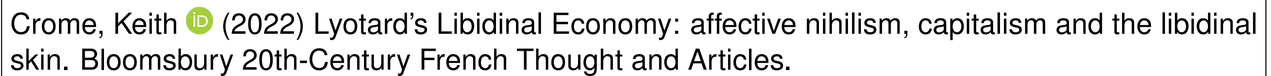
Manchester Metropolitan University

e-space

Manchester Metropolitan University's Research Repository

Please cite the Published Version



Crome, Keith (2022) Lyotard's Libidinal Economy: affective nihilism, capitalism and the libidinal skin. Bloomsbury 20th-Century French Thought and Articles.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350892996.005

Publisher: Bloomsbury

Version: Accepted Version

Downloaded from: https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/630662/

Additional Information: This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article which appeared in the online Collection "Bloomsbury French Thought Articles"

Enquiries:
If you have questions about this document, contact openresearch@mmu.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in e-space. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our Take Down policy (available from https://www.mmu.ac.uk/library/using-the-library/policies-and-guidelines)

Lyotard's *Libidinal Economy*: affective nihilism, capitalism and the libidinal skin

Key Words

Body, Capitalism, Critique, Desire, Representation

Introduction

Near enough half a century has elapsed since *Libidinal Economy* was first published. Although not translated into English until 1993, it numbers among the seminal works of "French post-structuralism", which appeared in the last half of the 1960s and the first half of the 1970s: Jacques Derrida's *Writing and Difference* (1967) and *Of Grammatology* (1967); Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972); Jean Baudrillard's *The Mirror of Production* and *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1973); Luce Irigaray's *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974); and Julia Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974). At the time exciting enthusiasm and antipathy in equal measure, many of these works are now regarded as "classics." Having fundamentally revolutionized our sense of ourselves, and our place in the world, they are indispensable points of reference for anyone working in the arts, humanities, and social sciences — we now know where we are with them.

Things are different with *Libidinal Economy.* An intense, and sometimes uncomfortable read, powerful, exciting, exasperating, lacerating, a furious conductor of energies, demanding and difficult like all great thought, it is a deliberately polemical and rhetorically provocative work. It was written to challenge, and challenge it did and does. From its graphic description of the opening up of the "libidinal body", intended to dislodge the habitual image we have of the "body proper" — the reliable, situated, oriented and well-formed locus of our access to the world — via its ventriloquizing of Freud's Judge Schreber ("*Flechsig loves me*, since he makes me shit-come; *Flechsig hates me*, since he forbids me to shit-come" (2015: 58)), to its provocative and parodic (but also serious) identification of two Marx's — little-girl Marx, scandalized by the perversity of capital and longing for love, and big, fat, old-man Marx, prosecutor of capitalism, bent on procuring a suitor (the proletariat) for the little-girl — reading

Libidinal Economy was, and is still, a disquieting experience. It was shocking when it was written and it is as shocking, perhaps even more so, now.[1]

Its reception has been turbulent, and while *Libidinal Economy* is regarded as one of Lyotard's major books, its place amongst his writings is far from settled and its legacy is contested. According to Lyotard the violence of the writing, its unmediated inscription of impulses of "anger, hate, love, loathing [and] envy" (1988: 13), made *Libidinal Economy* something of a "take-it-or-leave-it" affair (1985: 3). If it is not entirely the case that its reception was limited to love or hate, there is some truth to Lyotard's remark. A book of philosophy written with such unmediated intensity is difficult to discuss and appraise: extracting positive propositions from it which can be argued or debated is not impossible but doing so misses what is important — the performative force of the writing, the force which is precisely intended to seduce and provoke. So whilst it could not be said of *Libidinal Economy* that it "fell dead-born from the press," as Hume had it of his *Treatise* (but the libidinal economist that Lyotard was would have, perversely perhaps, relished the thrill, the frisson, of its being ignored), or even that it had but few readers as Lyotard later suggested (1988: 13), it is perhaps unsurprising that considerably more attention has been given to his two other major works – *Discourse, Figure* (1971) and *The Differend* (1983).

Ever since Geoffrey Bennington's authoritative introduction to Lyotard's work, *Lyotard: Writing the Event* (1988), these three key works have been taken as landmarks, by way of which readers can orient themselves and chart their way across a body of writing marked by abrupt breaks and changes of direction. However, as well as providing an indispensable guide for readers to navigate a path through Lyotard's writings, this way of ordering his work has invited readers to take sides, to prefer either the phenomenologically inflected early works, the mid-period libidinal philosopher of the essays included in *Des Dispositifs pulsionnels* (1973) and *Libidinal Economy*, or

[1] This libidinal reading of Marx, cleaving his body of work by distinguishing the libidinal figures of the little-girl Marx (a designation that derives from Engels) and the old-man prosecutor, was seen by many as shamelessly provocative parody of Louis Althusser's (2005) distinction of the humanist Marx of the early writings, and the scientific Marx of *Capital*. Worse was Lyotard's suggestion that the nineteenth century English proletariat got-off on their own suffering (2015: 111). If Lyotard's intent was to prick the political pieties of Marxism he surely succeeded — not one of his former comrades from the Marxist group *Socialisme ou barbarie* would contribute an article to the special edition of *L'Arc* devoted to his work that was published in 1976.

the later philosopher of phrases and the sublime associated with *The Differend*. It is an approach further reinforced by Lyotard's own take on his work: an inveterate polemicist, he seemed frequently at variance with himself, sometimes going as far as to suggest that his earlier work is completely supplanted by the later. For that reason, the last works, linked to the idea of the differend, have attracted by far the most critical attention,[2] and while *Discourse, Figure* has benefited from being recently translated into English (2011), *Libidinal Economy* suffered as a result. Nevertheless, things have begun to change, and *Libidinal Economy* has found its champions ready to argue for its contemporary relevance. At the start of the millennium James Williams made an influential reappraisal of its politics of desire (2000), while more recently it has become a key document for Accelerationism — a loose alliance of political theorists who hold that "the only radical political response to capitalism is not to protest, disrupt, or critique, nor to await its demise at the hands of its own contradictions, but to accelerate its uprooting, alienating, decoding, abstractive tendencies." (Mackay and Avanessian, 2014: 4).[3]

In what follows, rather than taking sides, I want to situate *Libidinal Economy* in terms of the underlying unity of Lyotard's work. Doing this is not a matter of adopting a more comprehensive perspective on his work, and from that perspective constructing a unified system of ideas. Not only would that deny the disconnection between the various writings, but it would reduce those writings to a set of positive propositions, propositions with which it would be possible to agree or disagree, accept or reject, based on their internal coherence or their external correctness — traditional criteria of truth and validity that, for essential reasons, Lyotard rejects. Deeper than a mere superficial coherence of ideas, the unity of Lyotard's work lies in the singularity of purpose that drove it, a singularity of purpose that constantly unsettles it from itself.

---

[2] See, for example, Simon Malpus' *Jean-François Lyotard* (2003) written for Routledge Critical Thinkers series, which despite acknowledging *Libidinal Economy* to be Lyotard's "most complex and radical book" (Malpus, 2003: 5) devotes three pages to it, concentrating instead on the later writings.
[3] Together with a companion article, "Energumen Capitalism," (a review of Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*), and a short set of four "texts written in the embers of July '68", an extract from *Libidinal Economy,* was published in *#Accelerate#* (Mackay and Avanessian, 2014) an anthology of key accelerationist writings. Further testimony of the importance of Lyotard's libidinal writings to Accelerationism is given by the inclusion in the anthology of an article on Lyotard's *Libidinal Economy* by Gilles Lipovetsky (2014), first published in the 1964 edition of *L'Arc* on Lyotard.

That singularity of purpose is its confrontation with nihilism.[4] Forming part of that confrontation, *Libidinal Economy* is an essential work.

Nihilism

The phenomenon of nihilism was first clarified philosophically by Friedrich Nietzsche. The term itself derives from the post-classical Latin *nihilismus*, itself modeled on the Classical Latin *nihil* which means "nothing." Coined in the eighteenth century, and popularized in the nineteenth, it was first used to denote the metaphysical belief that there is nothing of any worth or sense, and it was associated with an increasing denial of the value of tradition and authority. For his part, Nietzsche viewed the denial of the value of traditional authorities, the flowering of atheism, and the rise of positivism, as symptoms of nihilism (1968). This was because for Nietzsche nihilism was not simply a matter of belief, and it could not be reduced to a doctrine or set of doctrines that an individual could choose to uphold or deny. Instead, Nietzsche saw European culture as inherently nihilistic. Nihilism names the historical process shaping the fate of the West.

As an historical phenomenon, nihilism is not a discrete event that has taken place in the past, and that can be described with the same historical objectivity as such events as the collapse of Ancient Egyptian civilization. Nihilism is Western history in its unfolding. Consequently, and as Eugen Fink says, "we live in its advent" (2003: 136). As such, and irrespective of whether we acknowledge it or not, it is something that humanity must endure. But if we cannot grasp the phenomenon of nihilism objectively, if we cannot set it over against ourselves in order to study it, how can we apprehend it? How does nihilism appear to us?

As the foregoing implies, for Nietzsche nihilism is no adventitious event. It is, he says, the process in which the highest values come to devalue themselves (1968: Bk. 1, §2). The very values which Western culture held to elevate humanity beyond itself — its belief in the good, and its will to truth — contain the seeds of their own destruction. They lose their binding power and creative force, and this leads inexorably to an

[4] This is a point I have made elsewhere in relation to *The Differend* (see Crome, 2004) and more broadly in relation to Lyotard's work in *The Lyotard Reader and Guide*. For important discussions of Lyotard and nihilism see also James Williams (2000), Ashley Woodward (2009) and (2017).

existence which lacks direction or purpose. For this reason, European humanity is incapable of willing anything beyond its empty self-perpetuation. The idea of progress that European civilization has attributed to itself at least since the advent of Christianity — progress towards religious redemption, towards enlightenment, towards freedom — becomes nothing but a superficial agitation masking a ceaseless cycle of the same. We pride ourselves on our scientific understanding, holding it to testify both to the superiority of our knowledge of what is, and the intellectual courage that allows us to admit that human life was not created in the image of God. Yet, for Nietzsche, the modern natural sciences that de-deify the world, that rid it of its God, are but the expression of the same idea of truth as that found in Christianity. They are, then, the product of a will to truth which hides its origins from itself, and which in doing so divests this truth of the value it gave to existence in Christianity.

For Nietzsche, the seeds of nihilism lie in the Platonic distinction between the sensible and the intelligible, which subsequently gets taken over in the Christian distinction between heaven and earth. By instituting this distinction, Plato opens a division between appearances and their truth. Behind the world as it appears in our sensible experience are what Plato calls ideas. When Plato says all beautiful things are beautiful because they partake in, and are illuminated by, the idea of beauty, he is saying that we see the former as an appearance of the latter, and the latter as the truth of the former. According to this interpretation, the world of existing things, the world as it is given to perception is not true, and its meaning and truth derive from elsewhere, a transcendent realm of true being, that is apprehended intellectually in abstraction from this world. For this reason, the problem of nihilism is not a problem that can be solved by way of the intellect alone. To proceed as if it were, to develop a theory of nihilism would be to remain within the theoretical framework of nihilism: there are no good arguments against nihilism that are not at the same time the passive perpetuation of it. Instead, the response to nihilism can only be posed at a concrete level, by forcing us to confront our own nihilism whilst at the same time collapsing the pervasive and historically enduring Platonic distinction between the apparent world and the true world.

Critique

Reading Lyotard is an exercise in following thought-in-action. In responding to nihilism Lyotard does not console us with an abstract theoretical account of it, but instead stages a series of strategically motivated confrontations with it. Since that confrontation is not made by an act of disinterested intellection, it must necessarily be an intervention in its situation, intended to provoke a crisis in thinking, unsettling it from itself. In *Libidinal Economy* this crisis takes the paradoxical form of inducing a crisis of criticism, of separating thinking from its critical vocation, and instead setting out what has been called an affirmative "philosophy of desire," (Dews 2007: 136) or even a "micro-politics of desire" (Best & Kellner 1991).

For more than one reason, this attempt to separate thinking from its critical vocation may seem surprising. Not only does Lyotard adopt a quasi-critical position in his later writings, but it is also the case that we associate, even identify the activity of genuine thinking — as opposed to an unthinking mechanistic reasoning — with critique. Critique is the calling into question of the existing order of things: the relations between classes, genders, between humans and other animals, between humans and nature, between humans and things, and even the relationship we entertain with our own identity. Even though the critical vocation is evident in what is often identified as the founding work of Western political philosophy, Plato's *Republic*, we link critique with the modern age, with the age of Enlightenment, an age which, as Michel Foucault has said, determines, "at least in part, what we are, what we think and what we do today" (2000: 303). So deeply is critique engrained in our habits of thinking, in our disposition, it can almost appear as if the renunciation of critique amounts to a renunciation of thinking as such.

Why, then, is it necessary to abandon the critical vocation of thought? It is because, as Lyotard sees it — at least as the Lyotard of *Libidinal Economy* sees it — critique has lost its critical edge and is incapable of inducing a separation between itself and its object, and for that reason it is incapable of bringing contemporary existence into crisis. In other words, it cannot compel contemporary existence beyond itself and in that sense it is inherently nihilistic.

For all that critique opposes its object, seeking its negation, it is restricted to the same essential position, a position that it repeats and confirms despite itself. Instructive in

this regard is Marx's criticism of the critique of religion. As Lyotard notes, Marx argued of the critique of religion that while atheism affirms humanity through the negation of God, in displacing God it posits a religion of man: the universality of humanity that it affirms is an empty moral sentiment, derived from Christianity. In this sense, critique goes beyond the position of one of the terms (God) but does not go beyond the positional set-up of the terms themselves. For Marx, the limitations of the critique or religion, are themselves recognized and superseded by critique – a critique of the critique of religion. If, according to the criticism of religion, humanity makes God, rather than God creating humanity, then the idea of humanity must be rid of its theological residue, and its true nature affirmed by a negation of the negation. Thus, as Marx puts it, the immediate critical task of philosophy, once the idea of God is shown to be but the alienated essence of humanity's own nature, is to reveal the worldly conditions of this estrangement, and transform the criticism of heaven into a criticism of earth.

For Lyotard – at least the Lyotard of *Libidinal Economy* — critique cannot critique itself in this way. As Lyotard puts it, multiplying critical overturnings and reversals "leads nowhere" (1984: 13). It leads nowhere because critique is rational and nihilistic, and so it is always and already complicit with the very conditions it looks to overturn – complicit with capitalism insofar as capitalism is rational, and complicit with nihilism (which is itself complicit with capital and rationality) because of its inability to think change otherwise than as a perpetual naysaying to what is, which cannot be affirmed insofar as it is always imperfect, always deficient.

The theatre of nihilism

For Lyotard, critique's judgement against what is – the schoolteacher's "must do better" that it scrawls in the margin of existence – operates according to a model of reality of an essentially theatrical kind. It is a model that is structured by a series of limits, as theatrical space is. First there is, Lyotard observes, a division between the space of the theatre and the outside world, and then, on the interior of the theatre, there is a division between the stage and the rest of the theatre (the auditorium, the wings and the backstage, the orchestra pit). On stage the dramatic spectacle of appearances is played out, whilst behind the scenes and outside the theatre, and so hidden from view, is what is held to be the truth of the spectacle – the original which the spectacle represents, and the apparatus that makes its representation possible.

This “theatrical” set-up is not simply an aesthetic device limited to the representational arts such as theatre or painting; it is a set-up that is as old and as far-reaching as the distinction between appearance and reality, a distinction synonymous with Western philosophy. This distinction acquired its decisive form with Plato’s ontological differentiation between the world that appears to us – the immediate world of sense-experience, and the true world of the forms – apprehensible only by intellection. It is against the former, mere appearances, and in the name of the latter, the truth, that critique supposes itself to work. It levels its suspicions against the spectacle of appearances, and, supposing that there is something behind those appearances (a truth or being that conceals itself), it seeks to make what is hidden apparent. However, and this would not be difficult to verify historically, such an aspiration cannot be fulfilled. It is this impossibility that critique continuously feeds off insofar as every supposed revelation of the truth behind appearances is itself susceptible to critical suspicion. Thus, the representational theatre is for Lyotard essentially religious and nihilistic: the spectacle that is represented always, ultimately, refers to a non-representational element or being, an absolute, a transcendent entity such as Nature, Idea, God, Humanity, Proletariat… These names, which form an historically regulated series or chain, are for Lyotard mutually substitutable in so far as they occupy the same structural position within the theatrics of representation. They are represented within the representational space as being outside it, as being beyond representation, but they function as the precondition of the spectacle represented, as an always absent origin — a *Great Zero* as Lyotard puts it — which produces the spectacle whilst effacing itself. For this reason, in the final instance, all representations are held to refer to them, and derive their meaning from them.

Historically, critique, which cleaves to the transformative power of truth, has unmasked the illusory authority of one such transcendent entity in the name of another, declaring God to be the truth of nature, humanity to be the truth of God, the proletariat to be the truth of humanity. Thus, while nominally transforming the theatrics, it perpetuates the representational-theatrical structure and repeats its nihilism, its judgement against a world that it devalues on account of its deficiencies: the world as it is imperfect — profane, sinful, corrupt, inequitable, a vale of suffering in need of correction.

What is at stake for Lyotard in identifying this representational set-up as theatrical? His aim is to dislodge the hold that the schema of representation has had over thinking since Plato, in which ideas stand in for things, and thought is conditioned, ultimately by what is in-itself wholly present, and for that reason can never itself be adequately represented. Showing that representation involves a theatrics, a staging of its spectacle, already weakens its hold upon us, since as Bennington has pointed out, if it can be accounted for as a particular way of organizing reality, as a set-up (or, to use the French term left untranslated in *Libidinal Economy — dispositif*) then it need not be taken as necessary, as a given (1988: 14).

Nihilistic desire

For Bennington this account of the critical-theatrical *dispositif* represents the core of *Libidinal Economy*. However, that is not all there is to it. As Lyotard sees it, the nihilism of critique is not simply an abstract intellectual stance taken against the world. So deeply engrained is the idea of the dispassionate objectivity of knowledge, that we are habituated to accept the idea that the critical knower is impassive in their pursuit of truth. Yet, the converse is the case: there is pain, there is ruthlessness and pitilessness, even cruelty, in the search for truth, and the skepticism of critique is underpinned both by a passion for truth, and its correlate, a zealous prosecution of falsity and destruction of error. Aristotle bears witness to the former when he tells us that “by nature all men desire to know” (1984: 980a 21), and Marx to the latter when he speaks of the need for a “ruthless criticism of the existing order” (1975: 207).

The possibility of both Aristotle’s and Marx’s declarations are neither personal nor particular; they are already pre-inscribed in the determination of philosophy as the “*love* of wisdom.” What is important here is not only that philosophy is named after a disposition towards knowing rather than deriving its name from the distinct group of entities of which it is the knowledge (in the sense that what we call “biology” is the knowledge of living things). What also matters is the way in which that disposition, love, which is a form of desire, is thought. As Lyotard observes in an article first published in 1976, “in the story Plato recounts of Eros’s birth (*Symposium*, 203b ff)” – a story that explains the nature of philosophy as the “love of wisdom” and which fixes the representation of desire – Plato thinks desire negatively (Lyotard, 1993: 70). Plato tells us, or rather has Socrates tell us, that despite what most people think, Eros (or

Love), is not a god; he is a *daimon*. Socrates reaches this conclusion because, he says, Eros lacks the characteristics associated with divinity; in particular, he lacks the beauty that is the attribute of the gods, and it is for this reason that Eros constantly strives after it.

The effect of this determination of Eros – an effect which extends from Plato to Lacan – is twofold: firstly, it conditions the representation of desire itself: henceforth the very possibility of desire is held to depend on lack, in the sense that desire desires what it does not have; secondly, it conditions the depiction of the pursuit of knowledge: the beauty after which Eros strives — the beautiful as such — is not of this world; but its luminous radiance is what allows us to see the world. All that is stands forth in the pure light of beauty, and it is for this reason that we can come to know it. Thus, for philosophy, the love of wisdom, and for the representational knowing founded upon it, the pursuit of truth is a passion, a desire. This desire is created by what it lacks, and it is driven towards it. Since what this love of knowledge lacks – what drives its desire – is a transcendence positioned outside the representational space of appearances, an always absent presence which is the ground of all knowledge, all meaning, the pursuit of knowledge entails a violence towards and negation of the world.

Lyotard's libidinal skin

As we have seen, according to Lyotard the theatrics of representation is always organized around the commanding presence of a great Zero. It is this great Zero to which, in the last instance, everything that appears on the stage refers, but which itself is always absent from the scene that it commands. Or to be more accurate, the representative *dispositif* positions this great Zero as outside the theatrical limits within which appearances are manifest. Since it is absent, the great Zero is always taken to occasion desire. In fact, it is the ultimate object of all desires, which since they are turned towards an always absent presence are incapable of being satisfied. Desire is, then, in this schema, nihilistic since it is always and only ever capable of desiring what it lacks.

As the title *Libidinal Economy* implies, an account of desire is at its heart. It is an account that does not succumb to the negative, nihilistic account of desire that has typified Western thought since Plato. However, for Lyotard it is not a matter of

denouncing this nihilistic way of accounting for desire, of saying, “this great Zero, what crap!” (2015: 11). To do so would be to reinstitute critique, to restore its theatricality and its nihilism, by assuming that this account is based on an error. Instead, Lyotard suggests that the great Zero should be taken not as what provokes desire, bringing it into being, but that it is itself a libidinal figure generated by desire. His point then is that rather than it being lack that occasions desire, it is a particular kind of desire that occasions its own subordination to lack.

But this suggestion raises as many questions as it answers. If, on Lyotard’s account, desire is not occasioned by lack, if it knows no negativity, then it follows that it must be affirmative and positive. But what is this affirmative and positive desire, and how is it to be exposed? There can be no question of Lyotard representing it in-itself, at least not without reinstituting the very theatrics of representation that he is attempting to dislodge. Instead, throughout *Libidinal Economy,* Lyotard will stage in various ways, and in a variety of scenes, the disruptive effects of desire upon representation, thereby registering, or allowing us to register, how it works to undo the divisions that are intrinsic to the limits that operate in the theatre of representation, principal of which is the division between inside and outside.

So it is that Lyotard begins *Libidinal Economy* not with the neutral, dispassionate approach typical of theoretical discourse, but with an imperative (which, as we will see has an odd, indeterminate status) to “open up the so-called body”, and to “spread out all its surfaces”, not only its variegated external surfaces, its skin, hair, nails, but also its supposed interior surfaces: “the diaphragm of the anal sphincter,… the black conduit of the rectum…the caecum, now a ribbon with its surface all striated and polluted with shit…” (2015: 1). It is worth dwelling a little on Lyotard’s staging of this spectacle. Not only is it a matter of exposing all that the well-formed body in its decency conceals — which we might call the abject body that has dirt under its nails, that loses control of itself, that pisses and shits and vomits… What Lyotard wants is to loosen the affective hold that this representation of the well-formed body has upon us and how we see desire.

The “well-formed” body is the “beautiful body” first modelled by the Ancient Greeks, beautiful not only in the sense of the symmetry and proportion of its parts, but beautiful

by virtue of their coherence, the concert with which they work and that makes of the body a well-organized unity, an organic whole. It is a body that is clearly defined, constituted around a clear distinction between its inside and outside — both the division of its interior surfaces from its exterior surfaces, and the division between the body itself and everything else external to it: other people and other things. This supposed "body" is a body everywhere in accordance with itself, ordered to a purpose, with survival as its goal. The undoing of the disjunction between the supposedly different surfaces of the body, the dismantling of the distinction between the interior of the body and its exterior, its prolongation into supposedly "other" surfaces, into "other" bodies, into "other" things, its flattening out and exposure, transforms it into an intensive body, crossed by aleatory and purposeless impulses and drives, vectors of desire that constitute the surface of this flat skin — which Lyotard likens to a single-sided Möbius strip — by virtue of their passage.

This account of the undoing of the body has what Lyotard elsewhere designates as a "seductive" force (2006: 321). It seduces the reader into adopting a certain relation to the spectacle it depicts.[5] Of course, there is seduction in the theatricality of representation — (who hasn't at one time or another been moved to tears by a book or a film?) — but the seductive movement that positions the reader or spectator in front of the representational scenario functions to consolidate the identity of the reader. There is in this seduction, as there is in all seduction, a certain pleasure (or *jouissance*) involved, but it is not a pleasure in which the reader or spectator is overwhelmed; it is the pleasure of the reader's or spectator's mastery of the organized scene it depicts. Here, by contrast, in the opening scene of *Libidinal Economy*, the seduction works to unsettle the reader from herself. The scene oscillates unsteadily between what is sometimes called "discourse", which is distinguished by the use of the first and second person, and "narrative", which is distinguished by the use of the third person. It is, in effect, impossible to decide if the use of the imperative and the second person throughout the passage is a direct address to the reader, or to an addressee internal to the narrative scene of the dissection of the body: How am I, the reader, being

[5] Lyotard distinguishes this seductive force from illusion. As he says, the reader or spectator — or to use a more contemporary example, the gamer — is immersed in the action or the sense without succumbing to the illusion that she is really there, unless she is "mad", Lyotard says, alluding to Descartes' madman who believes himself to be something he is not (Lyotard, 2006)

spoken to? Is this a prescription or a description? Am I being called to witness the scene being described, or invited to voyeuristically observe it? Or am I been asked to participate in it, or invited to perform this elaborate autopsy? The reader is simultaneously enticed on to the scene and held back from it by the descriptive frame – is she being asked to verify the description or (vicariously) experience it?

There are, then, two kinds of undoing or disruption at issue here that overlap in terms of their effect. On the one hand, there is what we might call, for want of a better word, the "description" of the undoing of the body proper, a theatrical representation that stages the spectacle of the dismemberment of the theatrical volume of the body-proper. On the other hand, there is the disruption of the limits that structure the representational theatre, the limits between the scene and the audience. Taken together, these two disruptions make of this perverse anatomical "description" something more than a description, not because it represents the body in a way that no anatomist would, by picturing it as extended beyond its proper borders, as a single-sided skin, but because through these disruptions it frustrates the representational objectification of the body which would reduce it to a thing, the being of which is ontologically exhausted by its presence before us.

The single-sided libidinal skin itself is not a body, not even a single-sided body, inasmuch as a body always involves some degree of permanence or presence. It has no history and knows nothing of the passage of time. It is a pure becoming, its surface retroactively constituted by the impulses that pass across it. But this pure becoming is not a simple activity; it is split, or internally differentiated. Lyotard appeals to a distinction he finds in Freud between two modalities of libidinal desire which, following Freud, Lyotard calls "eros" and the "death-drive". In both cases, what is at issue is a transformation of energy, the way in which it is conducted, and invested. Under the regime of eros, desire operates in a well-regulated fashion, whereas under that of the death-drive it is ill-regulated. Eros is homeostatic, and functions to create and conserve order, while the death-drive is disruptive and disordering. However, as Lyotard points out, they are not two distinct drives; they are the internal differentiation of one and the same thing. They are the poles of an originary tension of libidinal desire that produces the disintensification of intensity and the binding of its perpetual becoming into stable entities (the binding of becoming into being), at the same time

as it produces the disordering of this binding, its disruption through the disorderly impulses of the death-drive (the unbinding of being into becoming). According to Lyotard, these two regimes of desire dissimulate and dissimilate each other — a constitutively complex play of identity in difference, and difference in identity, in which they pull together and pull apart being and becoming. What this means is that the binding of impulses characteristic of eros, their organization and disintensification, their folding and fixing into structures and bodies, their being brought into being, is always threatened by undoing, always already inhabited by its own possible disorder. It is from out of these paradoxically singular and multiple impulses that the body as a living, historical entity has its genesis, and in this way can become the living historical vehicle of nihilism. And it is because of the duplicity of these two impulses that the body can exceed nihilism, undo itself and become something different.

Libidinal economics

On the basis of his account of libidinal desire, it is possible for Lyotard to think nihilism affectively. The negation of the here and now that we have said is nihilism – the subordination of the immediacy of the moment to the great Zero – is a disintensification of libidinal energy, its quiescence. Nihilism is, then, for Lyotard the diminution of the force of desire, a loss of intensity. From this Lyotard is able to undertake a libidinal economy, a description of the way in which different *dispositifs* work both to capture and quell energy and to incite its excitation. Insofar as the libido — or libidinal energy — is not contained, insofar as it is not imprisoned within the volume of the body, but is mobile and always crossing the limits set up to contain it, Lyotard's libidinal economics, his analysis of how energy is channeled and transformed, bound and liberated, takes in the organization of sexual difference, gender identities, generational differences, divisions of class and race, the ordering of the state and nation, the exchange of money and goods, works of art, industrial production and technology. Everything, for Lyotard, is energy in a more or less active state, and everything is a conductor of intensities — a "transformer" as he will put it. Consequently, libidinal economy is always already political economy, but a political economy that, as Robert Hurley has observed, is not restricted to an accounting, critical or not, of economic needs, interests, or labor-power, but which tracks the flow of affects and libidinal intensities in economic relations and economic exchange (1974: 125).

It is hardly news to claim that capitalism has an affective dimension. As Marx and Engels pointed out capitalism brings with it suffering — not only the immiseration of the working class, the exhausting intensity of factory work, the destruction of traditional communities, but also the alienation of the worker from their productive activity. For all that Marxism recognizes a wrong done to the worker, for all that it devotes itself to righting that wrong, it remains negative and nihilistic. In his critical analysis of capitalism, Marx repeats the two key structural-libidinal features of the representational dispositif: 1) He is committed to the idea that there is a limit and outside to capitalism. For Marx, capitalism will be destroyed by a force that is both born within it, but also external to it, in the sense that it cannot be fully assimilated within the system of capital, and thus which has the capacity to destroy it — the mismatch between quantities of commodities and quantities of money, the decline in the rate of profit, or the coming to self-consciousness of the proletariat. 2) He invests libidinal energy in the proletariat (or at least Marxism does; Marx himself, as Lyotard shows, is conflicted on this (2015: 95 – 103)) which, insofar as it is not simply an actuality but is also a political ideal, at once both internal and external to capital, functions libidinally as a great Zero.

For Lyotard capitalism cannot be positioned within the representational theatrics of Marxism. Capitalism destroys the representational theatre: it is both cynical and truth-less in that it does not invest energy (or locate value) in a lost object outside of itself. Instead, it invests energy in value itself, which in capitalism is internal to the system of economic or commodity exchange. Nevertheless, capitalism does not escape nihilism; looked at libidinally it engenders a new form of nihilism. As Lyotard sees it, under capitalism intensities are not simply associated with commodities, intensities are themselves commodified. On the one hand, this means they are subject to the rule of equivalence demanded by exchange, and in being rendered of equivalent value to something else they are necessarily drained of their intensity. Moreover, capital forces repetition: exchanges are repeated indifferently, and sedimented through repetition into established structures and orders. On the other hand, however, the very fact that capitalism invests in intensities means that it solicits them, invites them, and provokes them. And as we have seen with the body, this "opposition" between sedimentation and sedentarization on the one hand, and intensification and liberation of the drives

on the other, is not so much an opposition as the expression of the libidinal duplicity of capitalism which both dampens and excites intensities.

Conclusion

Lyotard's thinking is a thinking in action, and so *Libidinal Economy* is not the terminus of Lyotard's engagement with nihilism. In his later works he approaches nihilism differently. It is tempting to see his later work as a correction to the failures of *Libidinal Economy* — a temptation which Lyotard did not always avoid. But Lyotard's restless inventiveness, his abandoning of one approach and adoption of another, his leaving behind the philosophy of desire of *Libidinal Economy* for the philosophy of phrases of *The Differend,* is better conceived as an indefatigable effort to confront nihilism, an essaying of different ways to make us sensitive to it and to make us aware of its dangers. In this respect, *Libidinal Economy* calls to us now, at a time when whilst there seems to be no alternative to capitalism (even when the major economies are once more entering a period of hyperinflation, just as they were at the time that *Libidinal Economy* was written), there is nonetheless widespread disillusion with mainstream politics. For as Lyotard shows, whilst capitalism is a system that looks to produce more, it is also a system which, through its ceaseless solicitation of impulses and energies, can produce something other. It is that something other, fleeting, and difficult to discern, always in danger of being extinguished, that may, perhaps, be its undoing.

References

L'Arc (1976), *Lyotard*, No. 64. Republished as *Jean-François Lyotard*, Paris: Éditions Inculte, 2009.

Althusser, Louis (2005), *For Mar*x, trans. Ben Brewster, London and New York: Verso.

Aristotle (1984), *Metaphysics*, trans. W. D. Ross in Barnes, J. (ed.) *The Complete Works of Aristotle (The Revised Oxford Translation), Volume Two*. Princeton University Press.

Bennington, Geoffrey (1988), *Lyotard: Writing the Event*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Best, Steven and Douglas Kellner (1991), *Postmodern Theory: C*ritical *Interrogations*, Houndsmill, Basingstoke: MacMillan.

Crome, Keith (2004), *Lyotard and Greek Thought: Sophistry*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari (2020), *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane, London: Bloomsbury.

Derrida, Jacques (1990), *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, London: Routledge.

Dews, Peter (2007), *The Logics of Disintegration: Post-structuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory*, London: Verso.

Foucault, Michel (2000), *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume 1: Ethics*, ed. Paul Rabinow, London: Penguin.

Freud, Sigmund (1986), "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" in *The Essentials of Psychoanalysis: The Definitive Collection of Sigmund Freud's Writings*, London: Pelican Books.

Hurley, Robert (1974), "Introduction to Lyotard", *Telos*, No. 19, Spring: 124-126.

Lipovetsky, Gilles (2014), "Power of Repetition", trans. Robin Mackay, in *#Accelerate#*. Edited by Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian. Falmouth, UK. Urbanomic Media Ltd.

Lyotard, Jean-François (1973), *Des dispositifs pulsionnels*, Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions.

Lyotard, Jean-François (1974), "Adorno as the Devil", *Telos*, No. 19, Spring: 127-137.

Lyotard, Jean-François (1984), *Driftworks*, ed. Roger McKeon, United States: Semiotext(e): Foreign Agents Series.

Lyotard, Jean-François (1988), *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. George Van Den Abbeele, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Lyotard, Jean-François (1993), “On the Strength of the Weak” in *Towards the Post-Modern*, ed. Robert Harvey and Mark S. Roberts, New York: Humanity Books.

Lyotard, Jean-François (2006), “Painting as a Libidinal Set-up” in Keith Crome and James Williams, *The Lyotard Reader and Guide,* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Lyotard, Jean-François (2011), *Discourse, Figure*, trans. Antony Hudek and Mary Lyndon, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Lyotard, Jean-François (2014), “Energumen Capitalism”, trans by Robin Mackay in *#Accelerate#*. Edited by Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian. Falmouth, UK. Urbanomic Media Ltd.

Lyotard, Jean-François (2015), *Libidinal Economy*, trans. by Ian Hamilton Grant. London: Bloomsbury.

Mackay, Robin and Armen Avanessian, eds. (2014), *#Accelerate#*. Falmouth, UK. Urbanomic Media Ltd.

Malpus, Simon (2003), *Jean-François Lyotard*, London and New York: Routledge.

Marx, Karl (1975), *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin.

Nietzsche, Friedrich (1968), *The Will to Power*. Translated by Walter Kauffman and R J Hollingdale, New York: Vintage Books.

Williams, James (2000), *Lyotard and the Political*, London and New York: Routledge.

Woodward, Ashley (2009), *Nihilism in Postmodernity: Lyotard, Baudrillard, Vattimo,* Aurora, Colorado: The Davies Group, Publishers.

Woodward, Ashley (2017), *Lyotard and the Inhuman Condition: Reflections on Nihilism, Information and Art,* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Reading Recommendations

Bamford, Kiff (2017), *Jean-François Lyotard*, London: Reaktion Books

Bamford, Kiff, ed. (2020), *Jean-François Lyotard: The Interviews and Debates*, London: Bloomsbury

Crome, Keith and James Williams (2006), *The Lyotard Reader and Guide,* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Readings, Bill (1991), *Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics*, London: Routledge

Williams, James (1998), *Lyotard: Towards a Postmodern Philosophy*, Cambridge: Polity Press