

## Philosophy as a *vanitas*: Lyotard's exploded Sublime

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French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard's changing concepts of the sublime (after Immanuel Kant) are traced here. Overriding normative responses to Lyotard's *Artforum* texts on the sublime of the later 1980s, I argue for a fulcrum moment shared with painter Jacques Monory in California in the later 1970s, and the collision of astronomy, the digitalisation of data, the microprocessor and neuroscience. Lyotard's exhibition *Les Immatériaux* (Pompidou Centre, 1985) exemplified interdisciplinarity at the parameters of knowledge, shunning postmodern irony. *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime: Kant's Critique of Judgement*, §§ 23–29, (1991, English 1994), a resumé of Lyotard's courses, stands in perpetual tension with his art world engagement. The genre of the *vanitas* in art and its long time-axis challenges classical philosophy — likewise a genre and set of procedures. Might not philosophy also confront its own 'death' or epistemological obsolescence? A coda takes Lyotard's 'techno-sublime' into the era of bitcoin.

Keywords: Lyotard, sublime, digital, *vanitas*

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Don't Monory's Skies also illustrate the Pascalian and Kantian discourse of sublimity?

Do we have any experience of the rings of Saturn ? Of the most distant novae ? Of the galaxies receding at full speed in the far corners of the universe ? Or, closest of all, of the microprocessors which calculate our net incomes, our taxes, our heartbeats and our future population statistics, at the speed of light ?  
(Jean-François Lyotard, 1981)<sup>1</sup>

## Finale: *False exit*

Jacques Monory's *False exit n°2*, 1978 (fig.1), was painted in the wake of his visits with the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard to the Californian desert. It shows an astronomical observatory with the most advanced radio telescopes aimed at distant stars<sup>2</sup>. Other dramatic landscape elements in this six-panel history painting heighten our sense of awe: a snowy mountain reflected in a lake, a galaxy, an ocean at sunset and foamy breaking waves. The artificial colours of photo-separation, magenta bleeding to yellow, site these motifs within the *dispositif* of technical reproduction. The images are ironic, visual clichés projected as photographs, followed by the manual application of paint. Figurative oil painting was an

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<sup>1</sup> For Monory's collected writings, see J. Monory, *Écrits, entretiens, récits, Jacques Monory*, ed. by P. le Thorel, Beaux-Arts de Paris, Paris 2014, henceforth *Écrits*. For the bilingual edition of Lyotard's complex «Les Ciel de Monory illustrent-ils aussi le discours pascalien et kantien de la sublimité?», J.F. Lyotard, *Les confins d'un dandysme*, in "Derrière le miroir", *Monory. Ciel, nébuleuses et galaxies*, 244, March 1981, p. 18. «Avons-nous une expérience des anneaux de Saturne? Des novae les plus lointaines? Ou au plus près des microprocesseurs qui calculent nos revenus nets, nos impôts, nos rythmes cardiaques et nos démographies à venir, à la vitesse de la lumière?», J.-F. Lyotard, *L'Esthétique sublime du tueur à gages* (December 1981), in Id., *L'Assassinat de l'expérience par la peinture, Monory*, Le Castor Astral, Paris 1984, p. 150 (Engl. trans. second edition, p. 191).

<sup>2</sup> For Monory, see the website [www.jacquesmonory.com](http://www.jacquesmonory.com). He uses photographs of the VLA (Very Large Array) radio telescopes in Y formation (Natural Radio Astronomy Observatory, Socorro, New Mexico, built 1973-1980). For the context of Narrative Figuration, American Hyperrealism and Monory's contemporaries, see S. Wilson, *The Visual World of French Theory: Figurations*, Yale University Press, London 2010, Chapter 6, *Lyotard, Monory, Postmodern Romantics*, pp. 156-183.

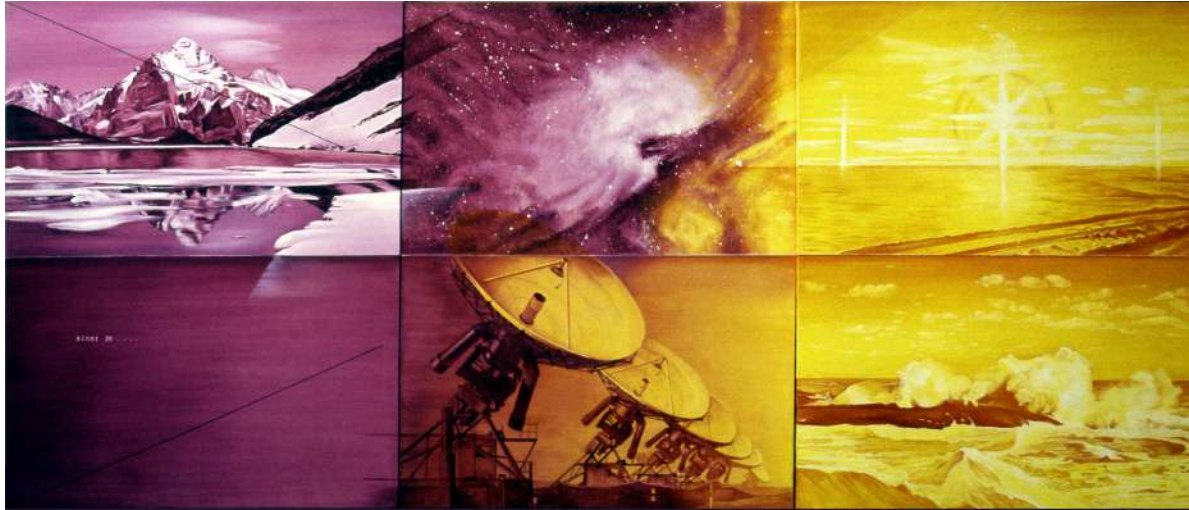


Fig.1 Jacques Monory, *False exit n°2*, 1978  
Private collection, Paris, ADAGP Paris; fee waiver, courtesy Madame Paule Monory

absurdly obsolete practice in the age of Lyotard's *Postmodern Condition*, whose publication in French was being finalised at this moment. Part of a diptych, *False exit*, once called *Finale*, was intended to be Monory's farewell to painting<sup>3</sup>.

*False exit* dramatises the primal scene, the fulcrum moment, when Lyotard realised how the light of dead stars was converted into binary digits: a «mathematical double», as he said, of the visible and invisible sky<sup>4</sup>. Immanuel Kant's eighteenth-century sublime and its engagement with the unfathomable enormities of nature was approaching its endgame. Kant's Newtonian *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens*, 1755, preceded his *Critique of Practical Reason*, 1788, where the «starry heavens above me» and «the moral law within me» created, in dialogue, «the consciousness of my existence»<sup>5</sup>. Telescopes, microscopes, the Milky Way and the concept of «mathematical sublimity» point to Kant's modernity in his *Analytic of the Sublime*, 1790, where landscapes provoke «astonishment» but also «brooding melancholy». As with our spectatorship, crucially: «true sublimity must be sought only in the mind of the judging subject»<sup>6</sup>. What more congenial

<sup>3</sup> «J'ai fait deux tableaux qui s'appelaient *Les Finales* ou *Les Fausses Sorties* puisque je voulais que ce soit des "sorties" que ce soit la fin de ma peinture (I made two paintings called *The Finales* or *False Exits* as I wanted them to be "exits", for it to be the end or my painting)», in J. Monory, *Écrits*, cit., p. 131, from *Il me reste la peinture face à face à moi-même*, Jacques Monory, *Énigme 4*, Galerie Novà Sin Praha, Prague 1997. «Fausse sortie» is also a fake exhaust pipe used in automobile styling: a typically *monorien* pun.

<sup>4</sup> See N. Lukacher, *Primal Scenes. Literature, Philosophy, Psychoanalysis*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1986, for an expansion of my metaphor.

<sup>5</sup> I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 1788, 5: 161-2.

<sup>6</sup> I. Kant, *Analytic of the Sublime*, 1790, an appendix, §§ 23-29 to the *Critique of Judgement*, 1790 (tr. J.C. Meredith, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1952): §25, the mathematical sublime, pp. 76-81, telescopes and

interlocutor across centuries?

Monory's yellow sunset recalls the French poet Charles Baudelaire who declared, «Dandyism is a setting sun»...<sup>7</sup> Europe's dominance had long been eclipsed by the scientific supremacy of post-man-on-the-moon America. Monory here, says Lyotard, tests the limits of dandyism, the Romantic critical position theorised by Baudelaire. He implies that the artist's deliberately anachronistic practice is a flaunting of mourning, for the passing of European culture or of civilisation itself. Lyotard's book title, «The Assassination of Experience by painting, Monory», conflates the artist as assassin (an American gangster guise was adopted in many self-portraits) with the «Kantian» art assassin of the past, Thomas de Quincey. Both Romantics were pitted against Karl Marx in Lyotard's first text on Monory of 1972<sup>8</sup>. In both method and meaning, Monory's work is inscribed within the tradition of painting as a *vanitas*. *False exit n°2* depicts several horizons: of lake and mountain, sea and sky, and the rim of telescope dishes as receiving and encrypting machines, all of which encounter the horizonlessness of outer space. Monory offers not merely a «sublime landscape» of the always-already past, but anticipates extinction as a threat, eclipsing technological development. The spectator is conscious of horizons as a metaphor for time as both finite and infinite, for personal death and for the death of the planet.

One of Lyotard's fictitious *Trembling narratives*, 1977, accompanied by Monory's Californian photopuzzles, likewise evokes a giant observatory telescope and its photographic records of the most distant sun<sup>9</sup>. The narratives are often erotic. *Trembling narratives* refers to the trembling of the ground in an earthquake (the «condition» of California), the trembling telescope, the body in orgasm and by extension, the retrospective «trembling narrative» offered by the analysand to the psychoanalyst. The individual human, seeing, sensing, desiring, is set again in tension with the enormity of what Lyotard later calls

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microscopes p. 80; the judging subject, p. 86; the Milky Way and nebulae, p. 87; astonishment and brooding melancholy p. 99. Compare the jejune *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, 1764 (first English translation, 1799).

<sup>7</sup> «Le dandysme est un soleil couchant...», C. Baudelaire, *Le peintre de la vie moderne (The Painter of Modern Life)*, 1863, many reprints.

<sup>8</sup> See J.-F. Lyotard, *Économie libidinale du dandy* (December 1972), in B. Lamarche-Vadel (ed.), *Figurations, 1960-1973*, 10/18 UGE, Paris 1973; Eng. transl. in Id., *The Assassination of Experience*, cit., second edition pp. 59-155. Lyotard reprints this in *L'Assassinat de l'Expérience par la peinture, Monory* (1984), cit. Steve Vine (Id., «Intermitting Power», *De Quincey's sublime identifications*, in "Prose Studies", 30, 2, 2008, pp. 142-158), explains how the English «Opium Eater» parodies Kant, in *On murder considered as one of the fine arts*, 1827.

<sup>9</sup> J.-F. Lyotard, J. Monory, *Récits tremblants*, Galilée, Paris 1977. Monory «doubles» old photos of California (including of earthquake destruction) with blue replicas cut with a jigsaw fret (*puzzle* in French) often with pieces missing; shown at the Galerie de Larcos, Paris.

«capitalist techno-science».

Rather than situating Lyotard as a philosopher in a lineage of consensual readings around Kant and his German successors, one should also turn to the French seventeenth-century philosopher, Blaise Pascal, (1623-1662). Indeed the French lineage of the sublime from Boileau's translation of Longinus to Pascal and later scholarship was important for Lyotard<sup>10</sup>. Pascal is the celebrated author of the fragmentary *Pensées* (Thoughts), around 1640, but was also the inventor of the *Pascaline*, a pioneering calculating machine. His «Two infinities» passage considers nature's majesty ranging from the starry firmament to humblest mite; the human interface placed between the infinite and the void<sup>11</sup>. In later life, he experienced a profound spiritual shock; his thoughts turned to God, whose existence he had previously calculated as a wager, a mere mathematical probability<sup>12</sup>. Just so, Lyotard would turn to the *Confessio of Saint Augustin* at the end of his life<sup>13</sup>.

Lyotard was pulled between the philosophical traditions of both Germany and France. At the height of the impact of his existential philosophy with its German philosophical roots, Jean-Paul Sartre wrote the biography of René Descartes, celebrating his bicentenary in 1946<sup>14</sup>. The marxist philosopher Henri Lefèbvre wrote a biography of Pascal in 1949, developing Pascal's position as the first «modern», while Pascal was inscribed at the base of the trunk of the existential «tree» Emmanuel Mounier devised in his *Introduction to Existentialisms*, 1947 where Heidegger is placed opposite his contemporary Karl Jaspers<sup>15</sup>. Lyotard was the first in France to review Karl Jaspers' *Die Schuldfrage*, the «question of German guilt» (the moral regression, the collapse of the *grand récit* or metanarrative of human progress) at a moment when political catastrophe was materialised in a European

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<sup>10</sup> The precursor is Nicolas Boileau's translation of Longinus in *Œuvres diverses du Sieur D\*\*\* avec le traité du sublime ou du merveilleux dans le discours. Traduit du grec de Longin*, Denys Thierry, Paris 1674. See J.-F. Lyotard, *Leçons sur l'Analytique du sublime*, Galilée, Paris 1991, pp. 187-8 on the baroque versus classicism, the Ancients versus the Moderns, and eighteenth-century debates preceding Kant.

<sup>11</sup> See H. Bouchilloux, *Du beau et du sublime chez Pascal*, in "Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger", 185, 2, 1995, pp. 191-210; F. Kaplan, *La pensée sur les deux infinies*, in "Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques", 2009/1, vol. 93, pp. 13-22, upon the religious framing of the «two infinities», challenging Louis Lafuma's classifications, and Calum Matheson, *The sublime rhetoric of Pascal's wager*, in "Argumentation and Advocacy", 53, 4, 2017, pp. 271-286.

<sup>12</sup> See B. Pascal, «Feu». *La nuit du Mémorial*, in J.M. Chatelain (ed.), *Pascal, le cœur et la raison*, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris 2017, pp. 156-8.

<sup>13</sup> See P. Sellier, *Pascal et saint Augustin*, Armand Colin, Paris 1970; J.-F. Lyotard, *La Confession d'Augustin*, Galilée, Paris 1998; *The Confessions of Augustin*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2000.

<sup>14</sup> J.P. Sartre, *Descartes, 1596-1650, Introduction et choix de textes*, Traits, Geneva-Paris 1946.

<sup>15</sup> E. Mounier, *Introduction aux existentialismes*, Denöel, Paris 1947 (many reeditions), translated as *Existentialist Philosophies. An Introduction*, Eng. transl. by E. Blow, Rockcliff, London 1948; H. Lefèbvre, *Pascal*, vols.1, 2, Nagel, Paris 1949.

landscape of ruins<sup>16</sup>. The impact upon Lyotard of this post-Holocaust existential debate should not be underestimated; it returns in *Le Differend*, 1983.

One might see the French and German philosophical traditions oscillating in Lyotard's thought, as did the past – the edifice of human thought – and the present, or memory (personal and collective) and the future. Europe's ruin may also be thought dialectically in relationship to the sublime, as Lyotard turns back to Kant. It was, however, the Californian experience together with Monory's painting and its repertoires which led Lyotard to think through the sublime in 1981, indeed to reach the post-Kantian statement: «The division between the beautiful and the sublime has lapsed»<sup>17</sup>. This moment, I maintain, interrogates and drives Lyotard's future discourse about this sublime within and beyond his strictly philosophical peer group. It is also the moment of the immediate reception of *The Postmodern Condition*.

### **Painting as a *vanitas***

«How vain is painting, admired for reproducing the likeness of things whose originals are not admired»<sup>18</sup>. Pascal's possibly most quoted *Pensée* targets the «vanity» (futility) of representation<sup>19</sup>. The *vanitas* as a still-life painting with allegorical codes and meanings emerged in Pascal's era. On a table strewn with fruit, flowers or other objects there would be references to the senses: seeing, hearing, touching, tasting but also to knowledge, books, musical instruments. The addition of a human skull points to the passing of life, to man's mortality. Paradoxically, of course, the *vanitas* painting as both intellectual conception and as a feat of representation attests to the transcendence of life through art, which remains after human death: see, for example, Harwen Steenwyck's *An Allegory of the vanities of human life*, 1640 (fig.2). This genre, essentially Christian, persisted into modern times in the work of Paul Cézanne and after. Lyotard's text *Freud according to Cézanne*, an exploration of psychoanalytic art criticism, was published before he dared meet the contemporary artist,

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<sup>16</sup> See K. Jaspers, *Die Schuldfrage: Ein Beitrag zur deutschen Frage*, Artemis-verlag, Zurich 1946; J.-F. Lyotard, *La culpabilité allemande*, in "L'Age Nouveau", 28, 1948, pp. 90-94 (book published by Minuit, 1948); see *German Guilt*, in J.F. Lyotard, *Political Writings*, University of Minneapolis Press, Minneapolis 1993, pp. 127-134.

<sup>17</sup> «La division du beau et du sublime est devenue caduque», J.-F. Lyotard, *L'Assassinat de l'Expérience*, cit., p.149; in the English translation I substitute «lapsed» for Rachel Bowlby's «collapsed» (*The Assassination of Experience*, cit., second edition p. 189).

<sup>18</sup> «Quelle vanité que la peinture, qui attire l'admiration par la ressemblance des choses dont on n'admire point les originaux!», B. Pascal, *Pensées* II, 134, (1).

<sup>19</sup> N. Heinrich situates Pascal's condemnation both ethically and in terms of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*: «Quelle vanité que la peinture», in "Actes de recherche en Sciences sociales", 28, June 1979, pp. 77-78.

Jacques Monory<sup>20</sup>. Lyotard was «taken out» of his own discipline, philosophy, through this encounter. Monory would revitalise the centuries' old traditions of large-format history painting (battles, coronations, disasters) with contemporary images. His works offer all the dimensions of human experience that philosophy as a discipline cannot «do»: form, colour, affect – or humour, irony, nostalgic recollection; all are persistently haunted by death.



Fig. 2. Harmen Steenwyck, *An Allegory of the vanities of human life*, 1640, London, National Gallery

In his self-portrait *For all that we see or seem is a dream within a dream*, 1967 (fig. 3), evoking his visit to Cuba, Monory plays with codes and conventions: the canvas has a deliberate crack running across it. Like all the artist's early work, the painting, all over, «has the blues». Monory introduced Lyotard not only to contemporary art but to the liberties of impersonation (he becomes an American tough guy standing by a Cadillac driven by a girlfriend), the potentials of fiction, and of writing about sex and melancholy<sup>21</sup>. *For all that we see or seem* ...a quotation from the poet Edgar Allan Poe, a favourite of the painter Edouard Manet, specifically introduces Romanticism into the «postmodern» equation. Lyotard and Monory were «Postmodern Romantics» as I called them long ago; simultaneously Monory was a «conceptual hyperrealist». This relationship anticipates by decades Jörg Heiser's retrospective label «Romantic Conceptualism» of 2007<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> J.-F. Lyotard, *Freud selon Cézanne*, part of *Psychanalyse et peinture*, in “Encyclopédie Universalis”, 13, 1971, pp. 745-750 ; Eng. transl. *Freud according to Cézanne*, in “Parrhesia”, 23, 2015, pp. 26-42.

<sup>21</sup> See Monory's *Document bleu*, 1972, and the detective novel *Diamondback*, (Christian Bourgois, Paris 1979), in J.-F. Lyotard, *Écrits*, cit., pp. 213-231 and 233-396.

<sup>22</sup> See my *Postmodern Romantics*, in S. Wilson (ed.), *The Assassination of Experience*, cit., pp 21-71; J. Heiser's *Romantic Conceptualism* (bilingual), Kerber Verlag, Berlin 2007, has an entirely different lineage.





Fig. 3. Jacques Monory, *For all that we see or seem is a dream within a dream*, 1967  
Private collection, Paris, ADAGP Paris; fee waiver, courtesy Madame Paule Monory



1970's America for both Monory and later Lyotard provoked an entire relativising of their previous experience. Indeed an understanding of this accelerated culture, its kitsch and its codes are what aligns Lyotard with the theoretical positions of his «postmodern» contemporaries, Robert Venturi, Charles Jencks or Fredric Jameson. But our artist-philosopher duo perceived American art and culture from outside: the European past was a palimpsest which persistently rose up into Monory's representations, countering both American subject matter and the style of photo-based, American hyperrealism. Monory's *Death Valley no 1*, 1974, a four-panel work, contrasts the «new» country with «no history», with Albrecht Dürer's enlarged engraving of *Knight, Death and the Devil*, 1513. Life's journey proceeds across the canvas from right to left : the figure of death behind the knight shakes his hourglass, there is a skull in the foreground. It is a museum piece, like the dry skulls in the Death Valley museum, which here provide the contemporary *vanitas* motif, above Monory posing by a vintage car<sup>23</sup>. But for half the painting, the never-ending road trip extends through the Mojave Desert from the viewer to the horizon.

Death Valley, one of the darkest places on earth, is the best for stargazing. In Monory's blue *Death Valley n°10 with Midnight Sun*, 1975, the landscape is copied from time-lapse photography which cuts the landscape into segments as the sun travels<sup>24</sup>. Lyotard's sense of the intellectual universe based in Paris, legitimised by the Enlightenment and French Revolution, was exploded by his confrontation with different spaces and scales of perception and by the notion of time 'cut' into longitudes, by time zones and the vastness they implied<sup>25</sup>. Lyotard's *Umwelt* – his reference world and comfort zone –now oscillated between the paradigms offered by California and Paris. (One imagines his sublime «first time» transatlantic flying experience, over bright or clouded masses of land or sea and light-spangled cities at night).

Silicon Valley, Death Valley's vital opposite, sprawled over the ground. Named in 1971, it signified a whole region of space-age experimental computer laboratories with their link to the military-industrial capitalist complex and vast US state budgets. On a macro-level, space exploration continued here : on a micro-level the microprocessor and internal circuits

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<sup>23</sup> I believe these may be from Death Valley's Borax museum Furnace Creek ranch. Monory first went to the US in 1970 and camped out with his small son. The extraction of borax was important; the «lost '49ers» trail is part of the mythology.

<sup>24</sup> Monory enlarges and paints the time lapse photos, *Endless Day*, by Carl Vander Yacht's (1913-1978) very specifically for his *Sky n° 34, midnight sun*, 1979; he also took his own photographs. Significantly, Monory worked with editor Robert Delpire on the layout of the illustrated book on time, by François le Lionnais, *Le Temps*, Delpire, Paris 1959.

<sup>25</sup> See J.-F. Lyotard, *Le Mur du Pacifique*, Galilée, Paris 1979, p. 38; Id., *Atlantic, Central, Mountain, or Pacific Time*, in *Pacific Wall*, Lapis Press, Venice, CA 1989, p. 24.

driven by binary numbers with their on-off 1 or 0 ruled (the Intel 4004 was also invented in 1971). With matter dissolved into numbers; the «human» became merely a computational interface between «micro» and «macro».

So where should philosophy go? Lyotard's past-orientated philosophical repertoire of the European great and the good was confronted by new scientific and epistemological horizons. At the same time, his engagement with Marcel Duchamp from the mid-1970s, leading to *Duchamp's TRANS/former*, 1975 and beyond, metamorphosed his understanding of art (Monory became nonchalantly post-Duchampian)<sup>26</sup>. This is also the period between conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth's *Art after Philosophy* of 1969 and Thierry de Duve's *Kant after Duchamp*, 1996<sup>27</sup>. The collision of disciplines, with art as a practice of interrogation and a critical discourse, helped «think» philosophy on the cusp of its «visual turn».

The distinction between European versus American responses to postmodernism rests, as I have suggested, upon the Holocaust and its implications for human history. America's late theoretical formulations of postmodernism remain focussed on eclecticism in architectural style (Charles Jencks), so evident in Los Angeles and in Robert Venturi's Las Vegas – or, alternatively, late capitalism as theorised from Fredric Jameson to Francis Fukuyama<sup>28</sup>. In Europe, the immediate postwar spate of Holocaust memories or depictions was slowly eclipsed by the «economic miracle» with aid –and a cultural package – from America<sup>29</sup>. In the melancholic, post-Vietnam war 1970s, however, memories reemerged. In *The Pacific Wall*, 1975, Lyotard makes an analogy between the racist Klu Klux Klan (KKK) and «Kaiser Kapital AmeriKa» (the German Kaiser as nazi sign)<sup>30</sup>. Monory himself, with *Hope abandoned, Homage to Caspar David Friedrich n°6*, 1973 (fig.4), created a glacial blue copy of Friedrich's *Sea of Ice: Wreck of Hope*, 1823-4. He saw Friedrich's seascape as a

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<sup>26</sup> Lyotard's US university periods coincided with the later venues of the definitive Duchamp retrospectives in Philadelphia (September to November 1973); the Museum of Modern Art, New York (December 1973-February 1974) and the Art Institute of Chicago (March-April 1974). See A. D'Harnoncourt (ed.), *Marcel Duchamp. Retrospective*, Museum of Modern Art, 1973; J.-F. Lyotard, *Les Transformateurs Duchamp*, Galilée, Paris 1975; *Duchamp's TRANS/formers*, The Lapis Press, Venice, CA 1990 and Herman Parret's critical bilingual edition, University Press, Leuven 2010, with Lyotard's Duchampiana, 1975-1977 including his contribution to *Marcel Duchamp*, Centre Pompidou 1977. For Monory's «Duchampiana», *USA Bicentenary Kit*, 1976, see S. Wilson, *The Visual World of French Theory*, cit., p. 175.

<sup>27</sup> J. Kosuth, *Art after Philosophy*, in "Studio International", 178, 915, October 1969, pp. 134-137; T. de Duve, *Kant After Duchamp*, MIT Press, Cambridge Ma. 1996, pp. 310-325.

<sup>28</sup> See R. Venturi, D. Scott Brown, S. Lennour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, MIT Press, Massachusetts 1972, 1977; C. Jencks, *the Language of PostModern Architecture*, Rizzoli, New York 1977; F. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural logic of Late Capitalism* (article 1984, in "New Left Review"), Duke University Press, Durham 1991; F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Free Press, New York 1992.

<sup>29</sup> See A. Wieworka, *Déportation et génocide*, Plon, Paris 1992. The «Blum-Byrnes» financial package for France (1946) insisted upon the massive influx of American film to French cinemas.

<sup>30</sup> See J.-F. Lyotard, *A genealogy of Politics and Sex*, in Id., *The Pacific Wall*, cit., p. 36.

sublime double of the contemporary period of glaciation and dead light: «A death camp, a desert, our blood on on our fingers, we will be only the negative of our image»<sup>31</sup>.



Fig. 4 Jacques Monory, *Hope abandoned, Homage to Caspar David Friedrich n°6*, 1973  
Private collection, Paris, ADAGP Paris; fee waiver, courtesy Madame Paule Monory

*Hommage to Caspar David Friedrich n°1*, 1975 (fig. 5) explicitly depicts the empty Auschwitz extermination camp site (from photos always) with its electrified fences<sup>32</sup>. A blonde girl dressed as a portrait by Lucas Cranach, inserted bottom left, is bound by the calibrating apparatus used to measure racial characteristics, anticipating the eugenic extermination programme. Monory thus references Germany's noble art tradition within the context of its «unrepresentable» crime. It is later, through the 1980s, that Lyotard's Holocaust-affected works would evolve, from the encounter with artist Ruth Francken, *History of Ruth* and *The Differend* (both published 1983 in French) and *Heidegger and the «Jews»*, first appearing in 1988<sup>33</sup>.

<sup>31</sup> «Lumière morte et notre terre glacée... Un camp de mort, un désert, notre sang sur nos doigts, nous ne serons que le négatif de notre image», J. Monory, *Die Geschierte «Hoffnung» Gaspar (sic) David Friedrich 1774-1840*, in "Chorus", 11-12, 1974, pp. 34, 37.

<sup>32</sup> Monory's show, *Hommage à C.D. Friedrich*, was held at the Hamburg Kunsthalle in 1977; see also J.-C. Bailly, J. Monory, *Hommage à Caspar David Friedrich*, Christian Bourgois, Paris 1977.

<sup>33</sup> See S. Wilson, *Ruths Gesang/The Song of Ruth. Ruth Francken*, Sprengel Museum, Hannover, 2004, np  
*Itinera*, N. 21, 2021

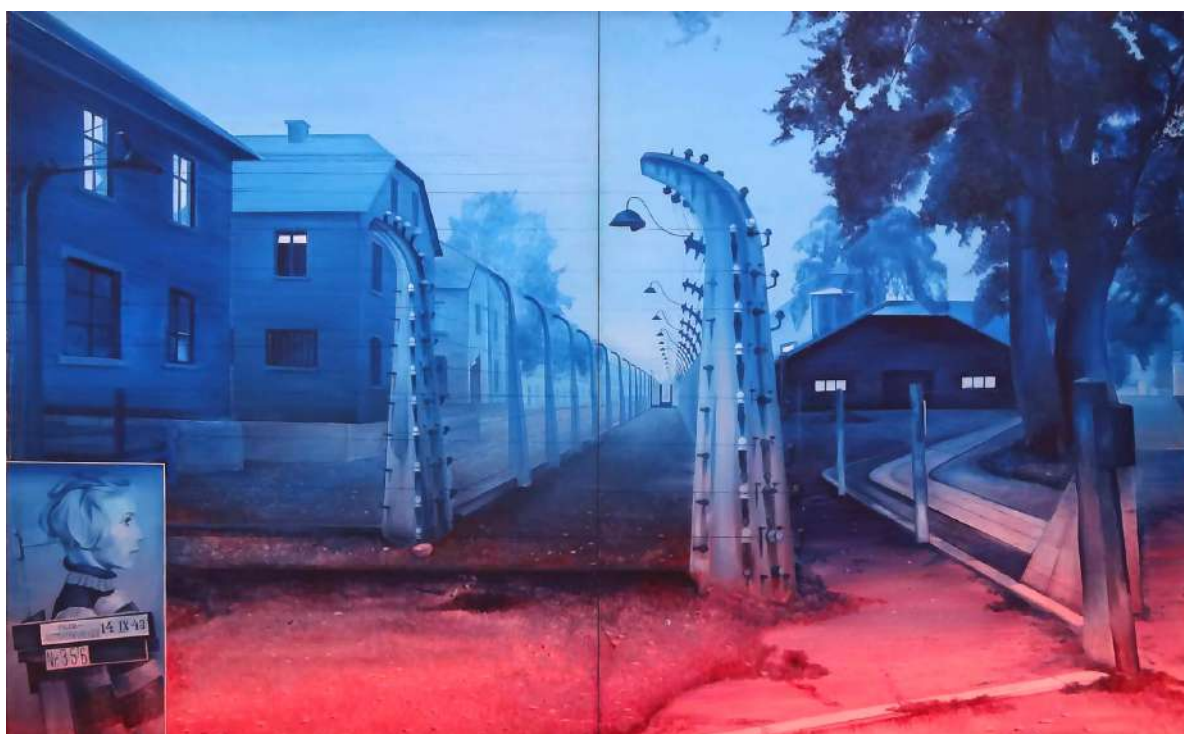


Fig. 5. Jacques Monory, *Homage to Caspar David Friedrich n°1*, 1975  
MAC/VAL, Museum of Contemporary Art, Val-de-Marne

### Projections: Skies, Nebulae, Galaxies

Lyotard was generally hosted by French literature faculties in California. How regularly did he speak about Kant at the new University of Vincennes through the 1970s? We imagine the master's voice (happily recorded), jokes, cigarettes and the digressions of the seminar, with its joyful *après-Kant* and camaraderie. What of the proposition that the question of the sublime was everywhere, but *occultée*, hidden?<sup>34</sup> With no rigid curriculum, Vincennes fostered a decade of Lyotard's teaching and publishing – including on conceptual artist Daniel Buren<sup>35</sup>. His second text on Monory in March 1981, looked back to their shared Californian experience; he specifically discusses the painter's art «with» Kant. At the

<sup>34</sup> «À mon sens la question du sublime était latente dans les travaux de JFL des années 70 sur l'art, sur Cézanne ou sur Duchamp par exemple, mais occultée, pour ainsi dire, par l'approche "pulsionnelle" (In my opinion, the question of the sublime was latent in JFL's art writing in the 1970s on Cézanne or Duchamp for example but hidden, so to say, by the "drive-orientated" approach)», Plinio Prado, Email to the author, 27 March 2020. Thanks to Plinio Prado (who confirms the recordings) and to Eric Alliez for sharing memories of Vincennes and of Lyotard with me. See also the conference "Passages de Jean-François Lyotard", 14-19 October 2009, for the fortieth anniversary of «Vincennes» (Université de Vincennes-Paris 8, Saint Denis).

<sup>35</sup> *The works and writings of Daniel Buren: an introduction to the philosophy of contemporary art*, appeared in "Artforum", February 1981, just a month before the text for the Galerie Maeght on Monory. Conflicting commissions, antithetical art forms.

Galerie Maeght, Monory curated *Skies, nebulae and galaxies*, works from 1978-1980 including the two *False Exits* (fig. 6). Colours ranged from the night-sky blue-indigo to grandiose works on the magenta and yellow spectrum, involving plexiglass and shiny metal. His characteristic «contract–killer» gunshots spattering the surface (part of his «dandy» American B-movie persona) here became black holes. Titles referred specifically to star configurations such as the Andromeda galaxy or timed viewing locations: *Plain to the east of the Chaska Mountains, Arizona, 15 June 1973 at 9.00 and 23.00*. As spectators, our introjection can be brusquely interrupted by the artist’s insistence upon a scientific grid<sup>36</sup>. In the gallery’s luxury review, Lyotard notes how Monory reprises a page of scribbled notes on a star-strewn double page spread by Nobel-prize winning Chinese physicists, Tsung Dao-Lee and Chen Ning Yan. Their demonstration of the coiled and twisted nature of space created a perfect complement to Lyotard’s one-sided Möbius strip metaphor for desire in his *Libidinal Economy*. Lyotard claims Monory as a «spontaneous philosopher». Astronomical diagrams and photographs are juxtaposed with free-standing quotations in the margins by Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin and Kant. Lyotard quotes Kant on the grandeur which plunges the impotent imagination into the abyss of itself; Kant’s «medication to melancholy» is now challenged, says Lyotard, by the theory of relativity. The (reflecting) *moi*, the «me» is itself just a moment: a little Bang in the Bing Bang of the Universe’s energy. Adorno (also a post-Hollywood philosopher) is also brought in to contest the aesthetic of the sublime, saying it will soon «sound hollow», while the subject contemplating grandeur becomes comic, as the gap between the sublime and the ridiculous narrows....<sup>37</sup> Moreover, referring to the spoof philosophical publication by Raymond Ruyer, *The Gnosis of Princeton*, and the «poverty of scientism» (*misère de scientisme*), Lyotard offers none other than a «neuroscientific» critique of Kant– and the whole philosophical system:

... If physics is immanent to the universe even in its temporality, if the universe is only made up of interactions of energy, then science is one case of interaction, just as perception is another one. It is not the fact of a mind opposed to matter, any more than the eye is opposed to what it

<sup>36</sup> See the scientific grid in *Skies*, 18, *An unknown entity in the Monoceros constellation, IC 2177-7h 03'01''*, 1979.

<sup>37</sup> «Adorno observe que l’esthétique du sublime se met bientôt à “sonner creux” que le sublime “se change en son contraire”, que le sujet qui croyait trouver son ultime identité dans l’idée d’absolument grand “est livré au comique” et “qu’il n’ya qu’un pas du sublime au ridicule”», J.-F. Lyotard, *Les confins d’un dandysme*, in “Derrière le miroir”, 244, *Monory. Ciels, nébuleuses et galaxies*, March, 1981, p. 26. See also E. Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant-garde*, Verso, London 2002.



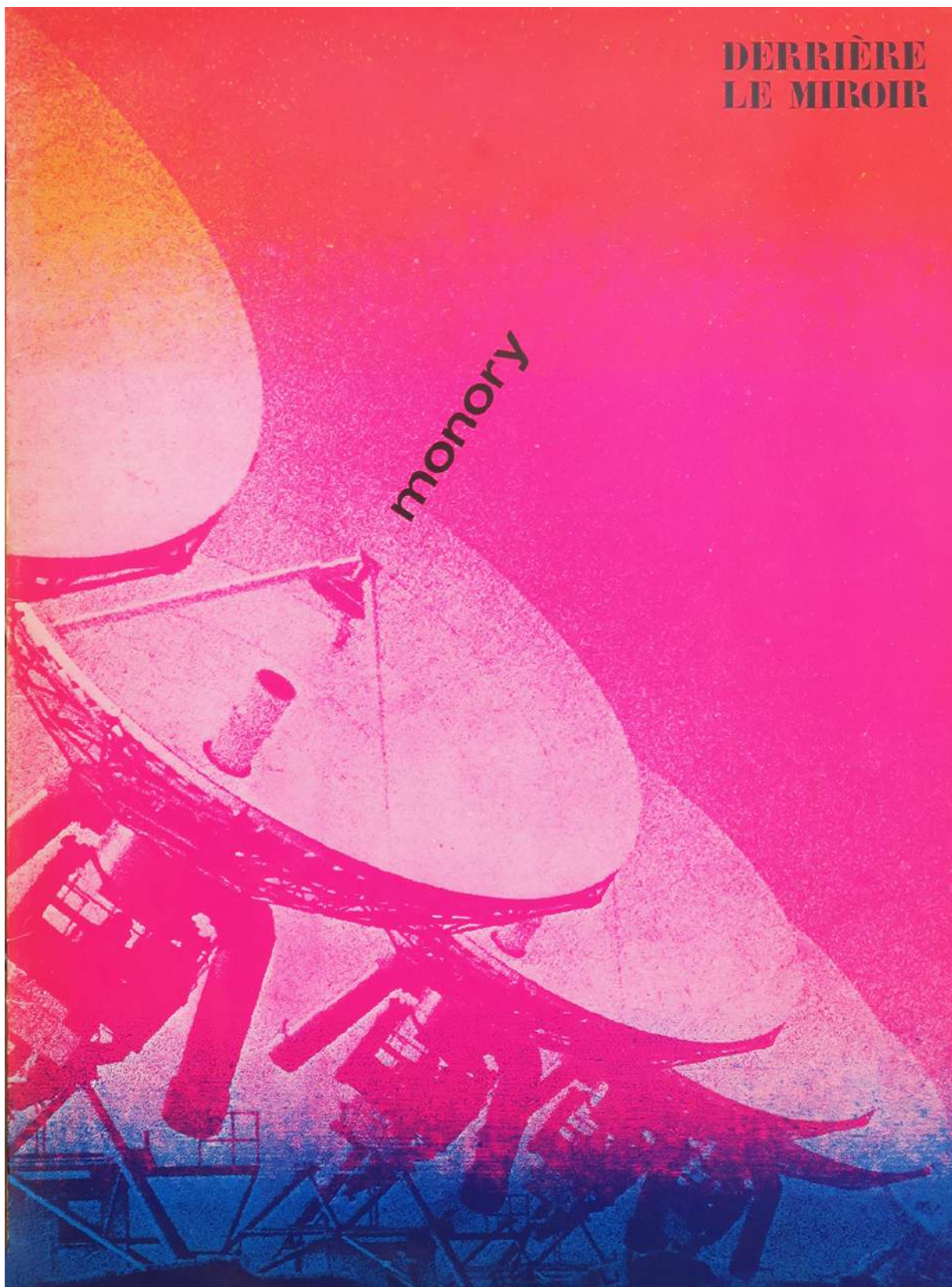


Fig. 6. Jacques Monory, *Derrière le miroir*, n° 244, 1981, cover

sees. Seeing, thinking are incomplete sequences of interaction obeying a field of reversibility without symmetry which envelops, instant by instant, the object seen or thought and its «double» formed in the neurones of a cortex<sup>38</sup>.

Monory's *Sky no 39*, reprises David Teske's computer generated map of 1976 with 5,766 stars. Obviously these maps – décor for American homes in Silicon Valley – are flat, two-dimensional representations of interstellar space where light travels darkly in light years. While the observatory telescope that Lyotard witnessed responded physically to a 41 million-light year distant star, the rectangular flattenings of Teske's «maps for the home» (successor to countless star depictions since Ptolemy) were as distorted as our familiar Mercator projection of the world<sup>39</sup>. The Mercator projection map massively distorts space, flattening our earthly sphere into a rectangular grid of latitudes and longitudes; the familiar contours of countries are also distortions; our exteriorised viewpoint is impossible. Our repertoire of knowledge and related desires, the «use value» of the map – viewed with our specific senses in our specific space-time continuum – bears no relationship with what we know or can imagine as a spherical land and sea «reality»<sup>40</sup>. The same goes for star maps.

The philosophical grid, its horizons, its repertoire, its post-Cartesian sense of self and rationality, is as distorting in its insistence upon its own «use value», I wish to argue, as a Teske or Mercator map. The discipline, too, is ultimately a language-based accumulation of representational world views: a self-reflexive *vanitas*.

It is following the Galerie Maeght exhibition and this text that Lyotard revised and expanded his thoughts adding several pages (up to December 1981) under the heading «The Immanent Sublime or the experimental». «The division between the sublime and the beautiful has lapsed» appears here. It is here that he juxtaposes galaxies with microprocessors and the («murderous») *facts* of capitalist technoscience: blue as a wave, space as topological, sublime emotion as psycho-physiological. His finite/infinite argument, essentially mathematical, posits an immanent rather than transcendent sublime within the

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<sup>38</sup> «...Si la physique est imminente à l'univers jusque dans sa temporalité, et si l'univers n'est fait que d'interactions d'énergie, la science est un cas de l'interaction, comme la perception en est un autre. Elle n'est pas le fait d'un esprit opposé à une matière, pas plus que l'œil ne l'est à ce qu'il voit. Voir, penser sont des séquences incomplètes d'interaction obéissant à un champ de renversabilité sans symétrie qui enveloppe, instant par instant, l'objet vu ou pensé et son «double» formé dans les neurones d'un cortex», J.-F. Lyotard, in «Derrière le miroir», 244, 1981, p. 27. See R. Ruyer, *La Gnose de Princeton: des savants à la recherche d'une religion*, Fayard, Paris 1974.

<sup>39</sup> See Lyotard's account of looking at galaxy photographs in the observatory museum, entering the dome with a giant telescope whose lens is coordinated with star movement to eliminate photographic blur. *Récits Tremblants*, cit., pp. 107-8. Lyotard's filmed 1982 conversation with Monory cites the radar installations at Mount Palomar and Mount Wilson (*Écrits*, cit., p. 92).

<sup>40</sup> NASA's «Equirectangular projection of the world», which can be computer-manipulated to a sphere offers another possibility.

«infinite ensemble of possible transformers»<sup>41</sup>. Is this not the salvage operation of a concept crushed by the immensity of the evidence ? A Pascalian wager?

Lyotard's *Presenting the Unrepresentable: the Sublime*, in "Artforum", 1982 (a fragment focussing essentially on photography) develops this «laps» («avant-garde painting escapes *ex-hypothesi* from the aesthetics of the beautiful...»). Kant's vocabulary of «monsters», «formless objects», purely «negative entities» is charmingly illustrated with J.M. Turner's abstract watercolour *Pink Sky*, 1820<sup>42</sup>. Lyotard writes after Robert Rosenblum's much-discussed derivation of Abstract Expressionism from a post-Kantian northern landscape genre in *Modern Painters and the Northern Romantic Tradition. Friedrich to Rothko* of 1975 (incidentally an attack on dominant Paris versus New York-based narratives). Indeed Lyotard's article follows his own tardy turn in 1981 to artist Daniel Buren, where the philosophy of contemporary art is deemed conceptual and installation-linked: the work *in situ*<sup>43</sup>.

Yet the friendship with Monory, continued; shared memories and discussions were now recaptured in filmed dialogues (fig. 7). Studio photos show the *Skies* canvases propped around them: Monory was working on a commission for Paris's Planetarium. Film – and Monory was a filmmaker – was another fundamental challenge to painting<sup>44</sup>. This deferred moment around the sublime and hence the ineffable (Lyotard later quotes Kant's words *das Unnenbare*, unnameable) fed into his book *Le Differend* – in conjunction with the «Faurisson affair» around Holocaust denial. (The juxtaposition here, even distanced, between the «unspeakable» event of the Holocaust and Kant, «enthusiasm» and the sublime is to my mind calamitous)<sup>45</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup> «Un ensemble infini de transformateurs possibles», J.-F. Lyotard, *Le sublime immanent, ou l'expérimental*, in Id., *L'Assassinat de l'Expérience*, cit., pp. 150-151.

<sup>42</sup> J.-F. Lyotard, *Presenting the Unrepresentable: The Sublime*, Eng. transl. by L. Liebmann, in "Artforum", April 1982, 20 (8), pp. 64-69. This text is misdated to 1988 and thus misplaced, chronologically, as *Representation, Presentation, Unrepresentable*, in J.-F. Lyotard, *The Inhuman. Reflections on Time* (Eng. transl. by G. Bennington and R. Bowlby, Polity Press, Cambridge 1991), pp. 119-128; see K. Bamford, *Lyotard and the figural in Performance, Art and Writing*, Bloomsbury, London 2012, Chapter 4, *The Sublime*, pp. 110-115.

<sup>43</sup> See R. Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition, Friedrich to Rothko*, Harper and Row, New York 1975. Contrast J.-F. Lyotard, *The Works and Writings of Daniel Buren: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, in "Artforum", 19 February 1981, pp. 56-64.

<sup>44</sup> Lyotard repeats many points in the filmed Monory interviews, made with David Carr Brown in 1982 (*Écrits*, cit., pp. 73-98). Film from Godard to Hollywood B movies persists in Monory's imagery. See *Fragile n°13, Manet-Hawks*, 1990, and «Filmographie», [www.jacquesmonory.com](http://www.jacquesmonory.com). See also V. Ionescu, *On Dialogue as Performative Art Criticism*, in G. Jones, A. Woodward (eds.), *Acinemas: Lyotard's Philosophy of Film*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2017, pp. 136-149.

<sup>45</sup> See J.-F. Lyotard, *Le Differend*, Minuit, Paris 1983, for Holocaust denial and Auschwitz pp. 16 ff.; on «L'enthousiasme», the sublime and Kant, pp. 238-9 ff.; in the context of S. Thion (ed.), *Vérité historique ou vérité politique: le dossier de l'affaire Faurisson: la question des chambres à gaz*, La Vieille Taupe, Paris 1980.



Fig. 7. Monory and Lyotard, Cachan studio, 1982 (photo Annick Demeule)

Lyotard loathed what he called the 1980's «return to order» along with neo-expressionism and the transavantgarde in painting<sup>46</sup>. His exhibition *Les Immatériaux*, at the Centre Georges Pompidou in 1985, was in some ways a privileged riposte, with a huge state budget. It mobilised an army of experts. American computer scientists engaged with their avant-garde contemporaries in the Pompidou's experimental music centre, IRCAM, where *Immatériaux* exhibitor Rolf Gehlhaar worked with devices generating aleatoric numbers as rhythms and sounds<sup>47</sup>. Futuristic art works of the past, such Kasimir Malevich's arkhitektons, anchored the *Immatériaux* within museum spaces. The looseleaf album pages that supplement the «writing experiment» part of the catalogue, picked up on familiar themes: «time in delay» with light streaks; «field and moment of the voice»; «the money of time» (Stock Exchange); stars as programmers and transmuters of elements; the exploded body, from the individual

<sup>46</sup> See the letter to Thomas E. Carroll, Milan, May 15, 1985, a valuable and extended snapshot, condemning eclecticism, «Anything goes», the «modern aesthetic» as a «nostalgic» aesthetic of the sublime etc. in J.-F. Lyotard, *Le Postmoderne expliqué aux enfants*, Galilée, Paris 1986; Eng. transl. *The Postmodern Explained to Children*, Power Publications, Sydney 1992, pp. 17-23. The «transavantgarde» changed the art scene with Achille Bonito Oliva's *Aperto 80* at the Venice Biennale, and *The Italian Trans-avantgarde: La Transavanguardia Italiana*, Politi, Milan 1980; *The International Transavantgarde*, also published in Italian and French, Politi, Milano 1982.

<sup>47</sup> Rolf Gehlhaar's *Sound=Space* was the sensation of *Les Immatériaux*. See also G. Born, *Rationalising Culture, IRCAM, Boulez and the Institutionalisation of the Musical Avant-Garde*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1995.



human to the anonymous molecule and «reference number –numbers can produce all possible states of matter». *Painting without a body* was illustrated with Monory's *Explosion*, 1973, the only «painting» in the show – in fact projections of four images of an air crash onto light-sensitive canvases<sup>48</sup>.

Lyotard's transposition of his thinking on the sublime to abstract art happened coterminously with the preparation of *Les Immatériaux*: he produced a Berlin lecture in 1983; *Newman: The Instant* was finalised in December 1983 for the major travelling exhibition, *Art and Time: looking at the Fourth Dimension* (Brussels, 1984, ending in London in 1986); *The Sublime and the Avant-garde* followed in "Artforum", 1984. Hence the subtitle of the anthology, *The Inhuman, Reflections on Time* (1988)<sup>49</sup>. The question of commissions for magazines and exhibitions presents itself here; these two texts, however, unillustrated, are where exegetes «read» «Lyotard-on-the-sublime»<sup>50</sup>. They are not my focus.

As stars became Star Wars through the Reagan-Thatcher era, Lyotard returned to Kant. In the anthology *Du sublime*, 1988, Lyotard says his texts are extracts from a course begun five years previously, including his seminar *The question of the sublime* at the Collège Internationale de la Philosophie (1985-6)<sup>51</sup>. The renewal of Kantian studies was fuelled by

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<sup>48</sup> «temps différé»; «champ et moment de la voix»; «monnaie du temps», «creusets stellaires... l'étoile comme matériel de programmation et de transmutation des éléments»; «corps éclaté... De l'individu humain à la molécule anonyme»; «matricule ... les nombres suffisent à classer tous les états possibles de la matière»; «peintre sans corps» (J.-F. Lyotard, *Les Immatériaux, Album*, (loose leaf cards), Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris 1988.

<sup>49</sup>J.-F. Lyotard, *L'instant, Newman*, in M. Baudson (ed.), *L'Art et le temps: Regards sur la quatrième dimension*, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels 1984, pp. 99-105, acknowledging Thomas B. Hess in a note dated December 1983. The show toured to Villeurbanne, Nouveau Musée 1985; Geneva, Musée Rath, 1985, as *Zeit, der Vierte dimension in der Kunst*, Vienna, Museum der Moderne Kunst, 1985 and *Art and Time*, London, Barbican Art Gallery, 1986. For the Hochschule Berlin lecture see "Merkur", 38, 2 March 1984. *The Sublime and the Avant-garde*, in "Artforum", 22, April 1984, pp. 36-43 (beginning with Newman). Lyotard's *Analytique du Sublime 4* (in "Po&sie", 34, 1985) reprinted *Le Sublime et l'avant-garde* (wrongly ascribed to "Artforum", 1982) preceding *L'instant Newman*, pp. 97-116 (this order is reversed in *The Inhuman*).

<sup>50</sup> See H. Silverman (ed.), *Lyotard, Philosophy, Politics and the Sublime*, Routledge, London 2002, IV, *Before Aesthetics* (sic); and Boris Groy's hilarious put-down, in Id., *Jean-François Lyotard: the Roller Coaster of the Sublime*, in *Under Suspicion. A Phenomenology of New Media*, Columbia University Press, 2012, pp. 150-160. For me, Newman's *The Sublime is Now* (1948) means *now*; «making cathedrals ... out of ourselves» is the ultimate challenge.

<sup>51</sup> See J.-F. Lyotard, *L'Intérêt du sublime*, in J.-L. Nancy, J.-F. Courtine, M. Deguy, E. Escoubas, P. Lacoue-Labarthe, J.-F. Lyotard, L. Marin, J. Rogozinski (eds.), *Du sublime*, Belin, Paris 1988, pp. 149-177; Id., *The Interest of the Sublime*, in *Of the Sublime. Presence in Question*, Eng. transl. by J.S. Librett, SUNY Press, Albany 1991, chapter 5. *Du sublime* was an anthology of the "Po&sie" texts (1984-1986) with contributions by Jean-François Courtine, Michel Deguy, Eliane Escoubas, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-François Lyotard, Louis Marin, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Jacob Rogozinski. To the 1988 moment one must add *Les Lumières. Le sublime. Un échange de paroles entre Jean-François Lyotard, Willem Van Reijen et Dick Veerman*, in "Cahiers de philosophie", 5 (Lyotard number), spring 1988, pp. 63-98, translated as *An interview with Jean-François Lyotard*, in "Theory Culture and Society", 5, 2-3, June 1988, pp. 277-309 and forthcoming in K. Bamford (ed.), *Jean-François Lyotard. The Interview and Debates*, Bloomsbury, London 2020, as *The*



newer translations, the approaching bicentenary of the *Critique of Judgement* and the input of younger colleagues, such as Jacob Rogozinski<sup>52</sup>. In his *After the Sublime* paper for Irvine, California in 1987, Lyotard once again expressed distaste for «trans-avantgardism, neo-expressionism, the new subjectivity, postmodernism, the neo's and the post's». The quintessentially postmodern art of the 1980s is displaced in favour of a simplified Kant and a modernist trajectory<sup>53</sup>.

Finally, *Lessons on the Analytic of the sublime* appearing in France in 1991, amalgamates years of teaching (and recording): 286 pages on Kant's 40 pages in the classic seminar mode of the *explication du texte*<sup>54</sup>. Despite the occasional intrusion of Freud and Lacan (the sublime as a family romance!) and a Lyotardian vocabulary (*apathie, anamnèse, économie, differend*) this compilation bypassed any need to refer to experiences which challenged Kant, or framed him with reference to the interdisciplinarity that was the very premise of *Les Immatériaux*. Lyotard is exhaustive, ratiocinative, scrupulous with regard to Kant's German original and its translations, critical of inconsistencies or anomalies – and of course romantic: the sublime arrives like a blast of lightning or meteor. Kant's text rests ultimately an «enigma»<sup>55</sup>. Lyotard does not stray, essentially, from his focus on the text as a series of propositions to be «explained». His explication is not open (in Umberto Eco's sense) to the study of the *généalogie du texte*, the shifts of mindset linked to paradigm changes, to language, writing and reading as time-related notions versus the instantaneity of sights and feelings. Yet these concerns, the very stuff of historical and literary disciplines or of art criticism as a practice, involved Lyotard fully as a thinker, surely transcending otiose

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*Enlightenment, The Sublime, philosophy and aesthetics*. The drafts of the courses on the sublime, 1980-1989, are held in the Bibliothèque littéraire Jacques Doucet, Paris, Fonds Jean-François Lyotard, JFL 340–JFL 347.

<sup>52</sup> See Lyotard's close colleague, Jacob Rogozinski, in J.-L. Nancy, J.-F. Courtine, M. Deguy, E. Escoubas, P. Lacoue-Labarthe, J.-F. Lyotard, L. Marin, J. Rogozinski (eds.), *Du Sublime*, cit.; *La question de la loi dans la pensée de Kant*, (thesis) 1993; in H. Parret, *L'Esthétique de Kant*, cit., <http://www.ccic-cerisy.asso.fr/kantprg93.html>; see later J. Rogozinski, *Le don de la loi: Kant et l'énigme de l'éthique*, PUF, Paris 1999; Id., *Esquisses kantienne*, Kimé, Paris 1996.

<sup>53</sup> J.-F. Lyotard, *After the Sublime, the State of Aesthetics* (initially a paper given at *The States of theory conference*, Irvine, California, 1987), in Id., *The Inhuman, Reflections on Time*, Polity Press, Cambridge 1991 (*L'inhumain. Causeries sur le temps*, Gallimard, Paris 1988), pp. 135-143.

<sup>54</sup> J.-F. Lyotard, *Leçons sur l'Analytique du sublime (Kant, Critique de la faculté de juger, §§ 23–29)*, Galilée, Paris 1991; *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime: Kant's Critique of Judgement, §§ 23–29*, Eng. transl. by E. Rottenberg, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA 1994. Lyotard's Kant-based *Critical reflections* beginning «Let us call art...» (in «Artforum», April 1991, pp. 92-3) appeared in this context. It would be amusing to compare his book both with Auguste Hilarion Kératry's critical *Examen Philosophique* (1823) and Andrew Ward's *Kant. The Three Critiques*, Polity, Cambridge 2006, also based on extensive teaching.

<sup>55</sup> J.-F. Lyotard, *Leçons sur l'Analytique du sublime*, 1991: an enigma p. 74 ; in particular, the sublime as a blast of lightning (*foudre*), p. 74; he challenges the 1979 translation, p. 77; the sublime as an «economy of the faculties which “invests” and “realises”», p. 195 ; as a fallen meteor, p. 196; a «sacrificial *dispositif*», p. 229; a «family romance», p. 218.

debates around analytical versus « Continental » philosophy<sup>56</sup>.

### **Microprocessor: Life Flows**

The very year, 1978, that Monory painted *False Exit no. 2*, his younger contemporary, Gérard Fromanger created a history painting of a microprocessor: the «other» of the starry skies and surely the very emblem of Lyotard's «postmodern condition» (fig. 8). The size of the work in relationship to the tiny life-sized object (fig.9) is patently absurd, as is the title inscribed on its colourful surface: *Et toi mon amour mon cœur ma vie et toi (And you my love my heart my life and you)*. A comment on the obsession with gadgets and with money? Is this a capitalist or anti-capitalist *vanitas*? The electronic microprocessor chip had been invented in France for instantaneous credit card transactions in 1974<sup>57</sup>. Capital – material transformed into commodities, then to numbers and to currency – was the life-blood of the postmodern, post-industrial world. The catalogue of Fromanger's Centre Pompidou exhibition of 1980 produces – in an uncanny replication of inputs close to Lyotard and Monory – a world map of time zones (fig. 10), an eighteenth-century French polyhedral sundial, the life-size photograph of a microprocessor, and astral maps of the north and south hemisphere. All become signs in an exhilarating or bewildering play of codes through the 1978-1979 series<sup>58</sup>. Paintings which «cut up» the synthesis into separate studies, played with the senses and parts of the body, the eye, skin, stomach, sex, blood.... (An explicit analogy is made with the medieval tapestry *Lady with the Unicorn: To my sole desire*). Fromanger would always show what his friend Gilles Deleuze called «flows» (of desire or of capital) in painted lines of colour signalling the energetic traces of the artist's body, the time and space of their making<sup>59</sup>.

Fromanger's *Blood*, 1979 – lines flowing over the inscribed faces of the multi-directional sundial in a state of dark energy – announces the vital relationship between flows of blood and flows of capital. Writing in a time of unanticipated human and economic catastrophe, the decision to conclude with duo ÜBERMORGEN's *Chinese Coin, Red Blood* (2015) has an extra resonance.

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<sup>56</sup> See G. Gutting, *Bridging the Analytic-Continental divide*, in “New York Times”, 19 February 2012, <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/02/19/bridging-the-analytic-continental-divide/>

<sup>57</sup> Roland Moreno invented the microchip *puce* for the credit card in 1974.

<sup>58</sup> See A. Jouffroy, *Une aventure imprévisible, Gérard Fromanger, 1978-1979*, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris 1979, pp. 8-20. Fromanger's previous figurative work related in part to his trip to Mao's China.

<sup>59</sup> See S. Wilson (ed.), *Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Gérard Fromanger, Photogenic Painting*, Black Dog, London 1999 and *The Visual World of French Theory: Figurations*, Yale, London 2010, Chapter 4, *Deleuze, Foucault, Guattari – Periodisations : Fromanger*, pp. 126-155.

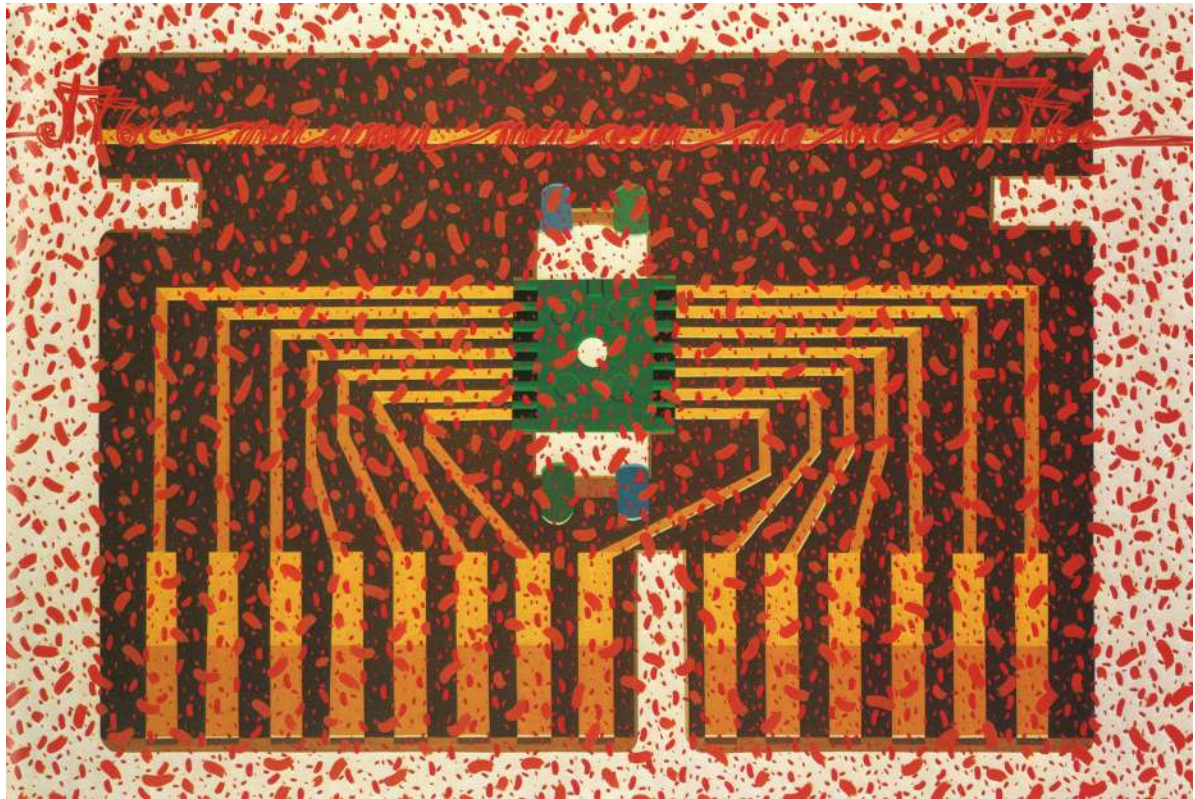


Fig. 8 Gérard Fromanger, *And you, my love, my heart, my life, and you*, 1978.  
Courtesy Gérard Fromanger

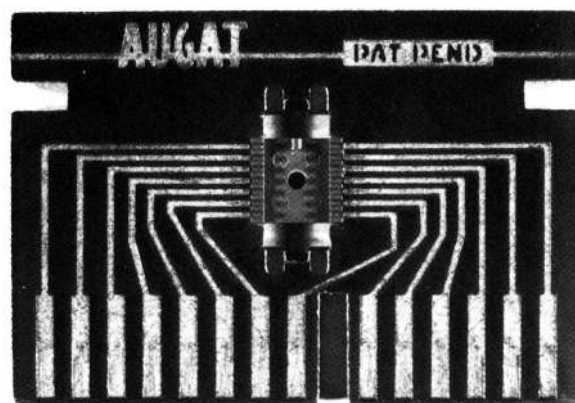


Fig.9. Microprocessor (Gérard Fromanger catalogue, 1980)

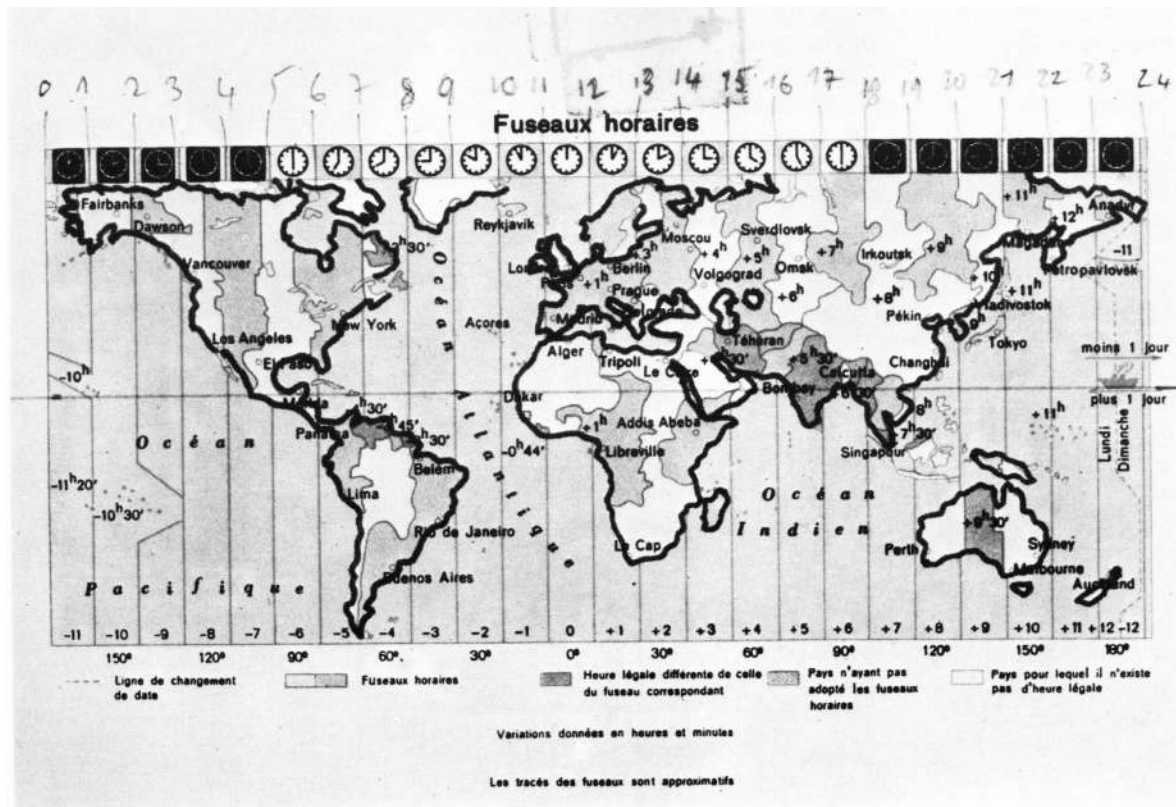


Fig. 10. Mercator projection with time zones (*Gérard Fromanger catalogue*, 1980)

## UBERMORGEN: The day after tomorrow ?

In London, the exhibition *24/7 A Wake-Up Call for our Non-Stop World* at Somerset House, drew crowds in autumn, 2019<sup>60</sup>. I witnessed the UBERMORGEN video, *Chinese Coin Red Blood* (fig. 11), just before taking the plane to Hangzhou. Bitcoin, the latest international currency, is digital, not physical, but «mining» metaphors are used for the huge amounts of hydroelectric power needed for giant generators producing aleatoric combinations: they function 24/7, managed 24/7 by human labour. The quantitative analogy is with human red blood cell production: 100 million new blood cells produced every minute. UBERMORGEN's video images portray a Chinese bitcoin mine functioning in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. The atmosphere with soundtrack is ominous, the conclusion (delivered with text inserts) is murderous: a quasi-fictional attack by Uyghur separatists on the bitcoin labourers<sup>61</sup>. The relationship to the body and to the microlevel of

<sup>60</sup> *24/7 A wake-up call for our non-stop world*, curated by Sarah Cook, (October 2019-February 2020) Somerset House, London, inspired by J. Crary, *24/7. Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, Verso, London 2013.

<sup>61</sup> See UBERMORGEN, (lizvix and Hans Bernhard), *Chinese Coin, Red Blood*, 2015; video and sound, Mike Huntemann. Commissioned by the NeoN Digital Arts Festival Dundee, it fuses footage from Vice video's *Itinera*, N. 21, 2021

the cell within the coordinates of space, time, capital, politics and expendable human interfaces in *Chinese coin*, *Red blood* exceeds, yet echoes, Lyotard's concerns.



Fig. 11. UBERMORGEN, *Chinese Coin*, *Red Blood*, 2015, video still.

Death Valley and Silicon Valley implode together here. Capital explodes in China: it has the face of terror. We recall the Lyotard's fulcrum-moment with Monory in California: from star to digit, computer to capital – and his attempt to redeem an «immanent sublime». Lyotard conflated sublimines with his *differend* and did not philosophise about the gulag. He chose «capitalist techno-science» – a neologism – as a sometime adversary<sup>62</sup>. Why did he avoid «techno-sublime» or «dystopic sublime»? What was the ultimate significance in Lyotard's trajectory from the future back to the text?<sup>63</sup>

Recent publications emphasise the topicality of the sublime: see Tate London's research project, *The Sublime Object. Nature Art and Language 2007-2010*, or the Centre-Pompidou

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*Inside a Chinese Bitcoin Mine* (report by Eric Franco, 6 Feb. 2015) with Shinya Tsukamo's *Tetsuo: the Iron Man* (Japan Home Video, 1989) and news fallout from the CP's campaign *Strike Hard Campaign against Violent Terrorism*, launched in May, 2014; <http://www.leisureandculturedundee.com/event/19852> and <https://vimeo.com/14514194>

<sup>62</sup> Lyotard's *Postscript to Terror and the Sublime*, a letter to Augustin Nancy from Berlin, 5 January 1985, looks back to Rousseau, Kant, the French Revolution, Stalinism and nazism – but not forward; *The Postmodern Explained to Children*, cit., 1992, pp. 67-72. See G. Hottis, *La Technoscience: de l'origine du mot à son usage actuel*, in J.-Y. Goffi (ed.), *Regards sur les technosciences*, Vrin, Paris 2006, pp. 23-27ff.

<sup>63</sup> In 1989, the "Cahiers du CCI" (Centre de Création Industrielle) produced the illustrated special number, *Les chemins du virtuel. Simulation informatique et création industrielle* (ed. by J-L.Weissberg): the latest «immaterial» advances – with no Lyotard.



Metz's 2016 exhibition, *Sublime, Les Tremblements du Monde*<sup>64</sup>. Stephan Zepke's *Sublime Art*, 2017, devotes a chapter to Lyotard in *explication du texte* mode, with insufficient postmodern irony<sup>65</sup>. Elizabeth Grosz's *The Incorporeal – Ontology, Ethics, and the Limits of Materialism*, also published in 2017, moves from the Stoics to Spinoza, Nietzsche, Deleuze, Simondon, to «Ruyer and the embryogenesis of the world»; yet despite her Monory-like, star-spangled book cover, her genealogy omits Lyotard altogether<sup>66</sup>. French scholars pursue in 2018 a sublime which is always now<sup>67</sup>. Jacques Monory, the 1970's postmodern romantic, exhibited – after his death – in the group show of 2019, *Silence, Cosmos, Turning!* in Dunkerque, northern France. *Sky no 16. The centre of our galaxy*, dominated a spectacular installation<sup>68</sup>. This is the paradox of the *vanitas*, for Pascal, for Kant, for philosophy as well as painting: *Silence, Cosmos turning!* Art is long but life is short: *Ars longa, vita brevis*.

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<sup>64</sup>See <https://www.tate.org.uk/about-us/projects/sublime-object> and *Sublime, Les tremblements du monde*, Metz, Centre Pompidou, 2016, curated by H el ene Guenin.

<sup>65</sup> S. Zepke, *Sublime Art. Towards and Aesthetics of the Future*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2017 (Chapter 1 on Kant, Chapter 2 on Lyotard).

<sup>66</sup> E. Grosz, *The Incorporeal. Ontology, Ethics and the Limits of Materialism*, Columbia University Press, New York 2017. Raymond Ruyer, author of *La Gnose de Princeton*, bequeathed to the University of Nancy his unpublished manuscript, *L'embryog nese du monde et le Dieu silencieux* (The embryogenesis of the world and the silent God), 1983.

<sup>67</sup> C. Fl cheux, P.-H. Frangine, D. Laroque (eds.) *Le Sublime*, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2018.

<sup>68</sup> M. Senhadji, S. Warlop, *Cosmos. Silence, on tourne!*, LAAC (Lieu d'Art et d'Action Contemporaine), Mus e de Dunkerque, France.