Kiff Bamford and Margret Grebowicz, eds. *Lyotard and Critical Practice*. Bloomsbury 2023. 238 pp. $159.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781350192027); $55.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781350201903).

Intellectual influences know their ebbs and flows. A simple JSTOR search on 'Lyotard' (as a term in the title) provides a statistical outline of how an intellectual debate has been entertained in time: between 1980 and 2010 we find 176 results that contain the name 'Lyotard' and 140 results for the period 1990-2010. For the period 2010-2023 we find 29 results, all of which are mainly in English and French. Of course, changing the digital database and the Boolean operators would provide more variety. But the idea is clear: the proper name 'Lyotard' had a certain impact in the period 1980-2010 and then it slowly waned away. In July 2009, France Culture's radio program *Les Vendredis de la philosophie* dedicated one hour to a debate entitled 'Have we forgotten Lyotard?' Gérald Sfez, Françoise Coblence, and Robert Harvey begged to differ. Those were the glory days of what the Anglo-Saxon humanities departments called 'French Theory' and Lyotard was one of the writers who suddenly found themselves as a 'syndicated' intellectual group with a few representatives in the New World (Sylvère Lotringer, James Williams, Avital Ronell, or Roland Bogue amongst many others) and periodicals such as *Semiotext(e).* That is how 'French Theory' became an 'American' invention of departments that think like librarians: thinkers that emphasized *difference* in all its forms – in writing and reading, perception and sexuality, art and history, etc. – appeared as a homogenous classification. Their denomination illustrated the approach: the group is geographically identifiable, and their texts are translated and ready to be 'applied.'

The *modus operandi* of the humanities departments that built up the myth of 'French Theory' is mirrored in the secondary literature it has generated. Another search through various university presses reveals the simplest Boolean logic. The Edinburgh University Press catalogue contains a plethora of titles about Deleuze *and* sex, *and* race, *and* law, music, space, design, history, ethics, etc. Besides being conceptually volatile, Lyotard's philosophy is both acutely anti-systematic and systematically experimental (when it comes to the genres of writing he tried out). Nevertheless, he was too, 'introduced' and 'applied' as if his thought was a blueprint of postmodernity. And yet, there is no other thinker from the category 'French Theory' who resisted systematization like Jean-François Lyotard. And still, instead of practicing his way of thinking – the experimental writing and the testimony of differences and events – academics turned to him as a machine of concepts that is supposed to be replayed in different contexts. And of course, motives, figures and concepts reoccur in writers like Lyotard or Deleuze.

The question is, however, one of methodology: instead of multiplying differences in essayistic, experimental writing, the academy tended to turn essayistic writing into a 'system,' to search for a logic and its 'applications,' organise symposia, replay the papers in the form of edited volumes, write dictionaries of concepts, and set up editorial boards for journals with abominable titles like *Deleuze Studies* or *Derrida Today*. Instead of *doing* what the concepts were supposed to do, academia turned the concepts into a small industry. Fortunately, Lyotard was spared such an honour and, thirty years later, he has relatively few followers. There are the profound comments of Gérald Sfez, Claire Pagès,

or Claire Nouvet in France. Recently, Kiff Bamford has followed Lyotard with the loyalty and dedication of an apostle. Bamford's last volumes include Lyotard's biography (Reaktion, 2017), a collection of interviews and debates (Bloomsbury 2020) and the co-editing (with Robert Harvey) of *Readings in Infancy* (Bloomsbury 2023).

Bloomsbury's *Lyotard and Critical Practice* (co-edited with the Polish scholar Margret Grebowicz) is a deeply layered cake that combines the canonical academic approach with a few intriguing essays that reveal the relevance of Lyotard as a thinker of recent cultural problems. In between the essays by an international group of Lyotard aficionados, the book offers two supplements that include a few original texts by Lyotard that are published for the first time in English ('Apathy in Theory' from 1975 and an interview with *Art Présent* from 1979), as well as two other texts that are relevant for the current debate, namely 'The Affect-Phrase' (1990) and 'The Other's Rights' (1993). The volume thus has a double relevance: new debates around central Lyotardian concepts are divided by important documents and a few experiments in writing.

Regarding the latter, it's worth noting the partly visual essay, partly descriptive 'Animal Testimony', by Margret Grebowicz and Marina Zurkow, which addresses the issues of the inhuman and the other's rights as it is inscribed on the bodies of whales. Despite the fact that – in Aristotelian, serene fashion – Lyotard was concerned with the *human* Other, the essay is intriguing in its debatably valid point that these fascinating old animals deserve a certain voice. The limits of Lyotard's own thought are tested here from a contemporary position regarding the care for nature, a care that can only have a human voice. There is also Kiff Bamford's own 'Uncertain? For sure. Limping? Certainly' – an essay of a writer / performer who finds in Lyotard the figure of a dramatic gesture: the medical condition called 'claudication' or temporary limping. This challenging movement becomes the figure for the continuation of thinking, reading, and feeling in contemporary culture (205). This testimonial and performative, descriptive and illustrated approach to Lyotard is an interesting dimension. Precisely because of the way they approach writing and visualizing, these two essays are an alternative form of critique than the usual academic writing of the type mentioned above.

Another fascinating approach is the return of authors like Stephen Zepke to *Libidinal Economy* (1971), Lyotard's self-proclaimed 'evil book' with its cultivation of polymorphous desire as a strategy to resist the recuperation of critique that maintains power relations (192). Considering the highly sensitive and protected identity politics that characterizes today's art departments, the evocation of Lyotard's anarchistic tonality feels like a breath of fresh air. Regardless, the revision of the notion of 'critique' tends to return to the usual fashionable themes. John E. Drabinski's contribution 'Citing and Siting the Postmodern' is introduced as not needing 'Lyotard's lexicon' to address the Afro-Caribbean cultural legacy (2). Nevertheless, the author does link Lyotard to this theme and ends up in a typical academic recuperation of empowered emancipation, an attitude that would make Lyotard wonder about the validity of such a revolutionary enthusiasm.

One relevant theme that returns in this volume is the philosopher's involvement with *Socialisme où Barbarie* and the Algerian War, a chapter that is discussed also in Bamford's biography of Lyotard. Claire Pagès' absorbing and succinct presentation of this episode shows how important it

was for Lyotard's intellectual formation: the upheaval of revolutions reveals internal tensions – the FLN appeared as a national front that united different social classes (from peasants to workers) 'under a bourgeois leadership' (105). One wonders whether history has known many instances of *modern* leadership that do not become bourgeoise and / or bureaucratic. Claire Pagès' and Claire Nouvet's interventions are significant also because of the still unfortunate and incomprehensible (to a Belgian) linguistic boundary between English and French research. Few readers of Lyotard – and that is also the case with Deleuze and the other poststructuralist heroes – have a broader linguistic approach to the existent publications. The fact that *Discourse, Figure* (1971), Lyotard's most fundamental writing on aesthetics, has been discovered so late by the English-speaking public (2011), is symptomatic of the state of Western humanities: they are passionately concerned about intersectional 'studies' with activistic allure (gender, postcolonial, fashion) but few researchers bother to read in a language other than their own.

Finally, the English-speaking readers of Lyotard readers deserve a translation of his early work, *Rudiments païens* (1978). After all, even though the essays collected in that book have been translated and published in various places, they have never been brought together in one edition. Considering the interest in the early Lyotard – arguably motivated by an exhaustive reading of Deleuze and Guattari's *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* – this book would be the last piece in the puzzle of the editing efforts from the English-speaking world. Is this a future challenge for Kiff Bamford and Margret Grebowicz? Considering the current interest in writing and technology, a more significant contribution would also be a facsimile reedition of the catalogue of the legendary exhibition *Les Immateriaux* (1985). After all, even the original French version is a collector's item and a milestone in curatorial studies. Hence, Bloomsbury's *Lyotard and Critical Practice* promises that a return to Lyotard is a publishing endeavour that is worth pursuing.

Vlad Ionescu, Hasselt University