makes us alive, something that revives, resurrects, reanimates. In the Shoah both victims and hangmen are for obviously different reasons not worthy of being considered human beings, they are both at a kind of bottom of the human condition, and as such are a stain, which pertains to all humanity. Revolution, on the other hand, brings about something which cannot ever again be forgotten in all its positivity, as Kant says, regarding the disposition of human nature and ability to improve. Both these two events are impossible and unpredictable, but each of them in its own way. The Shoah cannot be imagined or presented without already being betrayed, the French Revolution as a sign of constant progress cannot be erased, it is unimaginable that it is not present. So, if the Shoah cannot be presented because it is so thoroughly erased, a revolution cannot be erased because it is so present. The Shoah is, as Lacan would put it, something which “doesn’t stop not being written”, it is something impossible (to present and represent for Lyotard), while enthusiasm is something which “doesn’t stop being written”,

³⁵ See Rado Riha, “Seeing the Revolution, Seeing the Subject”, *Parallax*, Issue 27, April-June 2003, Routledge, London 2003, p. 33.

it is necessary (it is “*signum demonstrativum, rememorativum, prognosticon*” as Kant put it).³⁶ And finally, Shoah seems to be a kind of a black hole that sucks everything into it, while the revolution is a kind of pure emanation of light, a lighthouse on our journey in history.

The first impression we get when faced with this list of numerous oppositions is that there is no possible connection between the two events. However, there are more than your philosophy dreams of, Horatio! Let us examine two of them. Firstly, is there a concept comprising all the above-mentioned paradoxes and contradictions? Without a doubt! But it is not found in Lyotard, one should look for it in Lacan. Lacan’s *objet petit a* is an unrepresentable object, nothing in itself, however it can magically color any everyday object and it can render anything beautiful. It is something the Greeks called *agalma*, another name for this secret treasure which is “in you more than you”. It makes you alive, and as a mask of *das Ding*, brings you close to death – if *das Ding* is approached too closely it triggers anxiety and horror. The unrepresentable concept of *objet petit a* is a kind of a-concept, it is absent from language, while at the same time it frames reality. As a stain in a picture, the *objet petit a* attracts the gaze, yet it is also the cause of the desire. At this point we approach the problematics of the Real – “the trauma *qua* real is not the ultimate kernel referent of the symbolic process, but precisely that X which forever hinders any neutral representation of external referential reality. To put it more paradoxically, that Real *qua* traumatic antagonism is, as it were, the *objective factor of subjectivization* itself; it is the object which accounts for the failure of every neutral-objective representation, the object which ‘patologizes’ the subject’s gaze or approach, makes it biased, pulls it askew. At the level of gaze, the Real is not so much the invisible Beyond, eluding our gazes which can perceive only delusive appearances, but, rather, the very stain or spot which disturbs and blurs our ‘direct’ perception of reality – which ‘bends’ the direct straight line from our eyes to the perceived object.”³⁷ In short, there is a theme in Lyotard which brings us into the midst of his eternal differend with Lacan that he tried to avoid by leaning on Freud.

However, there are other topics of the Real as well. One needs to remember that one of the pairs of oppositions of the Shoah and enthusiasm was also the pair of impossible and necessary, of something which “doesn’t stop not being written” and something which “doesn’t stop being written”. This pair

³⁶ See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX, Encore, On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge*, trans. Bruce Fink, W. W. Norton & Co., New York and London 1998, pp. 132–133 and sq.

³⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, Verso, London & New York 1997, p. 214.

is of crucial importance for us here, for it presents something which is possible only on the background of the dispositive of modern science – maybe one should finally take seriously Lyotard's own classification of postmodern as a radical modern. Jean-Claude Milner, who is our guide here, has also classified Lyotard as modern, however different than here and in a different context.³⁸ We will use here his text on Lacan and science, especially the part which elaborates the link between contingency, impossibility and necessity in modern science:

The letter is as it is, without any reason causing it to be what it is; by the same token, there is no reason for it to be other than it is. And if it were other than it is, it would solely be another letter. In truth, from the moment that it is, the letter remains and it does not change ("the unique number, which cannot be another"). At most, a discourse may not change the letter, but rather change letters. In this manner, and by a tricky turn of events, the letter takes on the traits of immutability, homomorphic to those of the eternal idea. Undoubtedly, the immutability of what has no reason to be other than it is, has nothing to do with the immutability of what cannot, without violating reason, be other than it is. But the imaginary homomorphism remains. It then follows that the capture of the diverse by the letter gives the letter, insofar as the diverse can be other than it is, the imaginary traits of what cannot be other than it is. This is what is called the necessity of the laws of science. It resembles in all points the necessity of the supreme Being, but it resembles it all the more insofar it has nothing to do with it. The structure of modern science is entirely based on the contingency. The material necessity that one recognizes in these laws is the scar of that very contingency. [...] In a moment of clarity, every point of every referent of every proposition of science appears to be infinitely other than it is, from an infinity of points of view; in the next moment, the letter has fixed each point as it is, and as not being able to be other than it is, save by changing letters, that is, field. But the condition of the latter moment is the earlier moment. To manifest that a point of the universe is as it is requires the dice to be thrown in a possible universe wherein this point would be other than it is. To the interval of time during the dice tumble, before falling, the doctrine has given a name: the emergence of the subject, which is not the thrower (the thrower does not exist), but the dice themselves insofar as they are in suspension. In the vertigo of these mutually exclusive

³⁸ See Jean-Claude Milner, "Jean-François Lyotard, du diagnostic à l'intervention", in: *Jean-François Lyotard. L'exercice du différend*, PUF, Paris 2001, pp. 261–272.

possibilities, bursts finally, at the instant after the fall of the dice, the flash of the impossible – impossible that, once fallen, they bear another number on their upturned face. Here one sees that the impossible is not disjoined from contingency, but constitutes its real kernel.³⁹

This longer passage can help us elucidate why Lyotard after *The Differend*, along with themes of making the invisible visible and presenting the unrepresentable, also elaborated the knot of time, cause and subject. The latter for Lyotard is never something outside the Universe – one of the tasks in the *Differend* is to refute the prejudice “that there is a ‘man’”.⁴⁰ As such, Lyotard definitively and unambiguously belongs to the modern since one of the main theses of the modern is “There is nothing outside the Universe”.⁴¹ That is why for Lyotard “Man” cannot be the highest authority, the only authority is the “authority of the infinite, perhaps, or the heterogeneous”.⁴² To put it differently, “the universe presented by a phrase is not presented to something or to someone like a ‘subject’. The universe is there as long as the phrase is the case. A ‘subject’ is situated in a universe presented by a phrase. Even when the subject is said not to belong to the world, qua addressee or addressor of the presentation – the thinking I in Descartes, the transcendental ego in Husserl, the source of the moral law in Kant, the subject in Wittgenstein – this subject is nevertheless situated at the heart of the universe presented by the philosophical phrase that says it does not belong to the world. This is the difference between universe and ‘world’.”⁴³

A specific link between time and cause is especially elaborated in Lyotard’s work *Heidegger and “the jews”* through a conceptualization of repression that Lyotard calls “the jews”. “The jews” are for him not the Jews, neither are they to be confused with the Jewish nation, the political movement of Zionism and Judaism, or with the Jewish religion, “the “jews” are namely an object without a place. They are a name for a kind of a cause, a kind of double causality with a special temporal status. There is, states Lyotard, a double blow, a first blow, the first excitation, the shock, which upsets the apparatus with such a “force”, that is not registered. It is best rendered by the Freudian term

³⁹ Jean-Claude Milner, “The Doctrine of Science”, trans. Oliver Feltham, in: *Jacques Lacan. Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory*, ed. by Slavoj Žižek, Vol. I: *Psychoanalytic Theory and Practice*, Routledge, London & New York 2003, p. 284. See also: Jean-Claude Milner, *L’Oeuvre claire. Lacan, la science, la philosophie*, Seuil, Paris 1995.

⁴⁰ *Le différend*, p. xiii.

⁴¹ See Jean-Claude Milner, *L’Oeuvre claire. Lacan, la science, la philosophie*, p. 123.

⁴² *Le différend*, p. 31.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 71–72.

Nachträglich, which implies a double blow, that is constitutively asymmetrical and a specific temporality which has nothing to do with the phenomenology of consciousness. Lyotard thus differentiates between a shock which affects the system without being registered, "it is like a whistle that is inaudible to humans but not to dogs, or like infrared or ultraviolet light. In terms of a general mechanics, the force of excitation cannot be 'bound', composed, neutralized, fixed in accordance with other forces 'within' the apparatus."⁴⁴ This first blow then "strikes the apparatus without observable internal effect, without affecting it. It is a shock without affect. With the second blow there takes place an affect without shock: I buy something in a store, anxiety crushes me, I flee, but nothing has really happened. The energy dispersed in the affective cloud condenses, gets organized, brings on action, commands a flight without a 'real' motive. And it is in this flight, the feeling that accompanies it, which informs consciousness *that* there is something, without being able to tell *what* it is. It indicates the *quod* without the *quid*. The essence of the event: that *there is* 'comes before' *what* there is."⁴⁵ "In this sense Freud understands his concept of *nachträglich*. The first blow hit the soul too early, the second will touch it too late. The first time as the thought is there, but is not being thought; the second time this unthought returns and demands to be thought, but then the first is not there."⁴⁶ That is the essence of an event, not only that *quod* is before *quid*, but also, moreover, the psychological apparatus is never prepared for a shock, this shock always throws it out of joint and surprises it. In this line Lyotard also situates "infancy" – infancy is a first blow, which never really happened, never was, because it is not re-presentable, but it still ex-sits and in-sists. For the purposes here – leaving other dimensions for another occasion – it is important that also in modern science we deal with a certain retroactive character of time: "In any case, science does not allow such passages; once the letter is fixed, necessity alone remains and imposes the forgetting of the contingency that authorized it."⁴⁷ What kind of causality is Lyotard searching for? In our view that would be a cause "not as inscribed in a law of regularity and continuity, but rather a cause which so preoccupied David Hume in the 18th century when he showed that the very term "cause" as separate, as primary, was non-conceptual".⁴⁸ This cause involves the breaking of the chain, it presents discontinuity, a cause breaks with the chain of

⁴⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger and "the jews"*, p. 15.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁴⁶ Jean-François Lyotard, *Pérégrinations*, Galiléé, Paris 1990, p. 26.

⁴⁷ Jean-Claude Milner, "The Doctrine of Science", p. 285.

⁴⁸ Jacques-Alain Miller, "To Interpret the Cause: From Freud to Lacan", in: *Newsletter of the Freudian Field*, Vol. 3, No. 1–2, Spring-Fall 1989, New York 1989, p. 33.

causes and effects, with determinism. Both conceptions of time and cause need a third one – a subject. While for Miller the subject as the missing link is always involved in the structure of causality versus legality, Lyotard seems to go in a different direction, while leaving his conception of the subject in fragments.

It seems that Lyotard with his concepts “infancy”, “the jews”, “phrase-affect”, and “sensus communis” consciously leaves room for the heterogeneous, for something unarticulable, they are always something that is simultaneously too near and too far – philosophy cannot touch this “sensus communis”.⁴⁹ One of the reasons might be that all his concepts were frequently undeveloped or simply negative (negative determinations like “ne... pas”, what something is not.)⁵⁰ The main reasons lie in the fact that he never succeeded to develop a full conception of the subject, only a subject “in statu nascendi”, a kind of subject before the subject. A major consequence of this “guarding of the heterogeneous” against the power of negativity, dialectics and the Subject, is that his thought remains bound to a preservation of the basic split, the fundamental disunion between the subject and the object. The task of thought, literature, art is to risk, to take chance, to venture and to “witness it”.⁵¹ This witnessing and analyzing is infinite and painful “what art can do, is bear witness not to the sublime, but to this aporia of art and to its pain. It does not say the unsayable, but says that it cannot say it.”⁵² The main emphasis is then on the incongruity of the object. In this sense we never own thoughts, because they are not “fruits of the earth. Thoughts are not kept in the some big land register, except for the convenience of people. Thoughts are clouds. The margins of a cloud cannot be exactly measured; thoughts form a fractal Mandelbrot line. Thoughts are set in motion i.e. driven by a different speed.”⁵³ We can never dominate them, they always remain something heterogeneous to us. It seems that Lyotard is thus stuck in Adorno’s “negative dialectics”. He is clearly aware of this and that is why the problem of the void, blankness, and emptiness takes a prominent place in his late opus. The blank is for him another name for subjective retreat, for “making a slate clean”, wherein an object in all its phenomenality can appear. This clearing of place is for Lyotard a kind of evacuation of the spirit, a withdrawal of the subject exemplified by the Japanese artist-soldier, “who must suspend the usual intentions of the

⁴⁹ *Misère de la philosophie*, Galilée, Paris 2000, p. 17.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁵¹ *L'Inhumain*, p. 15.

⁵² *Heidegger and “the jews”*, p. 47.

⁵³ Jean-François Lyotard, *Pérégrinations*, p. 21.

soul connected with the habitus, with the dispositions of the body".⁵⁴ This "disarmament of the spirit",⁵⁵ this evacuation demands a certain suffering, an asceticism of body and soul. The making of a blank, a fabricated void, a self-withdrawal, guards a place for *éclair*, for an event, for *Ereignis*, which may or may not emerge at all. Only then in this world of ready made inscriptions "a certain place has to be made for this lack by making a blank [mise à blanc], that makes possible the emergence of something different which needs to be reflected."⁵⁶ This "lightning flash that makes something (a phrase universe) appear, but blinds as it blinds itself through what illuminates", this lightning flash which "takes place – it flashes and bursts out in the nothingness of the night, of clouds, or of the clear blue sky" also brings about a "feeling that the impossible is possible. That the necessary is contingent."⁵⁷ It is here, again, that we meet the problematic of modern science introduced last but not least by Copernicus, it is here that every scientific invention is nothing but "the emergence of something different which needs to be reflected", it is here, finally, that Lyotard's unfinished philosophical project carried out in the name of the second Copernican turn, stops.

⁵⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, *Inhumain*, p. 27.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁵⁷ *Differend*, p. 75.