



Lyotard characterized the postmodern era as one that has lost faith in all grand, totalizing "metanarratives"—the abstract ideas in terms of which thinkers since the time of the [Enlightenment](#) have attempted to construct [comprehensive](#) explanations of historical experience. Disillusioned with the grandiose claims of metanarratives such as "reason," "truth," and "progress," the postmodern age has turned to smaller, narrower *petits récits* ("little narratives"), such as the history of everyday life and of [marginalized](#) groups. In his most important philosophical work, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (1983), Lyotard compared discourses to "language games," a notion developed in the later work of [Ludwig Wittgenstein](#) (1889–1951); like language games, discourses are discrete systems of rule-governed activity involving language. Because there is no common set of assumptions in terms of which their conflicting claims or viewpoints can be [adjudicated](#) (there is no universal "reason" or "truth"), discourses are for the most part incommensurable. The basic [imperative](#) of postmodern politics, therefore, is to create [communities](#) in which the [integrity](#) of different language games is respected—communities based on heterogeneity, conflict, and "dissensus."

[. . .] Science has always been in conflict with narratives. Judged by the yardstick of science, the majority of them prove to be fables. But to the extent that science does not restrict itself to stating useful regularities and seeks the truth, it is obliged to legitimate the rules of its own game. It then produces a discourse of legitimation with respect to its own status, a discourse called philosophy. I will use the term modern to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth. For example, the rule of consensus between the sender and addressee of a statement with truth-value is deemed acceptable if it is cast in terms of a possible unanimity between rational minds: this is the Enlightenment narrative, in which the hero of knowledge works toward a good ethico-political end – universal peace. As can be seen from this example, if a metanarrative implying a philosophy of history is used to legitimate knowledge, questions are raised concerning the validity of the institutions governing the social bond: these must be legitimated as well. Thus justice is consigned to the grand narrative in the same way as truth.

Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward meta-narratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it. To the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds, most notably, the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which in the past relied on it. The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements – narrative, but also denotative, prescriptive, descriptive, and so on. Conveyed within each cloud are pragmatic valencies specific to its kind. Each of us lives at the intersection of many of these. However, we do not necessarily

establish stable language combinations, and the properties of the ones we do establish are not necessarily communicable.

Thus the society of the future falls less within the province of a Newtonian anthropology (such as structuralism or systems theory) than a pragmatics of language particles. There are many different language games – a heterogeneity of elements. They only give rise to institutions in patches – local determinism.

The decision makers, however, attempt to manage these clouds of sociality according to input/output matrices, following a logic which implies that their elements are commensurable and that the whole is determinable. They allocate our lives for the growth of power. In matters of social justice and of scientific truth alike, the legitimation of that power is based on its optimizing the system's performance – efficiency. The application of this criterion to all of our games necessarily entails a certain level of terror, whether soft or hard: be operational (that is, commensurable) or disappear.

The logic of maximum performance is no doubt inconsistent in many ways, particularly with respect to contradiction in the socio-economic field: it demands both less work (to lower production costs) and more (to lessen the social burden of the idle population). But our incredulity is now such that we no longer expect salvation to rise from these inconsistencies, as did Marx.

Still, the postmodern condition is as much a stranger to disenchantment as it is to the blind positivity of delegitimation. Where, after the metanarratives, can legitimacy reside? The operativity criterion is technological; it has no relevance for judging what is true or just. Is legitimacy to be found in consensus obtained through discussion, as Jurgen Habermas thinks? Such consensus does violence to the heterogeneity of language games. And invention is always born of dissension. Postmodern knowledge is not simply a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable. Its principle is not the expert's homology, but the inventor's paralogy.

Here is the question: is a legitimation of the social bond, a just society, feasible in terms of a paradox analogous to that of scientific activity? What would such a paradox be?

Among the metanarratives are reductionism and teleological notions of human history such as those of the Enlightenment and Marxism. These have become untenable, according to Lyotard, by technological progress in the areas of communication, mass media and computer science. Techniques such as artificial intelligence and machine translation show a shift to linguistic and symbolic production as central elements of the postindustrial economy and the related postmodern culture, which had risen at the end of the 1950s after the reconstruction of western Europe.

The result is a plurality of language-games (a term coined by Wittgenstein^[4]), without any overarching structure. Modern science thus destroys its own metanarrative.

In the book, Lyotard professes a preference for this plurality of small narratives that compete with each other, replacing the totalitarianism of grand narratives. For this reason, *The Postmodern Condition* has often been interpreted as an excuse for unbounded relativism, which for many has become a hallmark of postmodern thought.

^[3] Though upon a closer reading of Lyotard's text one will find that there is no such notion of the aforementioned relativism.

The Postmodern Condition was written as a report on the influence of technology on the notion of knowledge in exact sciences, commissioned by the Québec government. Lyotard later admitted that he had a 'less than limited' knowledge of the science he was to write about, and to compensate for this knowledge, he 'made stories up' and referred to a number of books that he hadn't actually read. In retrospect, he called it 'a parody' and 'simply the worst of all my books'.^[3] Despite this, and much to Lyotard's regret, it came to be seen as his most important piece of writing.

Quotes

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In a more polemically written afterword, entitled (after Kant's epochal essay on Enlightenment) \"Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?\" Lyotard makes his own views clearer. He argues against the German sociologist Jürgen Habermas, the last representative of the Frankfurt School and therefore of the idealist tradition, a thinker who moreover attacked postmodern philosophers like Derrida and Foucault as \"conservatives\" for

challenging such progressive projects of modernity as liberalism and Marxism. Lyotard turns the charge back, effectively accusing Habermas of Stalinism:

When power assumes the name of a party, realism and its neoclassical complement triumph over the experimental avant-garde by slandering and banning it—that is, provided the "correct" images, the "correct" narratives, the "correct" forms which the party requests, selects, and propagates can find a public to desire them as the appropriate remedy for the anxiety and depression that public experiences.

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If *The Postmodern Condition* dwells, sometimes incomprehensibly (not to mention fraudulently), on science, its afterword more credibly discusses art. Lyotard sees the modern and the postmodern as perennial conditions or poles of an opposition within the modern period as a whole: "The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself." The moderns posit wholeness, either a wholeness lost to time or one to come in a utopian future; the postmoderns, by contrast, know that humanity never was or could be whole, and that any attempt to make it so will only end in some kind of totalitarian dystopia.

Montaigne's essays, he says, are postmodern, while Schlegel's fragments are modern, presumably—he doesn't elaborate—because Montaigne playfully writes his own uncertainty into the text while Schlegel portentously evokes the totality of which his discourse is only a scattering. Malevich with his solemn God-shaped hole of a black canvas is a modernist, Duchamp with his witty interrogation of the art institution a postmodernist; Hegel and his syntheses are modernist, Kant and his antinomies postmodernist. In the lengthiest comparison, he gives us Proust the modernist—nostalgic for a lost paradise written up in a still-referential and stylistically unified prose—and Joyce the postmodernist—exposing the inadequacy of all signs in a language calling constant ludic attention to its performance. He concludes with the force of a manifesto:

Finally, it must be clear that it is our business not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented. And it is not to be expected that this task will effect the last reconciliation between language games (which, under the name of faculties, Kant knew to be separated by a chasm), and that only the transcendental illusion (that of Hegel) can hope to totalize them into a real unity. But Kant also knew that the price to pay for such an illusion is terror. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and the communicable experience. Under the general demand for slackening and for appeasement, we can hear the mutterings of the desire for a return of terror, for the realization of the fantasy to seize reality. The answer is: Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name.

Lyotard criticizes metanarratives such as [reductionism](#) and [teleological](#) notions of human history such as those of the [Enlightenment](#) and [Marxism](#), arguing that they have become untenable because of [technological](#) progress in the areas of [communication](#), [mass media](#) and [computer science](#). Techniques such as [artificial intelligence](#) and [machine translation](#) show a shift to [linguistic](#) and symbolic production as central elements of the [postindustrial](#) economy and the related postmodern culture, which had risen at the end of the 1950s after the reconstruction of [western Europe](#).

The result is a plurality of [language-games](#) (a term coined by [Ludwig Wittgenstein](#)^{[1]:67}), of different types of argument. At the same time, the goal of truth in science is replaced by "performativity" and efficiency in the service of capital or the state, and science produces paradoxical results such as [chaos theory](#), all of which undermine science's grand narrative.^[2] Lyotard professes a preference for this plurality of small narratives that compete with each other, replacing the [totalitarianism](#) of grand narratives.

In *The Postmodern Condition* Jean-François Lyotard extends that analysis to postmodernism by looking at the status of science, technology, and the arts, the significance of technocracy, and the way the flow of information and knowledge are controlled in the Western world. Lyotard emphasized language; the world of postmodern knowledge can be represented as a game of language where speaking is participation in the game whose goal is the creation of

new and ever-changing social linkages.

Postmodernism would then be undone by a single formula. But explaining the origin of fundamental particles would not explain the whole subsequent development of the universe; the equation would have to be "run" to determine that, and wouldn't doing so demand the power of the whole universe, and create a new universe in turn? I'm running back again into Lyotard's arguments. His (anti-)system is impervious even to a TOE. To him it is still never enough. There will always be a scientific frontier. Such is the restlessness of humanity, and our great Mother Nature. Heraclitus all the way.

Lyotard introduces the concept that the grand unifying narratives that have justified the pursuit of knowledge are being questioned by postmodern science, which does not seek to produce useful knowledge; speculative knowledge that seeks Truth; or knowledge that will emancipate mankind. Rather it is best understood as playing a Wittgensteinian series of language games, looking to create multiple, localized communities that play by their own (incompatible) series of rules. The postmodern, he thus contends, pushes for novelty, for an exploration of new "moves" or new "rules" that can participate in these games. Its aim is not consensus, and it celebrates rather than mourns the loss of the earlier narratives of unified endeavor.

The author does purposely conflate justice, truth and knowledge in order to show the paradox that we are in. He'll say something along the lines that as soon as we describe the world with a narrative we lose knowledge. He knows that we create the narrative while we leave Plato's cave and that 'men yearn for narratives and fail to recognize knowledge. Knowledge is thus founded on the narrative of its own martyrdom'.

Post-modernist know that what people believe is a function of the narrative they have and that there is no meta-narrative that makes our beliefs universal, necessary and certain.

Post Modernism' literally means 'after modernism'. It is not an affirmation in itself. It is only a negation of something that was and indicates nothing about what it is. This author adds a little structure to that which has no structure by making post-modernism being *narratives absent of meta-narratives*. That is there is *no narrative for the narrative itself*. The world you are thrown into has no meaning beyond the meaning that you make of it through yourself and by your own devices from being-in-the-world while being part-of-the-world. The ultimate word game of word games is that it is up to you to figure this out for yourself. The author will point out that any change to the 'rules of the game' changes the game into another game.

Lyotard defines Postmodern thought in contrast to modernism. Modernism, he claims, is ". . .any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind [i.e., philosophy:] making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth." Postmodernism, in turn, is ". . .incredulity toward metanarratives."

Science and technology, especially information sciences based on computers, are increasingly an important commodity and the focus of worldwide competition. Knowledge and political power have become linked. Thus: ". . .[W:]ho decides what knowledge is, and who knows what needs to be decided? In the computer age, the question of knowledge is now more than ever a question of government."

Lyotard argues that the Postmodern moment should emphasize "paralogy," or dissensus. He argues: ". . .it is now dissension that must be emphasized. Consensus is a horizon that is never reached. Research that takes place under the aegis of a paradigm tends to stabilize; it is like the exploitation of a technology, economic, or artistic 'idea.'"

Postmodern science, in his view, encompasses: "The function of differential or imaginative or paralogical activity of the current pragmatics of science is to point out these. . . 'presuppositions and to petition the players to accept different ones. The only legitimation that can make this kind of request admissible is that it will generate ideas, in other words, new statements.'" Thus, new statements, new presuppositions maintain science as an open system of discourse, characterized by paralogy (dissensus) as individuals strive to generate new knowledge, not imprisoned by existing consensus on what one should study and how one should study it.

Liotard makes a distinction between narratives and science, where narratives are apparently the manner in which older societies organized themselves. By focusing on "popular sayings, proverbs, and maxims," he argues that it is narratives that consume/elide history, while Science preserves it, bringing along with it baggage from previous work:

[For narratives,] In their prosody can be recognized the mark of that strange temporalization that jars the golden rule of our knowledge: "never forget"... The narratives' reference may seem to belong to the past, but in reality it is always contemporaneous with the act of recitation (22)

[For Science, the] knowledge that has accumulated in the form of already accepted statements can always be challenged. But conversely, any new statement that contradicts a previously approved statement regarding the same referent can be accepted as valid only if it refutes the previous statement by producing arguments and proofs. The game of science thus implies a diachronic temporality, that is, a memory and a project. The current sender of a scientific statement is supposed to be acquainted with previous statements concerning its referent (bibliography) and, only proposes a new statement on the subject if it differs from the previous ones. (26)

Liotard's distinction seems based on an idealized view of science drawn from philosophers, like when he says: "A statement of science gains no validity from the fact of being reported. Even in the case of pedagogy, it is taught only if it is still verifiable in the present through argumentation and proof. In itself, it is never secure from falsification." (26)

At the same time, there are many notions of "narrative" which don't dispense with history that easily - consider the academic field of History or judicial traditions that are definitely non-static like rabbinic Judaism. While these might place themselves as continuing in the line of those who came before, scientists certainly see themselves as standing on the shoulders of giants too, so not sure that's enough for a distinction based on history. There's also a risk of equivocation - although the narratives Lyotard focuses to make his point about time are like aphorisms, he later includes television appearances by scientists as narratives too (27). These don't in any obvious way have the same relationship to time as the aphorism.

The supposed historic distinction between narratives and science isn't supported by a detailed historic analysis, of course]

B. Three narratives of legitimation of Science

For Lyotard, while each science should be thought of as a distinct language game (drawing on Wittgenstein), each science still requires a narrative for its own legitimations

[An aside:

Interestingly, in his introduction, Frederic Jameson writes "Legitimation becomes visible as a problem and an object of study only at the point in which it is called into question" (viii), while for Lyotard, "It is not inconceivable that the recourse to narrative is inevitable, at least to the extent that the language game of science desires its statements to be true but does not have the resources to legitimate their truth on its own. If this is the case, it is necessary to admit an irreducible need for history understood, as outlined above - not as a need to remember or to project (a need for historicity, for accent), but on the contrary as a need to forget" (28).

For Jameson, what is a contingent state of needing legitimation seems for Lyotard to always come with the territory. In addition, the claim that narratives are associated with forgetfulness is assumed again, and as before I think this

needs support, although it might be on to something]

Lyotard argues that there are two narratives of legitimation that used to be available:

1. Science as liberation for people, where "The subject... is humanity as the hero of liberty" (31)
2. A philosophical metanarrative that unites not only the different disciplines, but located each with respect to the other, and located all of them in relation to appropriate action.

The argument has in mind Hegel, the setting up of the university of Berlin, and Humboldt (33), for example:

...the Bildung aimed for by Humboldt's project, which consists not only in the acquisition of learning by individuals, but also in the training of a fully legitimated subject of knowledge and society. Humboldt therefore invokes a Spirit (what Fichte calls Life), animated by three ambitions, or better, by a single, threefold aspiration: "that of deriving everything from an original principle" (corresponding to scientific activity), "that of relating everything to an ideal" (governing ethical and social practice), and "that of unifying this principle and this ideal in a single Idea" (ensuring that the scientific search for true causes always coincide with the pursuit of just ends in moral and political life). This ultimate synthesis constitutes the legitimate subject. (33)

In a complicated way, unlike #1 where science's legitimation was for man's sake, this is more science for its own sake:

Research and the spread of learning are not justified by invoking a principle of usefulness. The idea is not at all that science should serve the interests of the State and/or civil society. The humanist principle that humanity rises up in dignity and freedom through knowledge is left by the wayside. German idealism has recourse to a metaprinciple that simultaneously grounds the development of learning, of society, and of the State in the realization of the "life" of a Subject, called "divine Life" by Fichte and "Life of the spirit" by Hegel. In this perspective, knowledge first finds legitimacy within itself, and it is knowledge that is entitled to say what the State and what Society are. But it can only play this role by changing levels, by ceasing to be simply the positive knowledge of its referent (nature, society, the State, etc.), becoming in addition to that the knowledge of the knowledge of the referent - that is, by becoming speculative. In the names "Life" and "Spirit," knowledge names itself. (34-5)

True knowledge, in this perspective, is always indirect knowledge; it is composed of reported statements that are incorporated into the metanarrative of a subject that guarantees their legitimacy.

Although Wittgenstein himself did not see legitimation as involving performativity (performance/power?) work is legitimized. I think by "performativity", what is meant is simply performance/success, particularly success in the ability to produce consensus about reality, through the production of reality itself. After all, earlier Lyotard draws from Bachelard to state:

a referent is that which is susceptible to proof and can be used as evidence in a debate. Not: I can prove something because reality is the way I say it is. But: as long as I can produce proof, it is permissible to think that reality is the way I say it is. (24)

This changes education:

If the performativity of the supposed social system is taken as the criterion of relevance (that is, when the perspective of systems theory is adopted), higher education becomes a subsystem of the social system, and the same performativity criterion is applied to each of these problems. The desired goal becomes the optimal contribution of higher education to the best performativity of the social system. (48)

What is transmitted in higher learning? In the case of professional training, and limiting ourselves to a narrowly functionalist point of view, an organized stock of established knowledge is the essential thing that is transmitted. The application of new technologies to this stock may have a considerable impact on the medium of communication. It does not seem absolutely necessary that the medium be a lecture delivered in person by a teacher in front of silent students, with questions reserved for sections or "practical work" sessions run by an assistant. To the extent that learning is translatable into computer language and the traditional teacher is replaceable by memory banks, didactics can be entrusted to machines linking traditional memory banks (libraries, etc.) and computer data banks to intelligent terminals placed at the students' disposal. (50)

C. Making \"systems\" complicated

However, Lyotard seems to want to make a distinction between enhancing productivity as a legitimation narrative, and the actual possibility of production-enhancement using bureaucratic control. He insists that total control would reduce productivity of the system. This explains \"the weakness of state and socioeconomic bureaucracies: they stifle the systems or subsystems they control and asphyxiate themselves in the process.\" (55-56)

Therefore technocrats who pretend to speak on behalf of a whole system, made up of multiple, incommensurable language games are simply demonstrating hubris: \"What their \"arrogance\" means is that they identify themselves with the social system conceived as a totality in quest of its most performative unity possible. If we look at the pragmatics of science, we learn that such an identification is impossible.\" (63)

[As someone alien to the tradition of German idealism, this seems to be a lot of a-historic history deployed to support (what seems to me to be) equivocating over-generalizations. In addition, if the sections of this summary seems somewhat disconnected, that's because that's my understanding. For my part, either because of stylistic failings or my own, I find the text insufficiently clear or careful to be of too much value, at least now (since so much great work has been done in the Social Studies of Science), although the question of how culture/economics shapes knowledge is still fascinating and important.

The introductory essay by Jameson was incredibly valuable to place this work in context - when read after reading Lyotard's text. For example, he points out that Lyotard locates postmodernism too close to high modernism, indicating disagreement over how to conceptualize postmodernism.

The postmodern world then is that which seeks to present the unrepresentable. There's an inherent kind of humility in the approach, a recognition that all knowledge is not available to us, that we will constantly be reforming our perspective on our world. So Lyotard concludes then with a call to eschew totality and \"activate differences.\" For it is through the differences, not the totalities, he argues, that we will enhance our knowledge of the world.

The mourning modernity of 1930s is marked by secularism, and hence is a eulogy for the death of religion per se. During this period, the new secularist values of modernity have not yet been exhausted, and meta-narratives that become utopias in the 'postmodern' age, are still available to the critiques of modernity. Thus Marxism and anarchism remain alternative realities for the people of 1930s, even though they cease to be credible for the frustrated generation of revolutionaries that Lyotard is a part of. It is in this era that capitalism acquires a truly global shape and the emergence of post-Fordist production relegates the dreams of the proletarian revolution. In *The Postmodern Condition* Lyotard is mourning not for the death of religion, or tradition, but for the removal of hope from the world.

However, I agree with Jameson's criticism that Lyotard's mourning is in some senses premature: the prevalence of contradiction is not a new development – it is the push factor in Hegel's dialectics, and goes hand in hand with capitalism. Yes, the proletariat has taken a different shape with post-Fordism, but the power dynamics that effected Marxism are still present, and it is these power dynamics that have to be attended to. Eventually, the solution to the problems of late capitalism may not be universal, but mending each particular will give the universal a new face, thereby ousting the need for a meta-narrative in unifying against the imbalances of today's system.

What are metanarratives? They are the stories modern science or its philosophical and political partisans have told to legitimate itself before the public, i.e., though he doesn't quite put it this way, the Enlightenment. They are *metanarratives* because they provide a narrative justification for science, which is not itself narrative but a set of procedures for producing statements about physical reality that correspond to that reality. Lyotard singles out two such Enlightenment metanarratives, the political and the philosophical. In the political story, humanity through education becomes more and more informed about the truth of the world and therefore more and more able to govern itself as a free citizenry in a free society. The philosophical narrative is the political narrative spiritualized, as it were, in Hegel and other idealist philosophers, who believe in the progressive self-conscious realization of our own capacity for freedom.

These metanarratives, however, did not result in the promised liberation. Instead, they promulgated what Lyotard, with a backward glance at the Jacobins, calls the \"terror\" of silencing all dissent and exterminating all alternatives; they lead, in other words, to imperialism, fascism, and Stalinism. But this isn't the only reason to abandon them and

take up "incredulity" instead, nor even the main reason Lyotard gives in this book, though it *is* the most ethically and politically consequential. The actual practice of science, he writes, as well as the economies of the developed nations, are more and more devoted to language, in the form of computer code, cybernetics, informatics, fractal geometry, and the like, all fields requiring the production, manipulation, or analysis of sign-systems to operate. With recourse to the later Wittgenstein, Lyotard argues that as these scientific fields define more and more of our lives, we will come to recognize not one single metanarrative but rather a plurality of "language games," each with its own rules, as defining the future. In this technological pluralism is implied a corresponding social and cultural diversity, a thousand flowers blooming in the cracked edifice of Enlightenment.

These language-games will be justified not by metanarratives but by what he calls "pragmatics" or "performativity," by which he means their ability to accomplish certain ends. "Does it work?" becomes a more important question than "What does it mean?" or "Is it true?" As this increasingly computerized society empowers the multinational corporation to become sovereign as the master of this technology, the nation-state itself, whose natal citizenry was the hero of the Enlightenment metanarrative, wanes in importance as a plurality and diversity of practices spreads over the globe. What the metanarratives of science have suppressed—narrative itself, for one, which Lyotard argues oriented traditional and indigenous cultures in their cosmos without the need for progressive teleological metanarratives—can re-emerge and the terror of silencing may be a thing of the past. All manner of previously authoritative institutions will likewise collapse; he foresees, for example, the demise of the traditional university—itsself the inaugural seat of idealism's philosophical metanarrative—in favor of a hub where students can be taught to access relevant information and compose their own codes.

Whether these are positive or negative developments, he doesn't fully say. On the one hand, his evocation of indigenous narrative vs. imperial metanarrative suggests a progressive hope in postmodern "incredulity" to liberate previously suppressed peoples; on the other hand, he's clear about the nexus of money and power that a tech-dominated and corporate-led global society will require, surely an anti-democratic feature of the coming landscape.

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If *The Postmodern Condition* dwells, sometimes incomprehensibly (not to mention fraudulently), on science, its afterword more credibly discusses art. Lyotard sees the modern and the postmodern as perennial conditions or poles of an opposition within the modern period as a whole: "The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself." The moderns posit wholeness, either a wholeness lost to time or one to come in a utopian future; the postmoderns, by contrast, know that humanity never was or could be whole, and that any attempt to make it so will only end in some kind of totalitarian dystopia.

Montaigne's essays, he says, are postmodern, while Schlegel's fragments are modern, presumably—he doesn't elaborate—because Montaigne playfully writes his own uncertainty into the text while Schlegel portentously evokes the totality of which his discourse is only a scattering. Malevich with his solemn God-shaped hole of a black canvas is a modernist, Duchamp with his witty interrogation of the art institution a postmodernist; Hegel and his syntheses are modernist, Kant and his antinomies postmodernist. In the lengthiest comparison, he gives us Proust the modernist—nostalgic for a lost paradise written up in a still-referential and stylistically unified prose—and Joyce the postmodernist—exposing the inadequacy of all signs in a language calling constant ludic attention to its performance. He concludes with the force of a manifesto:

Finally, it must be clear that it is our business not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented. And it is not to be expected that this task will effect the last reconciliation between language games (which, under the name of faculties, Kant knew to be separated by a chasm), and that only the transcendental illusion (that of Hegel) can hope to totalize them into a real unity. But Kant also knew that the price to pay for such an illusion is terror. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and the communicable experience. Under the general demand for slackening and for appeasement, we can hear the mutterings of the desire for a return of terror, for the realization of the fantasy to seize

reality. The answer is: Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name.

If I have summarized this difficult and somewhat hoaxing book persuasively, how does it help us with our opening questions? On the political coordinates of postmodernism, Lyotard's argument, for all its vogueish cyber-talk, is remarkably congruent with Cold War anti-communism and the even older traditions of moderation out of which it grows; with the disparagement of "terror" and warnings about abstract idealism, we might be reading a more up-to-date Albert Camus or Hannah Arendt, not to mention Edmund Burke, but without the crucial dimension of these thinkers' recourse to art and nature and the civic, which Lyotard replaces with the unrepresentable sublime of a world no mind can apprehend. The valorization of self-consciously pluralized language-games in the name of the "silenced" is a sentimental post-'60s multiculturalist take not only on Wittgenstein but on Nietzsche's rather colder perspectivism and aestheticism.

None of this is objectionable, since the experiences of imperialism, fascism, and Stalinism *should* make us cautious about totalizing political and technological initiatives. But at this strange crossroads where Burke's exaltation of "little platoons" meets Toni Morrison's elegy for "discredited knowledges," Lyotard gives away too much. For as illegitimate as one may find the modern state, it's more accountable than its would-be replacement in the multinational corporation, and its laws are the only guarantors of pluralism (besides sheer force) in the form of rights. William Gibson exposed Lyotard's pitch for cyber-diversification in the global company town as dystopia only a few years after *The Postmodern Condition* was published; we confirm its disadvantages—censorious, manipulative, exploitative, surveillant—every day of our 21st-century lives. Finally, for someone who wants to "wage war on totality" and make fun of Stalinist criticism, Lyotard is suspiciously eager to pass definitive judgments, as if there were not other ways to read Hegel, Proust, or Joyce.

Despite its reputation as helping to put the concept of "postmodernism" on the conceptual map, Lyotard's book is probably too idiosyncratic to be exhaustive. But on its evidence, we might say that postmodernism was a partially justified conservative revolt that unfortunately ended up emboldening authorities who threaten to become as totalitarian as those it criticized; that we are still postmodern insofar as it names the condition of a corporate, digital, and at least officially pluralist society; and that its assault on the modern was too indiscriminate, striking through imposition and terror to cut down order and beauty too.

For Lyotard, the age of the 'universal' the 'one-transcending-truth' 'I-understood-it-all' fell down to let us swaying on unstable grounds. So what now? Will we rebuild once again our way to truth, a universal truth even? Or will we stay busy with local truths?

Lyotard posits that it's not as much a question of who controls knowledge, but who owns the technology to more efficiently ascertain information at a swifter pace through having the best equipment. The best equipment is an issue of class and state due to its inherently expensive price, leading there to be a new duality present during the technological boom we're in: 1) We have more access to information than ever before, rendering most of academia obsolete. This also leads to a new understanding of knowledge entirely. Now it's no longer about who is an expert in incredibly specific fields of study but who comprehensively and efficiently can utilize the new metalanguage of knowledge acquisition within cyberspace.

Lyotard distinguishes differences between narrative knowledge and scientific knowledge in terms of their legitimized rules, or language games. The radical difference is that the metanarratives of science and technology have been able to legitimize themselves through their own denotation to the exclusion of all other narratives which place things like moral traditions, tribal wisdom and even earlier philosophical prescriptions into incoherent positions. The postmodern condition is, then, a loss of narrative knowledge to the means of science since it will manifest as efficient production through its use of power - which leaves grand-narratives broken into many pieces of differing positions (think of too many language games, beliefs and viewpoints). The answer? It seems Lyotard moves to a position of relativism - the metanarratives of the past can no longer hold true. We can enter the age of the deliberate plurality of positions leading to localization of knowledge that will embrace diversity to generate new positions without succumbing to productivity.

But Lyotard's text is philosophical and metaphorical at best, one whose message is largely propelled by the uniqueness of the declaration and ability of the writer to provide an imaginative account of the paradigm shifts of his generation. The book is still significant in challenging metanarratives and encouraging interdisciplinary perspective.

That definition of postmodernism is offered in the intro., meaning that the body of this work is all an apologia

articulating what Lyotard calls a report on knowledge. And make no mistake, that apologia is often dense to the point of inscrutability, making this a pretty tough read despite its length. But anyway, the thrust here is the argument that knowledge itself, from any discipline, has been separated from its referent, which is easier claimed than proved. Lyotard takes on science for the majority of his discussion, presumably because it's considered preeminently "real" or about "real" things, and shows how the realness of the real things science measures and proves and "knows" is based on language games that ostensibly operate to work toward consensus. By reducing science to a series of "moves" in a language game Lyotard also reduces reality to a web of intersecting consensual interlocutions about the nature of reality. (He never offers anything as helpful as an example, but I think it looks something like this: "The sky is blue." "Okay, I see that too, but what is blue?" "Blue is the sign we use to signify visible light of a wavelength between 450 and 495 nanometers." "