
INTERPRETATION IN ART AND BEYOND

On the Aesthetics of the Sublime and the Boundaries of Understandability

Sofia Angelova (University of Sofia)

Abstract

Drawing on Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, the paper discusses the relation between the aesthetic of the sublime that underlies modern art and the rationale of avant-gardes, and ventures an enquiry into the problematics of the understandability of 'formlessness.' The implicit character of the difficulties for understanding formlessness is elucidated by recourse to Kant's treatment of the sublime, Roland Barthes distinction between first and second order signification and Derrida's concept of 'différance.' It is concluded that if, following in Lyotard's steps, we refuse to resort to the transcendental illusion of a totalizing real unity and true infinity, then the sublime will inevitably remain not only beyond the boundary of understandability, but also of representability.

At a time when Malevich's *White on White*, John Cage's *4'33*, or Nathalie Sarraute's *Silence* can no longer induce shock, it has become more viable to explore the rationale behind their aesthetics impartially. Since the impetus behind this enquiry is not to address the problematic of literary, music or art theory, but to put the somewhat paradoxical attempt at presenting the unrepresentable in a philosophic perspective, it will be irrelevant for our purposes whether such works are defined by some as modernist or postmodernist. Avoiding any mechanistic distinction between modern and postmodern, we will proceed from Lyotard's definition of the postmodern as "that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms;...that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpre-

sentable,”¹ and refer to all such works simply as ‘avant-gardes.’

Our point of departure will be Lyotard’s view of the aesthetic rationale of Modernity and Postmodernity presented in his seminal work, *The Postmodern Condition*. In the face of the appeals for liquidating the heritage of the avant-gardes, he questions Habermas’s suggestion that the remedy for the gulf between culture and life lies in ‘changing the status of aesthetic experience’ so that “it is put in relation with problems of existence,”² thus creating a unity of experience and bridging the gap between cognitive, ethical and political discourses. Sceptical towards bridging this chasm, described in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, by invoking some Hegelian transcendental illusion, Lyotard warns against the ominous danger of the nostalgia for the whole and the one, and calls for a war on totality. He describes the situation of any modernity as one in which for some reason the belief in reality is shattered, so that it is found to ‘lack reality,’ and it therefore sees the emergence of new realities. For Lyotard such a ‘lack of reality’ is akin to the Kantian theme of the sublime. Therefore, for him, it is the aesthetic of the sublime that underlies modern art and the rationale of avant-gardes. Unlike the sentiment of the beautiful which is achieved when a work of art corresponds to the principle of universal consensus, the sublime involves incommensurability of reality to concept, that is, inadequacy between the ability to conceive of something and to present it, and therefore evokes both pleasure—from conceiving—and pain—from failing to present. It imparts what is unrepresentable: the infinitely great, the infinitely powerful, the ultimately simple. The way this end is achieved, according to Kant, is by means of formlessness, or the absence of form—avoidance of figuration and representation, so as to shatter the fetters binding thought to the gaze, and let it venture into the realm of the unrepresentable.

Taking this affinity between the aesthetic of the sublime and avant-gardes as a point of departure, we will venture an enquiry into the problematics of the understanding of the latter, or more generally, of the understandability of ‘formlessness.’ We will first of all have recourse to the source of Lyotard’s interpretation of the sublime—Kant. According

¹ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 81.

² Jürgen Habermas, “Modernity versus Postmodernity”, *New German Critique* 2 (1981): 12.

to Kant, the domains of the aesthetic and the pure reason are entirely separate, so within the Kantian system it is not possible to find a direct answer to the question of the understandability or non-understandability of the sublime. And yet, there is an important clue: for Kant, one possible way to conceive the sublime is by formlessness or the absence of form.³ On the other hand, the only way understanding operates, is through forms. Thus, it could be claimed that the sublime is—at least, in some cases—beyond the boundary of understanding. The flaw in presuming that formlessness as such invokes the sublime is in the substitution of implication with equivalence: we can sense the sublime when we are confronted by what causes it—the infinite, the boundless etc.—but even though it appears to us as formlessness, it does not follow that it is enough to be confronted by formlessness, in order to conceive the infinite and the boundless. We are as if confronting not it, but its empty form—which is familiar to many from their experience with 4'33.

We can further try to elucidate the implicit character of the difficulties for understanding formlessness by turning to Roland Barthes.⁴ Stepping on a distinction between denotation—the literal meaning, and connotation—suggested or associated meaning, Barthes introduces his terms of first- and second-order signification. The first-order sign is 'appropriated' and becomes the signifier of a new signified, forming with it a new second-order sign. This second-order sign 'parasitizes' and depends for its survival on the first-order sign. Within this distinction, it might be argued that radical absence of form in art is an attempt at a second order signification without a first. Since there is nothing to suspend the second order of signification, it is at a risk of 'flopping.' The 'reader' of the message, who, after the death of the author has been announced, plays the decisive role for creating the work, is confronted with the extremely demanding task of creating something out of nothing, or that 'which is' from that 'which is not'—or the task of the author *per se*. Thus, it appears that the author is not dead, but has abdicated, leaving the challenging task of creation to the audience. But since such a challenge is beyond the powers of just anyone, we are faced with the

³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 98.

⁴ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (The Noonday Press - New York, 1991).

paradoxical situation in which it takes an author to be an audience. Therefore, though not impossible, the interpretation, or understanding of such messages is by default limited but to a few.

And finally, we will look to Derrida for a prompt. He believes that the true nature of signification can be fully accounted for not by the Saussurean concept of ‘difference’, but by what he calls ‘différance.’ For Saussure, concepts “are defined not positively, in terms of their content, but negatively by contrast with other items in the same system,”⁵ or in other words, the signs in a semiotic system are linked by means of ‘difference without presence.’ While fully accepting that signs are defined not by their positive content—by referring to a real object—but negatively—by phonic and conceptual differences—Derrida challenges Saussure’s notion of ‘difference without presence’ and introduces his own notion of “différance.”⁶ It comprises both the idea of difference as distinction, as well as that of displacement and deferring, and has the advantage of taking into account the displacement of the meaning of each sign (caused by the fact that the meaning of a sign is not contained within itself, but points to other signs), as well as the deferring of meaning in time. The latter temporal element in the process of signification is introduced by Derrida: the meaning of a particular sign is delayed along an endless chain of signification devoid of a transcendent signifier. Thus, due to this special displacement and temporal deferral of the sign, the presence of the thing which the sign is supposed to substitute is also continually displaced and deferred along the same chain. Since, as Derrida points out, the sign takes the place of the referent, i.e. the present thing, it can be said to represent the present in its absence. Or, when the present cannot be presented, then it is signified following the detour of the sign. Thus, by its very nature the sign implies deferring the ‘moment in which we can encounter the thing itself.’ Viewed from this perspective, it might be said that in the avant-gardes, meeting the unrepresentable entity behind the sublime is deferred endlessly in vicious regress ad infinitum. No matter what sign is chosen to present it, it will inevitably refer us to another sign, and thus to yet another ‘signifiable,’ whereas what

⁵ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris (London: Duckworth, 1983), 115.

⁶ Jacques Derrida, “Différance,” in *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs* (Evanston ILL.: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

is necessary for encountering the unrepresentable, is breaking free from the chain, going beyond it to the domain of the 'unsignifiable.' The situation is reminiscent of the bad eternity, where, in Hegel's words, "Something becomes an other; this other is itself somewhat; therefore it likewise becomes an other, and so on ad infinitum. This infinity is bad infinity: it is only a negation of an infinite; but the finite rises again the same as ever, and is never got rid of and absorbed."⁷

If, following in Lyotard's steps, we refuse to resort to the transcendental illusion of a totalizing real unity and true infinity, then the sublime will inevitably remain not only beyond the boundary of understandability, but also of representability. It appears to be possible only as an individual experience, and any piece of literary, musical or art work risks to remain incommunicable. If we go back to the avant-gardes examples we started with, it might be worth asking whether it has not been the shock of encountering them, rather than their mere 'formlessness' that invoked a sense of the sublime in their once audiences. Once the shock is gone, together with their novelty, their message can no longer be suspended by the aesthetic structure of the sublime. Not akin to the aesthetics of the beautiful in their very conception, they have no choice but to become unaesthetic.

⁷ Georg W. Fr. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, trans. W. T. Harris (Hegel by Hypertext): § 93-94, accessed February 20 2016, <http://hegel.net/en/etexts.htm>.