

Glissement: Oscillations in Postmodern Thought

Dionysian art is difficult to conceive, and there is only one way to make it intelligible and grasp it immediately:
through the wonderful significance of musical *dissonance*. – Friedrich Nietzsche

How to define the moment that I write? – Michel Foucault

The *glissement* from modern European philosophy to postmodern philosophy can be articulated along three moments in relation to the general theme of subjectivity *vis-a-vis* art. Broadly speaking this slippage involves subject formation as a self-reflexive concern for what man is and may become and the growing skepticism regarding the status of knowledge. The movement in thought happens from the certainties of modern philosophy to the explosion of Nietzsche and his inheritors, Heidegger, and the French wave: Foucault, Deleuze, Irigaray, and Lyotard. Although diverse in their approach there is a feeling that unites this new philosophy; there is a sense of conflicted excitement as the limits of German Idealism are trespassed and a new field of inquiry lies open. The three moments of slippage can be bracketed as such: the negation of the Cartesian *cogito* and Kant's universal subject; the issue of *savoir* as the possibility of thinking *differently*; and the re-discovery of aesthetic thought as resistance to the current state of the world.

The *glissement* can be explored through a series of inter-textual encounters while also gaining in clarity by calling on avant-garde art practice. John Cage, as an exemplary avant-garde figure, attempted a project of re-composition in relation to what had been fixed in the arch of the Western musical tradition. In music, silence had previously been considered simply as *nothing*, non-being. Cage's expansion of the field of music to include silence, his *process*, is similar to the shift in thought that occurs in philosophy drawing towards an experimental openness but also towards deeper listening, "with a third ear." (56) Lyotard will be the figurehead in this

exploration because he is the thinker that encounters the *glissement* substantially and appears to have been influenced the most by the art-philosophy of the avant-garde.

For Lyotard the task of re-writing modernity is an “anamnesis of the Thing.” (33)¹ The task of rewriting is not a return in time but a writing/voicing of the present, which, he says, is always been written. The “re” in rewriting is meant to designate an openness by which things can be experienced and thought differently. Lyotard links the task of rewriting to Freud’s notion of “working through” where a suspension of judgment takes place and attention is given outside of the aim of composing a general picture. A collection of materials is gathered, one which refuses to give into the re-building of memory, and neurotic repetition. Lyotard references Cage, highlighting the similarity of their project: “To make the point differently, but within the same order of memory, *a la* John Cage, there is no silence that is not heard as such, and therefore makes some noise.” (28)

The first problem is the *cogito* or what Cage would call the composer. The philosophy of Descartes, and then Kant presupposes a subject-processor that funnels the world in and can extend its powers over it. The world is not what *it is* but what the subject *organizes*. This notion is based on Kant’s distinction between the phenomenal, which can be apprehended through the faculties “active powers” and the *Ding an sich*, the thing-in-itself that remains unknowable, forever locked in the passivity of nature. The composer of pictures or sounds is a good characterization of rational subjectivity, a zero point in the linear organization of the sensory realm.

Lyotard speaks of Descartes in relation the invention of linear perspective in the

¹ Lyotard avoids using the terms modern and postmodern because of their implication in a classical ordering of time and the Hegelian understanding of history as a succession of periods building towards progress.

Renaissance. (71) The perspectival system used in Renaissance painting shows the gridlock of representation to which Lyotard responds by “breaking” and allowing for an encounter “approaching presence without recourse to the means of presentation.” (139) Lyotard speaks of colors and sonorities as different forms of sensory presence. He mentions how colors take on their “value” according to its position in relation to other colors, the palette, under the ordering form of the picture. (139) Comparably, John Cage’s main avant-gardist maneuver was to see music as “organization of sound” - all sounds are musical. In his usual semi-serious philosophical manner, John Cage speaks of the role of the composer which is what we understand (in our Western tradition) as the maker of music, he says: “The reason I am less and less interested in music is not only that I find environmental sounds and noises more useful aesthetically than the sounds produced by the world's musical cultures, but that, when you get right down to it, a composer is simply someone who tells other people what to do. I find this an unattractive way of getting things done.” (Monday, ix) Cage is proposing is the liberation of sounds and music from under the domain of the subject-composer.

Heidegger’s project is a fundamental challenge to Descartes’ *cogito*. *Dasein* as being-there is not a primarily thinking substance, a *res cogitans*. Being is not self-evident nor is it a thing. In fact, being is put in question from the foundation “Why are there beings at all, and why not rather nothing?” (110) For Heidegger being must be understood again, rewritten, thought-over. Unlike the fixed *cogito* *Dasein* is always beside itself; it is not a point on a place but rather more like a circumference “I am never here only, as this encapsulated body; rather I am there, that is, I already pervade the space of the room, and only thus can I go through it.” (359) This understanding defies the subject-object relationship that is perpetuated in modern thought from Descartes’ *Je pense* to Kant’s legislating subject. Heidegger warns us against this fixation to

isolate a subject and an object that has been put in place: “Being, as the element of thinking, is abandoned by the technical interpretation of thinking.” (219) Provisional as it may be sound Dasein is understood as a being-in-the-world. Heidegger’s *destruktion* of the “modern metaphysics of subjectivity” opened up a whole new area of investigation in postmodern thought. (222-23)

The next moment of slippage is knowledge, what Foucault calls *savoir*. Knowing is tied up with the issue of subjectivity, Foucault asks: “What, then, is the connection, the difficult link, between being and thought?” (323) Man must face thought, or what had previously been *thought*, an archeology of the living relationship between subjectivity and thought, “thought addresses the unthought and articulates itself upon it.” (323) Foucault likens the unthought to the unconscious. (xi, 326) The subject must traverse unthought to reach a paradoxical determination. In short, Foucault is speaking of what in art is called *process*: “Man is a mode of being which accommodates that dimension – always open, never finally delimited, yet constantly traversed – which extends to a part of himself not reflected in a *cogito* to the act of thought by which he apprehends that part.” (322) Foucault emphasizes the transformative power of thought, as man thinks he is transforming himself, not through his will specifically but by the “dim mechanisms, faceless determinations” of thought itself. (326) The material speaks to the artist, as light did for Cezanne and stone for Michelangelo. There cannot be transparent self-reflection pointing to a fixed subject without the oscillations of sensing/thinking. When such a task is begun there are more problems or happy accidents to be encountered than certainties; in fact postmodern thought can be characterized as an ongoing production of *krisis* as the Greeks understood it in terms of moment of intensity where fate acts. Like Lyotard, Foucault likens the task of thinking to a pulling closer to the thing-in-itself, and in a similar vocabulary to Cage, he says, “becoming

absorbed in its silence, or of a straining to catch its endless murmur.” (327)

Another French philosopher, Gilles Deleuze questions *savoir* in terms of representation/identity vs. difference. He asks: Can difference be thought, can there be an outside to knowledge, and what does it mean to draw into it? Is Foucault being fashionably dark but *really* optimistic? Deleuze makes reference to the philosophy of Leibniz and Hegel; what is implicit in these systems of philosophy is that difference is tamed, a-toned; “reason acts the drunkard” in an *orgiastic* expansion of reason. (253) Difference is the Nietzschean dimension of the Dionysian. In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche equates the Dionysian with musical *dissonance* opposed to Apollonian figuration. Has philosophy become deaf to the sound of things? Has it been deaf since Socrates? This is Nietzsche’s crux, he writes: “If we can imagine dissonance become man – and what else is man? – this dissonance, to be able to live, would need a splendid illusion that would cover dissonance with a veil of beauty.” (kindle version) In great art these two poles of dissonance and form intersect. Nietzsche gives the example of Raphael’s *Transfiguration of Christ* to show how the Dionysian is subsumed under the *imago*. The Christ/Apollo figure occupying the top of the painting catalyzes the raw energy of the lower, Dionysian chamber into an erect image.

Bringing this point further, I think that Dionysian dissonance, as difference that is “dissipated in non-being” can be likened to what Irigaray says about woman in relation to the discourse of psychoanalysis on female sexuality. (Deleuze 251) Irigaray says how psychoanalysis is dominated by the symbolic law of the father meaning, “Women are in a position of exclusion.” (88) The criticism is raised against Lacan’s claims about women not knowing that they are saying. Irigaray wants women to speak for themselves, giving voice to their own pleasure, knowing that psychoanalytic discourse is tilted in favor of male authority:

“This model, a *phallic* one, shares the values promulgated by patriarchal society and culture, values inscribed in the philosophical corpus: property, production, order, form, unity, visibility... and erection.” (86)

The third moment of slippage concerns the rediscovery of aesthetic thought as a means for resistance. For Deleuze thinking is a practice that should lead to creation, an encounter between man and the world, and a re-composition of energy in the form of new concepts. In a system that has already included difference the *presence* of the thing cannot be felt and therefore channeled into new modes of being. Thoughts are materials to be reconfigured to produce an affective disposition; thinking is a transformative act, what Deleuze and Foucault call affirmation of being. This creative transformation of thought and subjectivity is not simply a product of the will but is a disposition towards embodied reception, listening. Heidegger will call this disposition openness to Being while Lyotard will use the term *passibility*.

Lyotard defines passibility as being *seized* and receiving a *donation*. (111) Lyotard speaks of Kant’s distinction between the beautiful and the sublime. The experience of the sublime gives rise to an unknown pleasure or Nietzschean *rush* yielding to a formlessness that is beyond schematization. While Kantian beauty implies harmony and communicability that rests on the *sensus communis* the sublime is an experience of disharmony that leads to humbled silence and listening. The “rule over infinity” of reason is cut short by the *excessive* experience of what is too large or too small. (Deleuze, 253) The point being that if a firm conceptual framework is applied to experience then the matter of sensation is lost. Passibility is a state of receptivity in which *presence*, as it may be, can be experienced. This category oversteps the subject-centered Cartesian distinction between activity and passivity. Passibility is a disposition much like Cage’s process whereas the composition, if it can be still called so, aims at letting

sounds be themselves.

The injunction to act instrumentally is part of the “ideology of communication” Lyotard denounces as the backdrop of contemporary Western culture. Heidegger introduces the concept of “enframing” and “standing-reserve” in *The Question Concerning Technology*, where he says: “Everywhere everything is ordered to stand by, to be immediately on hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may be on call for a further ordering.” (322) What happens in the deadlock of technological ideology is that man will not be sufficiently aware, receptive enough, to “experience the call of a more primal truth.” (Heidegger 333) Many see this (or better, they do not see) technology as a new freedom; following the same critical thread Lyotard says: “The penetration of techno-scientific apparatus in the cultural field [human life] in no way signifies an increase of knowledge, sensibility, tolerance and liberty.” (63)

In conclusion, these three modes of slippage reveal that subjectivity is formed *in process* instead of being fixed and distinct as in the philosophy of Descartes and Kant. The process of slippage can be thought kinetically as slipping-towards: drawing towards the space of a body that is being evacuated. The awareness of a pulling away of thought and the slippage towards, what Foucault calls *unthought*, is present in the writings of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Lyotard, Deleuze, Irigaray, and Foucault. For Heidegger being is part of Being, and remains potentially open to it, while for Foucault the human being is more like a prisoner seeking a way out in a labyrinth of his own making. Furthermore, art emerges as a way of knowing that does not remain under the tutelage of reason and the dictates of logic. In postmodern thought much attention is given to art and it is often viewed as a liberating force. The status of art as that which cannot be fully articulated is what ties together these thinkers and is the fulcrum of the aesthetic project that links subjectivity and art. The sublime can be sensed as silence/sound in the work of John Cage.

Furthermore knowledge takes on new forms; areas of inquiry that were unknown are explored. As the world becomes increasingly abstract under the hegemony of capitalism, the new philosophies take on a mercurial character, seeking liberation and affirmation, otherness, under the banner of difference. In the wake of post-Marxism, these thinkers questions man's position in the world he has made, not necessarily the best of possible worlds as Leibniz thought. Aesthetic thought merges with experience as a hopeful key for an *outré vie* in a world that feels increasingly closed-in.

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