

## Arnold Berleant

Professor of Philosophy (Emeritus)  
Long Island University, USA

# THE SUBLIME TROUBLES OF POSTMODERNISM: A TRIBUTE TO S.M.<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** This essay interweaves Stefan Morawski's critique of postmodernism and Jean-François Lyotard's expression of the postmodern sublime as "the presentation of the unrepresentable" in a wide-ranging appraisal of the culmination of the postmodern age. This juxtaposition finds expression in the concept of the two modes of a negative sublime: the negative dynamical sublime exemplified in the stockpiles of nuclear warheads scattered widely across the globe, and the negative mathematical sublime represented by the omniscient electronic informational web that increasingly entangles individuals and societies.

**Keywords:** Lyotard, Morawski, negative sublime, popular culture, postmodern culture, postmodern episteme, postmodern sublime

Postmodernism refers to a phase in Western intellectual culture that became prominent during the final decades of the twentieth century. As a complex period with distinctive cognitive traits, it could be called, to use Foucault's language, an *episteme*.<sup>2</sup> A number of influential though disparate writers contributed to identifying a cultural trend they called postmodernism. They differed from one another so much that commentators named them as a group by their temporal period in intellectual history – after modernism – rather than by a shared principle or style. What seemed common to all was a skepticism toward the basic tenets of high modernism and a critique of its

<sup>1</sup> This essay was written in honor of my friend and colleague Professor Stefan Morawski. The author wishes to acknowledge the contributions of Professor Riva Berleant-Schiller to the development of the argument and the insightful comments of Michael Alpert.

<sup>2</sup> M. Foucault, *The Order of Thing: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences (Les mots et les choses. Une archéologie des sciences humaines)*, Random House, New York 1970.

articles of faith. Postmodernist writers questioned, in particular, the social stabilities and values, primarily identified with rational order in material and cultural progress through science that had governed the post-World War II period. This was a time that saw the rebuilding of Europe and the flood of technological innovation, especially information technology, and commercial expansion into a global economy.

In a small book written in English, the Polish Marxist aesthetician Stefan Morawski developed a broad yet detailed critique of this diffuse movement.<sup>3</sup> He was able to reflect the complexity and vagaries of a large literature without reducing postmodernism to a simplistic formula. For many cogent reasons, he cast doubt on the value, even the identity, of a movement that encompassed a large number of disparate artistic and cultural forms and practices exemplified in the work of a wide range of influential figures. At this late phase of postmodernist thought, it will be useful to review his findings and consider his insistently negative assessment of postmodernism. What stands firm and clear in Morawski's far-reaching survey of its expressions and tendencies is his steady commitment to humane values, and the honor that he accords the noblest achievements of the arts, a regard unqualified by the vagaries of fashion. Given the scope and diffuseness of postmodernism, we may ask what insights reside in Morawski's reflections on the culture of these times.

How does Morawski characterize postmodernism? He begins by recognizing that modernism, itself, embraces a diversity of meanings and practices in art and culture. Juxtaposing modernism and postmodernism, Morawski notes that, despite their sharp differences, both end in disaster. Postmodernism is distinctive, however, in abandoning any claim to the autonomy of art. He finds that architects such as Michael Graves and James Stirling, and artists like Jeff Koons and David Salle, exemplify the consummation of pop art. Their work exploits, in every imaginable way, the gleam and glitter of glib conventions derived from consumer culture.<sup>4</sup> Morawski also singles out for disapproval Rob Scholte, whose voluminous work co-opts images from art history and the media, and Haim Steinbach, who appropriates and displays found objects on small shelves.<sup>5</sup> Postmodernism was not confined to the visual arts, and Morawski considers film at length, noting its imitative use of parody and a pastiche of styles, plots, and characters. Other arts can easily be included, such as the postmodern dance of Yvonne Rainer and the minimal music of Steve Reich and Terry Riley.

Throughout Morawski's litany of postmodern artists and works, no grounding principles and values are identified. That is largely because postmodernism, both in philosophy and in art, displays a fascination with the consumerism, opportunism, and vacillations of mass culture. In a telling phrase, Morawski sees as its basis the "commodification of the whole social fabric because the rule of obsolescence has become dominant."<sup>6</sup> One could easily confirm this analysis by using a search engine

<sup>3</sup> S. Morawski, *The Troubles with Postmodernism*, Routledge, London–New York 1996.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 13–14.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 18–21.

to document the profusion of artists and works he cites. Cleverness, ingenuity, imagination, gloss, and glitz are used to full effect in flooding the fickle marketplace of cocktail party art.

The suffocating influence of mass culture deeply troubles Morawski, constituted, as it is, of sometimes degenerate myths, and easily influenced by managers who control taste by market standards. He is particularly disturbed by the myth-making capabilities of mass culture, which he condemns for parodying and degrading the ideas and values found in great art and philosophical conceptions. Film, of course, is the mass art *par excellence* and stands as a ready object of Morawski's postmodern analysis. He recognizes its contribution to popular culture, but what he adamantly opposes is turning film into "the paragon of culture."<sup>7</sup>

It is as a philosopher, however, that Morawski is most troubled by postmodernism. Here the clarity with which he began his critique is quickly obscured in the intricacies of the many scholars he surveys. For they represent a movement that is not a school of thought but a cultural tendency, or perhaps only a cognitive mood. His antipathy to this tendency is swept along in a deluge of words, names, and works. To clarify and sharpen the issues, let me center on one concern to which Morawski pays particular attention, the postmodern sublime.

## II

Jean-François Lyotard was instrumental in bringing the term 'postmodernism' into circulation. Inaugurated in his 1979 book, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, the concept of postmodernism soon gained currency, being taken up by many different cultural critics and applied in a profusion of contexts.<sup>8</sup> In introducing his work, Lyotard provided a key to the motivation behind the movement, as well as to its signal achievement: "Postmodern knowledge is not simply a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensibility to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable."<sup>9</sup> This statement contains the inflammatory spark of postmodernism as a cultural movement as well as its profound value, for it is in Lyotard's discussion of the sublime that the incommensurable is revealed most sharply.

"Modernity, in whatever age it appears, cannot exist without a shattering of belief and without discovery of the 'lack of reality' of reality, together with the invention of other realities."<sup>10</sup> While "lack of reality" is reminiscent of Nietzsche, Lyotard sees an intimation of this earlier in the Kantian sublime. "I think [...] that it is in the aesthetic of the sublime that modern art (including literature) finds its impetus and the logic of

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, pp. 34, 35, 48.

<sup>8</sup> J.-F. Lyotard, *La Condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir*, Les Éditions de Minuit, Paris 1979.

<sup>9</sup> Idem, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington, B. Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1984, p. xxv.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, p. 77.

avant-gardes finds its axioms.”<sup>11</sup> Lyotard recalls Kant, who regarded the sublime as “a strong and equivocal emotion” combining both pleasure and pain, which we have in response to its chaos or in perceiving its size and might “in its wildest or most irregular disorder and desolation.”<sup>12</sup> Kant developed this feeling as a conflict between the faculty to conceive of something and the faculty to present something which, when conceived in a reflective judgment, is pleasurable. Lyotard’s analysis of the postmodern follows the direction of the Kantian sublime. From this conflict between taste and reason, it is in the presentable that exceeds reason that the sublime appears. However, the sublime, in Lyotard’s formulation, occurs “when the imagination fails to present an object which might, if only in principle, come to match a concept.... Those are ideas of which no presentation is possible.”<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, while Kant finds the sublime in “our attitude of thought” that we assign to nature, Lyotard finds it in the postmodern.<sup>14</sup> In further associating the postmodern with the unrepresentable, Lyotard seems to find the postmodern sublime in “the pleasure that reason should exceed all presentation, the pain that imagination or sensibility should not be equal to the concept.”<sup>15</sup> Thus the postmodern sublime lies in the presentation of the unrepresentable. “The postmodern would be that which...puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself.”<sup>16</sup>

Herein lies Morawski’s deep dismay over the postmodern and over Lyotard as its principal protagonist. For it is in culture (and art) that the postmodern is encountered, and Morawski locates Lyotard’s postmodern sublime in “the black hole of Being, the immaterial,” the avant-garde’s “vain attempts to embody the sublime.”<sup>17</sup> Morawski, moreover, characterizes postmodernism as “the cultural logic of late capitalism.” In his own penetrating formulation, “what most probably distinguishes the new cultural mutation in its permanent functional interconnecting of political and socio-economic and cultural transfigurations is the prevalence of the circulation of cultural goods and the emergence of a special class of intermediaries involved in the management of this type of commodity society.”<sup>18</sup> It is not easy to grasp the core of Morawski’s disapproval of postmodernism by wading through his flood of references and allusions. He seemed to regard postmodernism as fundamentally conformist. It does not embrace the avant-garde but rather favors commodity art, which it confounds with high, “and it glories in eclecticism.” Morawski most vehemently decries mass art, while he sees the avant-garde as preserving the genuine search for aesthetic insight. Postmodernism

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem; I. Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Hafner, New York 1951, § 23.

<sup>13</sup> J.-F. Lyotard, op. cit., pp. 77–78.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, pp. 78–79; I. Kant, op. cit., § 29.

<sup>15</sup> J.-F. Lyotard, op. cit., p. 81.

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>17</sup> S. Morawski, op. cit., p. 51.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, pp. 62, 81; J.-F. Lyotard, op. cit.

he regards as the climax of the cultural crisis at the close of the twentieth century.<sup>19</sup> In its mistrust of theory, even philosophy cannot escape the scalpel of deconstruction, and aesthetics degenerates along with it. Morawski turns, in the end, to Aristotle's concept of *phronesis*, practical wisdom, for the proper balance of philosophy and politics as a guide against any reliance on the modern autonomy of art, aesthetics, and philosophy.<sup>20</sup> And he concludes the intricacies of his analysis with a question: "Does not postmodernism stand as an alarming sign of a cultural crisis in which not only the ultimate answers but also the ultimate questions cease to be self-evident?"<sup>21</sup>

In their polemical presentations, both Morawski and Lyotard not only reflect on postmodernism but also seem to exemplify it. Through an array of names, ideas, and works without clear logical sequence or coherence and in a torrent of words and citations, both cultural commentators endeavored vainly to present the unrepresentable. Is there anything that one can conclude from Lyotard's identification of the postmodern phenomenon and Morawski's relentless diatribe against it?

### III

One may conjecture that Lyotard's reformulation of the sublime in postmodern terms characterizes the unconstrained permissiveness of postmodern society, and Morawski provides a brilliant documentation of its excesses. Does not a culture in which anything is possible and everything is permitted stand as the presentation of the unrepresentable, the postmodern sublime? This is even more the case than in 1996, when Morawski's critique appeared. Perhaps a revived and enlarged conception of the sublime can offer a key to the postmodern condition. I suggest that the postmodern sublime is a dramatic yet incisive characterization of the unfathomable negativity of the postmodern age.

This is what I have come to call "the negative sublime."<sup>22</sup> We have left behind the Kantian sublime, which is unrepresentable because no concept can embrace the indeterminable magnitude of the starry heavens or the overwhelming might of natural forces.<sup>23</sup> Postmodernism replaces the boundless immensity of Kant's mathematical sublime<sup>24</sup> with the information society, which entangles everyone in its all-enclosing electronic web. It exceeds every concept of enormity in the proliferation and extent

<sup>19</sup> S. Morawski, op. cit., pp. 63, 65, 95–97.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem, p. 102.

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>22</sup> I have elaborated the idea of a negative sublime in earlier publications. See: A. Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World*, Imprint Academic, Exeter 2010, ch. 10; idem, *Art, Terrorism, and the Negative Sublime*, "Contemporary Aesthetics" 2009, vol. 7; idem, *Reflections on the Aesthetics of Violence*, "Contemporary Aesthetics" 2019, vol. 7 (Special Volume), <http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/aph9-1969>.

<sup>23</sup> I. Kant, op. cit., § 26, § 28; J.-F. Lyotard, op. cit., pp. 77–79.

<sup>24</sup> I. Kant, op. cit., § 26.

of the personal information it amasses, encompassing identity, location, thought, and behavior. The detail and completeness of the pervasive global web dwarfs the magnitude of the starry sky. This is the ultimate elaboration of the information society, whose excess of data overwhelms the astronomical magnitude of the mathematical sublime, entrapping paltry individuals in an electronic net whose controllers are hidden.

The postmodern sublime also dwarfs Kant's projection of the dynamical sublime by the presentation of the unrepresentable embodied in the ominous presence of arsenals of nuclear warheads stockpiled around the globe. This condition establishes the permanent possibility of universal destruction, the inestimable magnitude of whose force renders puny the thundercloud, the overhanging rock cliff, and the hurricane-roiled ocean. Unlike Kant, for whom our mind maintains its superiority over nature, there is no way of separating ourselves by an act of cognitive consciousness from the overwhelming arc of destruction lurking in the widespread distribution of nuclear arsenals.<sup>25</sup> The postmodern sublime is a negative fate we humans have contrived for ourselves.

The postmodern sublime further magnifies the complexity of the more benign traditional conception. Interestingly, both Kant and Burke before him recognized that an element of terror from a sense of threat is inherent in the experience of the sublime. Burke, in 1757, called terror "the ruling principle of the sublime," while Kant, three decades later, recognized the presence of "a delightful horror" in the experience of the aesthetical sublime.<sup>26</sup> For both, an element of terror not only accommodates but amplifies the disturbing features of the classic conception. In the postmodern sublime, the enormity of terror cannot be encompassed by the intellect.

Postmodernism, moreover, moves the sublime to a new level in the omniscient yet indeterminable insinuations of its immateriality. This may be seen in the unrepresentable of the so-called "information age," the unrepresentable that lies in the digital technology of the global information net, the indeterminable web in which we humans are enmeshed like hapless flies, buzzing futilely into our computer screens. Here resides another mode of the postmodern sublime. Unlike its classic predecessor, the postmodern sublime is neither edifying nor ennobling but humanly demeaning and cognitively terrifying. It reduces persons to faceless units serving the insatiable avarice of distant administrative and mercantile agents.

The postmodern sublime is, then, both a negative dynamical sublime, whose force exceeds conception, and a negative mathematical sublime, whose quantitative enormity defies calculation. In its scope and power, the postmodern sublime evokes boundless terror. Unlike Kant, our minds cannot stand superior over these immensities; thus the postmodern sublime asserts its negativity.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem, § 28.

<sup>26</sup> E. Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry* (1757), Oxford University Press, New York 1998; I. Kant, op. cit., § 28, General Comment on the Exposition of Aesthetic Reflective Judgments.

It is, then, ironically appropriate to characterize this late postmodern age in which we find ourselves by Lyotard's formulation of the postmodern sublime as "the presentation of the unrepresentable" in a negative mode. The foundation of civil society is overwhelmed nationally and internationally by the magnitude of corporate and political autocracy and greed. The controllers have furthered their interests, manipulating mob mentality to overwhelm the last vestiges of Enlightenment rationality and humanism. This is expressed in the breakdown of the safeguards of conventional distinctions in the name of liberation by an aesthetic glorification of the mundane in objects (postmodern assemblage and sculpture), movement (postmodern dance), sound (ambient sound and minimal music), visual art that trivializes its history and its materials by the repetition of the commonplace in pop art, decontextualized stylistic features in architecture, and commercialized objects, and glitzy forms in sculpture. The art world is buried under variations on the postmodern theme, from Andy Warhol's obsessive iterations of the mundane images of pop culture, Sherri Levine's appropriations and Cindy Sherman's self-portraits, to Philip Glass's repetitions of simplistic harmonic progressions and postmodern dance choreography of pedestrian movements.

At the same time, postmodern culture has had a powerful influence by undermining the conventional pieties of high art and expanding the scope of aesthetic experience. While this has enlarged the range of appreciative experience, it is important to free ourselves from the glitzy permissiveness, eclecticism, and brash arrogance of pop culture. At the same time, we should recognize the startling expansion of the objects and scope of aesthetic awareness in the postmodern period, from the land aesthetic to the resurrection of found objects and debris.

So it is that postmodernism has vastly enlarged the range and the influence of the aesthetic. It may be here where its lasting significance lies. Postmodern dance has elevated the mundane into spectacle. In theater, the novel, music, and performance art, the conventional divisions in the aesthetic field of artist and performer, and object and appreciator, have been overcome in the sharing of artistic and aesthetic functions with the transformation of the audience into performers and the artist's body into the art object. Traditionally distinct functions of artist, work, performer, and audience have amalgamated into an enlarged, integrated aesthetic field of perceptual activity. What has always been the case experientially has now become manifest. At the same time, not all art of this period is on the flat plane of mundane sensibility. There is little in the art of any period that exceeds the aesthetic richness of abstract expressionism, the profundity of Mark Rothko, the intricate energy of Jackson Pollack, the tangible strength of Karel Appel, the dark power of Anselm Kiefer. The tradition of high art lives on.

## IV

It may seem surprising that a cultural critic like Stefan Morawski would take serious issue with a major cultural trend that, in its own right, was critical of the cultural establishment. To his credit, Morawski did not play critical games. He kept his eyes on the values embedded in the noblest achievements of high culture. This essay was conceived and written in the same spirit.

As an art and cultural period, then, the postmodernism episteme has vastly expanded the aesthetic.<sup>27</sup> Postmodern art exemplifies the eclecticism and permissiveness of our time. Traditional conventions and proprieties have faded. The objectivity of truth has fallen before the irrationality of partisan slogans and paranoid explanations. Centralized control of the media has undermined the independence and objectivity of fact. Novels have exposed the multiple experiences of the same events.<sup>28</sup> And the objectivity of fact is obscured by opposed cultural traditions and political organizations vying for hegemony, as well as by countercultural forces on the right and the left.

Further, the widespread influence of the esoteric has proliferated: Eastern cultures and the exotic in Buddhism and Zen, mysticism, and the propagation of contrived mystery and deliberate irrationality in questioning science and truth, more generally. While these have led to vastly enlarging the scope of the aesthetic, at the same time they have been exploited and trivialized by publicity- and profit-seeking innovations. In the aesthetic of pop culture is postmodernism's confirmation of its own criticism of modernism's claim of endless progress.

We could not do better than to characterize the late postmodern period than by using Leotard's formulation of the postmodern sublime as the presentation of the unrepresentable. In this ironic conversion of the traditional sublime, we encounter the romantic's dilemma in dealing with the failure of the ideal of human perfectibility in the face of human imperfection.

We live in the anthropocene age where the malfunction of societies nationally and internationally is exposed in the magnitude of corporate greed and governmental corruption. The last vestiges of Enlightenment humanism have disappeared with the decline of rationality in civil society. The overpowering negativity of the postmodern sublime makes manifest this presentation of the unrepresentable. Post-modernism is the proof of its own criticism of modernism's claim of endless progress. This is the tragic condition of the sublime world humans have constructed. The postmodern sublime does not elevate us: it is our epitaph.

<sup>27</sup> S. Morawski, op. cit., pp. 88–97.

<sup>28</sup> E.g. Lawrence Durrell's four novels constituting *The Alexandria Quartet*.



## Bibliography

- Berleant A., *Art, Terrorism, and the Negative Sublime*, "Contemporary Aesthetics" 2009, vol. 7.
- Berleant A., *Reflections on the Aesthetics of Violence*, "Contemporary Aesthetics" 2019, vol. 7 (Special Volume), <http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/aph9-1969>.
- Berleant A., *Sensibility and Sense: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World*, Imprint Academic, Exeter 2010.
- Burke E., *A Philosophical Enquiry* (1757), Oxford University Press, New York 1998.
- Foucault M., *The Order of Thing: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences (Les mots et les choses. Une archéologie des sciences humaines)*, Random House, New York 1970.
- Kant I., *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Hafner, New York 1951.
- Liotard J.-F., *La Condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir*, Les Éditions de Minuit, Paris 1979.
- Liotard J.-F., *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington, B. Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1984.
- Morawski S., *The Troubles with Postmodernism*, Routledge, London–New York 1996.