It is not possible to engage the literature of post-modernism without a degree of shock. For post-modern thinkers seek to leave no assumption of the modern era untouched: the notion of the independent subject, the ideal of emancipation, the proletariat as the universalizing subject of history, the concept of matter or nature, the doctrine of Reason. The familiar concepts and orientations which have been the historical frame of social thinkers for at least two centuries are all submitted to unrelenting critique.

For all that has been written about post-modernism not many writers have attempted to outline the nature of the ‘break’ with modernity, to place it in terms of a periodization of social forms. Often they simply draw on the cultural imagination, in the spirit of the spontaneous uprising in France in May 1968, and project this moment of discontinuity onto theories of art and architecture or onto philosophy and other fields of thought and practice.

* This article has benefited enormously from the help of a number of people who have made comments on early drafts and suggestions about further materials and arguments to be assimilated. I acknowledge in particular Gerry Gill, Paul James, Maryanne Lynch, Scott McQuire, Lorraine Mortimer, Gary Shapcott, Nonie Sharp, and Ilana Shulman. I acknowledge especially Geoff Sharp’s help towards the development of the framework of the article. Nevertheless, responsibility for its present content and form is my own.
Sometimes a little more concession is given to historical periodization; for instance when post-modernism, given the rise of cinema and the mass media, has been thought of as a perspective constituted by the proliferation of image. For example, in the field of architecture, post-modernism was first spoken of as a diffuse response against the orthodoxy of the modernist style. In this setting attempts were made to ‘theorize’ the present as a period which has no theory or periodization, a period in which all previous forms can be validly juxtaposed as diverse image and style. Even so, such accounts predominantly engage us at the level of sensibility. They do not seek an account of the transformation of social forms at the level of history.

If such accounts can be brushed aside by those concerned with social and historical perspectives, the work of Jean-Francois Lyotard poses more of a challenge. For Lyotard, whose work is the focus of this article, seeks to give an account of post-modernism which situates it historically.

Lyotard sometimes conceives of the post-modern as a moment within the modern, but by and large he employs it to refer to quite basic changes which mark us off from the modern era. For him, the modern was characterized by emancipatory perspectives and strategies, whether liberal or socialist, wherein emancipation was assumed and only the subject of progress was in contention: was the individual or the working class to be emancipated? Viewed in this context, post-modernism is referring to profound changes which bring the emancipatory frame itself into contention.

The demise of these ‘grand themes’ is manifested in various ways in Lyotard’s account. For example on one level he views both Auschwitz and Stalin as signs of the end of modern innocence towards emancipatory movements and their philosophical groundings. They are the sorts of catastrophic distortions to be expected from the modern tendency to legitimize a particular social totality by reference to universalizing narratives. On another level, we are confronted today with the generation of industries of a new type like bio-technology and the information industries, presenting us with novel circumstances which invalidate familiar perspectives and practical orientations. For example Lyotard refers to the declining need for the labour of the working class: while Marx confronted exploitation in the workplace what has he to say to circumstances which progressively remove the workplace from the ambit of the

broad mass of people? This transformation carried by the information revolution does not only impinge on the workplace. For this material revolution means that the philosophical division between mind and matter, dating from Descartes in its modern form, is countered by material reality; the ability of 'techno-science' to reconstitute matter indicates a 'profound transformation of our conception of the relationship between man and nature'.

Given this displacement of modern settings by post-modern developments, Lyotard criticizes such 'modern' concerns as class struggle, the attempt to generate a socialist alternative to a capitalist reality, as well as the wish to 'see' society as a whole. He does not take post-modern developments as a sign of the need to rethink the theory of 'society'. Rather, he rejects all such theories and emphasizes a post-modern politics grounded in 'local determinisms', a new subjectivity, a politics of the body, and an alternative vision of struggle where resistance replaces solidaristic politics.

This article attempts a critique of the post-modern perspective as reflected in the work of Lyotard. It does so more by questioning the meanings rather than the facts of our changed social settings. The approach taken is that a critique of post-modern sensibilities needs to recognize them as significant developments which mark the character of the present and demand careful evaluation. In particular it is crucial that categories drawn from modern circumstances are not simply imposed on the facts of post-modernity.

This issue of the imposition of perspectives is especially pertinent for the relation of marxist categories to an interpretation of post-modernity. In his well-known article on post-modernism Frederic Jameson illuminates the post-modern setting by his illustration of quite basic changes which have emerged in the relationship of person to society; in communication given the role of media and image today, and in the mode of production given the relation of science to working activity. These are changes which arguably not only make problematic our relation to others and our relation to nature but the whole strategy of the labour movement of the last 100 years. It is therefore disappointing, not to say reductive, to find Jameson simply defending one established marxist interpretation, that of Mandel, in his introduction to The Postmodern Condition.

3. Ibid., p. 10.
The question may therefore be rephrased as a question about Marxism: do the categories developed there for the analysis of classical capitalism still retain their validity and their explanatory power when we turn to the multinational and media societies of today with their 'third-stage' technologies? The persistence of issues of power and control, particularly in the increasing monopolization of information by private business, would seem to make an affirmative answer unavoidable, and to reconfirm the privileged status of Marxism as a mode of analysis of capitalism proper.

To conclude that we still have monopolization and power structures, and that therefore our categories of understanding and practice can remain essentially unchanged, trivializes rather than develops much of the work Jameson himself has done in his interpretations of post-modernity. Monopolization of information is a basic question; but there are other basic issues which emerge with post-modernity. These require a re-evaluation of marxist categories if a critique is to be developed which both engages with the facts and meanings of post-modernism and deepens our grasp of a defensible practice.

Within this broad approach, which views post-modernism as a development which challenges modern modes of interpretation, this article will argue that Lyotard can be characterized as a theorist of emancipation. That is, despite his critique of emancipatory grand narratives as orientations towards totality and his own orientation towards the aesthetic mode in order to privilege heterogeneity and the concrete as a strategy against totality, Lyotard is a theorist of emancipation in a new key, the post-modern information mode. The argument against him will be that this post-modern form of emancipation, where excessive emphasis is given to a social life made over in the image of information, actually works against heterogeneity in its more significant expressions. For information embodies a universalizing practice which displaces human presence from the structure of social relations. It carries a practice which 'emancipates' us from the body, from the other; from work as an expression of imagination, hand and body; and from nature. Where over-emphasized it cannot offer significant heterogeneity but rather high technology control as a mode of integration which precludes the rounded expression of different levels of the self. The information revolution is a manifestation of a renovation of the social classes which calls for a response qualitatively different from that appropriate to the circumstances of modernity.

This article is divided into two parts. The first half is an exposition of Lyotard’s account of post-modernity where the elements of a critique are drawn out; in the second half these elements are drawn together from the standpoint of a critique of post-modern emancipation and its expression in terms of a renovated class form.
Lyotard: Heterogeneity Against the System

If one begins to speak of a ‘system’ of thought in relation to Lyotard it must be with the knowledge that he denies all attempts to generate consistent theory. His work is characterized by a diversity which is an explicit philosophical stance against Reason, System and Totality; this stance is further supported by a development at the level of the social form, the information revolution, which in Lyotard’s view strengthens the argument for an emphasis on heterogeneity. The philosophical and the social are interwoven in his work in ways which generate a ‘system’ grounded in difference.

Lyotard’s critique of consistent or coherent discourse goes back to the heady days of May 1968 in Paris where he observed that advocates of coherent discourse, especially marxists, made little contribution towards ‘the real transformation of things’ but rather ‘helped to keep them as they stood’. This experience led Lyotard to conclude that the problem lay with the very nature of consistent theory and how such theory, as Reason, mirrored the logic of capital.

The system, as it exists, absorbs every consistent discourse: the important thing is not to produce a consistent discourse but rather to produce ‘figures’ within reality. The problem is to endure the anguish of maintaining reality in a state of suspicion through direct practices; just like, for example, a poet is a man in a position to hold language — even if he uses it — under suspicion ...  

Here one encounters a master theme of Lyotard’s argument: the interrelation of coherent discourse, Reason and capital and how they can be opposed by the uncertainty and openness of the aesthetic. Against the unity of the system grounded in cognitive rules Lyotard holds up the heterogeneity of the aesthetic and the sublime.

This opposition between unity and heterogeneity emerges from the problem of how to oppose the rule of capital. Yet to speak of capital is to fail to identify how capital itself has been transformed in ways which intensify the control of Reason and further emphasize the need for an effective opposition. Here Lyotard has in mind the information revolution and how this expression of capital on the one hand undermines its social opposition from the period of the modern, the working class, by systematically displacing it from the realm of production, and on the other threatens to make culture over into a flow which is a mere ‘circulation of information’.

The need for a cultural principle (if not a social opposition), appropriate to post-modernity, able to stand outside information as culture is one of his basic concerns.

The information revolution is not, however, predominantly negative in Lyotard’s theory of the post-modern. On the contrary it is a significant frame for the very notion of post-modernity. It carries, for example, the possibility of social relations constituted as open interchange; no longer need we rely on the ‘rigidity’ of stable identities. Stable identities, subjects, are anachronisms from modernity helpless before the forces of ‘techno-science’. Post-modernity in both its mainstream and oppositional form consists of the constant movement of image, of the constant remaking of meaning. This is the ground of all future contestation given the collapse of modernity. We have entered an era where subjects, social totalities and nature are ‘de-materialized’.

I: *The Information Revolution*

The category which consistently grounds post-modernism in *The Postmodern Condition* is ‘information’, not as an idealist category but one which is carried by the computer revolution sweeping through contemporary society. For the computer carries a logic which supports settings with new imperatives.

We may thus expect a thorough exteriorization of knowledge with respect to the ‘knower’, at whatever point he or she may occupy in the knowledge process. The old principle that the acquisition of knowledge is indissociable from the training of minds, or even individuals, is becoming obsolete and will become even more so.7

Knowledge becomes more like a commodity separated off from its producers and available on the market for sale. Information ‘knowers’ are displaced by information ‘handlers’. It follows, as an implication of this logic, that access to information becomes a new emphasis in educational and political institutions and displaces the ‘modern’ notion of the educated person, of the subject grounded in stable identity.

Along with this transformation of knowledge into information comes another aspect of this new logic, an aspiration for ‘communicational transparency’. The theory of information has an ideal of communication without ‘noise’ and Lyotard argues this unleashes a logic which gives priority to free interchange, deregulation and the ‘commercialization of knowledge’. Social processes reconstituted in this way begin to place pressure on the nation-state. While multi-national capital has been for some time part of an expanding

international setting which destabilizes the state, the information revolution will by its nature further this process because state bureaucracies block the flow of information. A logic is set free which works to reverse the centralization process, the process of bureaucratic regulation, which for many is inextricably tied to the socialist idea.

The information revolution is a general frame for Lyotard. It is critical for an understanding of the historical break with grand narratives just as it offers a model of how the social bond can be reconceived as loose or unstructured social relations. It is science in the information mode which he argues no longer needs a social legitimation; and information provides a frame for his master theme of 'complexification' as an alternative to the model of human progress. In this section these various elements will be explored and criticized before giving a short account of the significance of the aesthetic and the sublime in Lyotard.

II: Grand Narratives

When Lyotard refers to the information revolution he is predominantly describing what he believes to be a material fact, that is, a new development within material production. Information is therefore a social basis which makes the emancipatory 'grand narratives' of the modern era, such as socialism, invalid. Information produces a social setting which no longer regenerates the working-class opposition found in the modern era. It sets in train processes which lead to the dissolution of 'man as the measure of things'. Yet it is not only grand narratives of the modern era which Lyotard opposes; it is all grand narratives, all totalizing processes. Narratives are to be broken up into 'local narratives'; language is to be reconceived as 'linked phrases' or 'language moves'.

Embedded in this critique of grand narratives is a fear of the totalizing state, of the totalitarian possibilities of state systems. Yet while much of Lyotard's critique is directed against grand narratives from modernity such as socialism, it is clear that the information revolution carries its own 'grand narrative' or at least 'system standing in for grand narrative'. For while information is a basis for 'local narratives' and the break up of state and bureaucratic forms in Lyotard, he also argues it to be a 'dream' instrument for controlling and regulating the market system. Lyotard, then, employs one aspect of information — its ability to

8. Ibid., p. 67.
give support to decentralization strategies and relations of free interchange — against aspects which are integrative and systemic. But what circumstances would ensure that information would unambiguously support ‘local narratives’? Lyotard’s answer is circular: local narratives.

Grand narratives tend to be equated with totalizing systems by Lyotard. Because they give the possibility for a particular state to represent itself as a universal state, he sets up a choice between universalizing narrative and local narrative — the latter being the point of resistance to the totalizing state. But is any kind of social order possible without a universal frame of some kind? Is social form possible without shared cultural assumptions of some significance? By never facing this question Lyotard ignores the special way local narratives, where they are generated by information relations, are also set within universality. The creation by the communication revolution of what Marshall McLuhan called the ‘global village’ illustrates one level of this universality. Information is a universalizing relation in the sense that it is not tied to any particular place — it functions at a higher level of abstraction than any particularity. This characteristic gives shape to the decentralizing possibilities of information, to the character of local narratives as well as the character of relations of open interchange. The implications of these qualities are never explored by Lyotard. Nor are the nature of the narratives which ground the information revolution confronted.

III: Relations Without Structure

A second aspect of Lyotard’s reliance on the information revolution is how information creates a setting which encourages more ‘flexible’ social relations with a heightened individuality. This aspect is a crucial element of the strategy of local narratives.

In The Postmodern Condition Lyotard conceives the social bond as a language game and social interaction as language ‘moves’.

Each language partner, when a ‘move’ pertaining to him is made, undergoes a ‘displacement’, an alteration of some kind that not only affects him in his capacity as addressee and referent, but also as sender. These ‘moves’ necessarily provoke ‘countermoves’ — and everyone knows that a countermove that is merely reactional is not a ‘good’ move... That is why it is important to increase displacement in the games, and even to disorient it, in such a way as to make an unexpected ‘move’ (a new statement). 9

In his later work Lyotard discarded the language game because

9. Ibid., p. 16.
it made social relations seem too technical and also 'the game' presupposes the player who exists independently of the game. The pre-existent player is too easily related to modern narrative and the doctrine of the pre-existent subject. Lyotard therefore develops a 'philosophy of phrases', where language is reconceived as a universe of phrases with undetermined linkages between the phrases. The subject is constituted within the phrases; social relations and politics are reconceived in terms of a search for linkages between phrases.10

Yet whether he refers to language games or a philosophy of phrases in order to reconceive the social bond, he is seeking a form of conceptualization which captures social relations as 'loose', free-ranging and in constant process. What interests him, and helps confirm his reconceptualization, is how 'the temporary contract is in practice supplanting permanent institutions in the professional, emotional, sexual, cultural, family, and international domains, as well as in political affairs'.11 This is better represented by the social bond as language game or as consisting of an actor constituted within phrases which require linkage: both in turn reflect the post-modern emphasis on plurality and difference.

To speak of the social bond in this way is a significant departure. Typically, both theoretically and practically, the social bond has been represented as integral with structure. Yet the Habermasian concern about the dissolution of the self is lightly dismissed by Lyotard: 'A self does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before.'12 Because language games or 'phrases' are generally available to us Lyotard judges this sufficient to ensure that the self and the social bond will be regenerated in most settings. The exception is where the actor is effectively removed by a denial of the right to a language move. This is what he calls terror.13

What is striking here is the significance given to social structure. The only form of social structure formulated by him is structure as (totalizing) terror. The way that culture and structure give a social relational setting for the self in society is abandoned in favour of a

12. Ibid., p. 15.
13. Terror is defined as 'the efficiency gained by eliminating, or threatening to eliminate, a player from the language game one shares with him'. Ibid., p. 63.
view of structure as terror and the self as free floating and in constant movement.

It is possible to find limited exceptions to this in Lyotard. For example he worries about what is happening to work given the information revolution and work has always been an important structuring institution for the self.

It is obvious for example that the level of unemployment foreseen by Marx...is today a reality [because of the information revolution]. And we have no solution to that. I think this will be the main problem for the next century because it's impossible to consider a mankind in which only one person in ten is working.14

Yet this reference to structure is essentially in low key. Certainly no perspective is developed which is able to articulate why information presents us with this crisis or under what circumstances things might change. In more general terms structure is viewed as an anachronism, from the period of the modern, a threat from the past which may manifest itself in the era of information as a totalizing form.

To see structure in this way is to view it from the vantage point of the 'free-floating self'. Not of course as an independent subject, but as a subject formed within relations of a particular kind — relations which so abstract us from the Other that structure is found repulsive.

Relations of this kind which generate this sense of autonomy, of relations being merely contractual relations, are not new. The relations typical of markets have this character as do the relations typical of intellectual interchange. But what is new is the generalization of such abstract relations through the medium of information. For example the media form generates subjects through the exchange of image, and image is an abstraction from, only one level of, what has historically been the social bond. Through media image the Other is typically the simulated other; this can only have the effect of diminishing the self.

In seeking to ground the self in the more abstract ‘creative’ relations of the information mode Lyotard ties himself to the information revolution as the form which liberates from structure. Yet, this is to view information as a cultural form devoid of structure. As Lyotard would hardly argue that the market could be treated in this manner, what reason has he to believe that information can be viewed in this one-sided way?

IV: Complexification and De-materialization

The third aspect of Lyotard's relation to the information revolution relates to how he sees its general implications for social life. The information revolution carries society out of the era of the modern and as it does so de-validates narratives of the subject including the working class as universal subject. In the post-modern era 'man is no longer the measure'. The doctrines of progress and emancipation or the ideal of the emancipated subject become the anachronistic concerns of modernity. The philosophy of modernity is displaced by what Lyotard refers to as an 'obscure desire' for 'complexification'.

And isn't it desire (and I could produce many texts of Marx to ground this hypothesis) which seizes hold of the capitalist organization of current society (and maybe minds), to assume the task of complexification? We can perhaps consider human history as a series of attempts at organizing human society and minds, not in order to achieve freedom or happiness or anything like that (human aims), but just to achieve the infinite task of complexification. This is just a hypothesis, and a metaphysical one, at that.15

It is probably in the nature of 'complexification' that just what it means is not able to be spelt out in detail, but it is hard not to see it as a new form of universalizing narrative. But if that can be put aside for the moment, complexification is clearly meant to indicate a process which is beyond that perspective of 'man as the measure'. Yet if complexificaton indicates a process beyond the modern Cartesian concern for 'man mastering and possessing nature', it is quite unclear how Lyotard sees this being carried through by the information revolution. For this revolution intensifies the process of mastering nature. How else can genetic engineering or nuclear fission or recent developments in superconductivity be understood?

On this question we find Lyotard at his most erratic. He holds out for the species a future orientation whereby we will be able to 'colonize the stars' and he associates with complexification, a process which leads towards the 'dematerialization of the body'. Yet if the information revolution takes the body apart Lyotard falters at this point:

...the body is to my mind an essential site of resistance, because with the body there is love, a certain presence of the past, a capacity to reflect, singularity if this body is attacked, by techno-science, then that site of resistance can be attacked. What is the unconscious of a child engendered in vitro? What is its relationship with the mother, and with the father?...16

15. Ibid.  
The uncertainty of his judgment here is reinforced by his view expressed in *Driftworks* that 'there has never been anything but pieces of the body and there will never be a body', 17 which can again be contrasted with the argument of *Les Immateriaux* that the body is a necessary form of resistance to some of the possibilities of postmodernity. 18

There is no doubt that the information revolution, given the intellectual powers of the sciences, carries a logic of de-materialization. Lyotard is at once both excited by these momentous possibilities, which are one aspect of the post-modern, and is also concerned. For isn’t de-materialization both an expression of communication without ‘noise’ and an expression of totalization? In order to preserve a ‘site of resistance’ he is forced to defend the body. Where else can he draw this defence other than from the modern? For the only narrative immediately available to us which carries a setting which assumes the body in both work and social life, which preserves a significant expression of the tangible, is that of modernity. Yet it is not possible to talk of the body in relation to the modern without reference to the complex of structured relations which give the body a setting. It is only with the post-modern, with the information revolution, that we have the body stripped of supporting social structures and in this setting the body is not primarily ‘a site of resistance’ but an object of exploitation. It is the apparent occasional wish to qualify the information revolution which produces the erratic character of Lyotard’s judgments, but given his categories his argument can only appear contradictory.

V: *Science and Legitimation*

Lyotard’s analysis of science is concerned primarily with how science relates to the broader society or grand narrative and the ways in which it too may become a form of local narrative.

In the nineteenth century the sciences were firmly set within the meta-narratives of liberty and progress. These narratives of emancipation gave a general perspective and orientation which served to legitimize the work of the sciences. In Lyotard’s words this meant that science was tied into a totalizing framework.

His argument is that this philosophical clothing has been progressively discarded in the twentieth century in the name of ‘performativity’ and efficiency. He argues this to be a situation where science is no longer legitimized by narratives outside its own practices,


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It is recognized that the conditions of the truth, in other words, the rules of the game of science, are immanent in that game, that they can only be established within the bounds of a debate that is already scientific in nature, and that there is no other proof that the rules are good than the consensus extended to them by the experts.19

As performativity as a criterion took hold the sciences split into many narratives. The 'project of the system-subject' failed; there is no longer a meta-language of emancipation appropriate to science. Rather legitimation arises only from the local narratives of the different practices.

Lyotard is not, however, advocating the performativity principle in science. It has certainly created a situation which, in Lyotard's view, breaks the hold of grand narrative or narratives of progress and emancipation yet if this produces a situation conducive to local narrative it cannot be achieved unless science also breaks with the dream of 'complete control'.

This aspect of performative science is tied to a positivistic search for exact knowledge. It assumes the existence of a 'stable system' and here 'system stands in for grand narrative'. Lyotard's critique of system science is essentially a critique of continuity. He takes heart from such developments as catastrophe theory and Kuhn's theory of scientific paradigms and conjures up the possibility of a post-modern science of local narratives which take hold of 'islands of determinism'.

Postmodern science — by concerning itself with such things as undecidables, the limits of precise control, conflicts characterized by incomplete information, 'fractor', catastrophes, and pragmatic paradoxes — is theorizing its own evolution as discontinuous, catastrophic, nonrectifiable, and paradoxical... It is producing not the known but the unknown.20

In post-modern science, then, discontinuity displaces the continuity of system.

In this attempt to outline a post-modern science Lyotard seeks to differentiate it from post-modernity as a reflection of the information revolution in its totalizing aspect. Yet the whole attempt is premised on a generalization of those moments of discontinuity constituted within the information mode which are themselves necessarily framed by that mode. Is there any reason to believe one can be separated off from the other in this way?

In any case it is not really clear that on balance Lyotard wishes to do this. The earlier references to how post-modernity de-

20. Ibid., p. 60.
materializes relations and the body, carried by a science which can engage in bio-technology and generate a communications revolution, suggest a strong commitment to ‘techno-science’. This seems quite clear in other sections of *The Postmodern Condition*:

> If our general hypothesis is correct, there will be a growth in demand for experts and high middle management executives in the leading sectors ... where the action will be in the years to come: any discipline with applicability to training in ‘telematics’ (computer scientists, cyberneticists, linguists, mathematicians, logicians ...) will most likely receive priority in education. All the more so since an increase in the number of these experts should speed the research in other learning sectors, as has been the case with medicine and biology.\(^{21}\)

This commitment to the generalized implications of the information revolution is further illustrated in Lyotard’s discussion of how Descartes’ division between mind and matter no longer holds. The ability of techno-science to reconstitute matter requires that we view mind and matter in continuity, a continuity which can only be captured if matter is reconceived ‘not as a substance, but as a series of indivisible and ungraspable elements organized by abstract structures’.\(^{22}\) With this revolution nature as perceived is no longer available to us. It is simply a construction. In his defence of this more abstract relation to nature Lyotard affirms the general aspects of the information mode. It is also this abstract practice of information science, the way in which it problematizes ‘the real’, which gives another reason for Lyotard’s erratic relation to the body. The body from this standpoint is the only reference point whereby we can refer to ‘the real’, but it is a reference point which quickly fades when the information mode is the only mode of relation given recognition. Further it is this whole complex of abstract relations, the information mode, carried by a systemic relation between the intellectual practices of the high sciences and productive activity in the various sectors of the economy — the high technology revolution — which, by giving no place to ‘the real’ removes all practical substance from ‘local narratives’. Stripping away those rich relations grounded in human presence which give local narratives meaning, the high technology revolution, *where unconstrained*, carries us into a logic which can only end in totalization.

But this is to speak of high technology control whereas Lyotard is preoccupied with totalization in the form of ‘revolutionary terror’. His attraction to the information mode lies in the way it transcends or lifts us out of the modern and its revolutionary

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tradition. Hence his emphasis on the foreground of information, the more loosely structured forms of inter-relationship. But the terror implicit in the information mode—the terror which must emerge when 'anything is possible', when a reality grounded in human presence is no longer an available point of reference—is never adequately addressed. Despite gestures towards the concrete, Lyotard's strategy of heterogeneity, discontinuity and local narratives is actually an expression of the abstract logic of high technology. His apparent 'inconsistency' is nevertheless a consistent narrative supportive of an unconstrained information mode.

VI: The Aesthetic and the Sublime

Faced with a tendency within society towards the dominance of system and Reason, a development within capitalism able to consume 'any consistent argument' against it, Lyotard seeks an approach which preserves the incommensurability of different realms. This is achieved by a return to Kant.

What Lyotard finds of crucial importance in Kant is a defence of incommensurable faculties, 'an unbridgeable gap between the cognitive and the ethical faculties'.

Moral experience is not an experience, the You must cannot be established as such in reality. However, the obligation is received, and that is why it can be called a kind of fact. But it is received by the fact of the will and in an ideal nature, not by the senses in the real world.

Lyotard is here seeking to maintain a separation between the real and the ideal, between the social and the cognitive as fact and the speculative. The illusion of an 'ethical community' where the ideal is collapsed into a legitimation of the real, in the same tradition as those Christians who have been enthused by the prospect of heaven on earth, is what he struggles against. For down this path lies revolutionary terror.

Revolutionary politics rests on a transcendental illusion in the political domain; it confuses what is presentable as an object for a cognitive phrase with what is presentable as an object for a speculative and/or ethical phrase.

It is because of such confusions that socialism has been reduced to dominance by bureaucracy and the Party. And these confusions are produced by traditions which give validity to meta-narratives, like narratives of emancipation, seeking to bridge the ideal and the real.

23. These arguments are discussed in David Carroll, op. cit.
24. Quoted in ibid., p. 80.
25. Quoted in ibid., p. 81.
That it is possible to collapse the ideal into the real is not to be doubted. Yet it does not follow that meta-narratives necessarily reduce differentiated spheres to the one. Nevertheless in Lyotard’s view this is the problem and he seeks an approach which will preserve the heterogeneity of these realms. To achieve this he conceives of the universal as a realm separated off from the cognitive and the social (which can have no general view). ‘A critical politics must, therefore, be uncertain, modest, open; it must operate with the knowledge that there is no general political doctrine possible.’

The realm of general ideas, of universals, notions of progress, humanity or emancipation are therefore restricted to an intensely personal experience. They are not experiential in a factual sense. That way lies illusion. Rather they are experiential only in the realm of the sublime.

The concept of the sublime, drawn from the field of aesthetics has a long history dating at least from Aristotle, taking various forms within Christianity, and re-emerging in Kant, Burke and the Romantics. The experience of the sublime is intensely personal, what one critic has referred to as an ‘a-social now’. It is that experience where we come face to face with the infinite — the formlessness which lies beyond all particular forms. We may try to speak of the sublime but by definition we can never adequately represent it. To experience the sublime is to experience a fundamental ambiguity, of pleasure and displeasure, of fascination and terror.

Lyotard takes this emphasis on the sublime in the aesthetic imagination and draws on it to criticize the role of the universal, and of the emancipatory, in the era of the modern. For the modern has been oriented to the general idea as a social practice and this has led society, including socialism, in illusory directions. If the sublime places the individual in relation to the infinite such that the experience of the general idea is available, that experience must be marked off from the role of the general idea as a central element of a social practice typical of modernity. It is one thing to enter into relation with the sublime, quite another to practise a politics of the sublime. Modernity can be seen to have made ‘the terrible mistake of trying to present in political practice an Idea of Reason’. This is so for concepts such as ‘proletariat’ and ‘labour power’ in Marx as it is for more general concepts such as freedom. Presumably it would also be a ‘mistake’ for Lyotard’s notion of

complexification to be joined to a political practice. Yet it will be argued Lyotard repeats this 'mistake' of modernity within postmodernity.

But it is not Lyotard's argument that this schematic division between the real and the sublime should be maintained. For he then sets himself the task of exploring the valid ways in which the aesthetic can be drawn on within the realm of the real without resorting to meta-narratives. This is achieved through his notion of linkage discussed at length by David Carroll in 'Rephrasing the Political with Kant and Lyotard'. (see note 10) He seeks ways which will preserve the heterogeneity of aesthetic judgments, judgments which can have no pre-existing or unchanging rules, within the particularity of social practice. What deserves comment in this relation is how the real, the realm of the social and the factual, is made over in the image of the aesthetic.

The characteristic of the aesthetic mode which is constantly emphasized by Lyotard is 'the limitlessness of its determination, its aesthetic and political formlessness'. It stands beyond all cognitive rules revealing 'the limitation of all rules, the necessity to go beyond them'.

The 'aesthetic' could be said to be privileged in Lyotard for the same reasons it is in Kant: because the problem of judgement is most radically articulated in terms of it, because it demands a form of judgement that judges without knowing or presuming to know its object and in the absence of determined rules.28

It is clear that Lyotard is going well beyond an emphasis on the importance of a general frame of meanings which should never be reduced to the particular structures of a given social form. Rather he takes the non-determined and limitless characteristics of the sublime, transforms its universalizing qualities into 'local narratives', and projects them into the real. His hope is that this will make the social more heterogeneous, but is it not clear that he also seeks to reduce the social form to non-determination, to a structure-less set of relations of free interchange? Such emphases, for example, can leave no room for social policy, for policy which is more than pragmatic moves necessarily relies on a general perspective. What is the nature of the social form which can give support to these relations 'free of determination'?

The experience of 'non-structure', the sublime, is, as Lyotard acknowledges, not new. It has a long history. In other periods it was largely available to intellectuals and religious mystics who by reference to the cultural frame of society found a point to stand


Arena 80, 1987
outside the particular structures of the time, Lyotard is suggesting that this experience is now available to us all.

And in a sense it is. But this cannot be understood without seeing the way the information mode offers the possibility to live our lives through image. The heightened significance of image as one expression of an enhancement of abstract relations in society makes possible a general aestheticization of the social form. Where these extended relations predominate, relations which by their logic give diminished place to human presence, the individual is constituted as the autonomous self beyond the constraints of structure. The sublime and complexification are the ‘natural’ field of meaning for the autonomous self.

But cultural meanings do not only constitute individuals. They are also the frame of society. As the social form unfolds around the logic of information, universality interpenetrates all the spheres of social life. Power and structure are reconstituted: the dominant carrier of universality, the sphere of the circulation of capital and its power to constitute the social world, is radically expanded by its junction with the new forms of production and exchange generated by the abstract technique of intellectuals. Such a form has much to offer the autonomous self: relations liberated from the constraints of the modern; an ability to ‘see through’ nature, to reconstitute nature; to be ‘emancipated’ from the body — heterogeneity of a kind.

By its one-sidedness Lyotard’s critique of narratives of liberation has an ideological effect: it blinds us to the emancipatory narrative implicit in his own analysis. It is not that Lyotard argues directly for such a social form. It is rather that his emphasis on the aesthetic and the sublime, as the modality of that ideological effect which covers other potentialities, appears to legitimize his particular perspective on the future form of society as the only available form. Is the ‘stimulation’ of image, ‘liberation’ from the Other and loss of a knowable world so attractive that we should accept this closure (in the name of openness) offered by Lyotard? Are we to deny the validity of all attempts to engage with the emergence of this new level of contradiction?

Post-modernity: The Emergence of Cultural Contradiction

In the course of their emergence, reconstituted social settings typically draw radically differentiated responses: nostalgia for what is passing is contrasted with enthusiasm for the new. Where there
is enthusiasm for the new, surface forms of the emergent setting mesmerize: a balanced evaluation of social meanings is displaced. Enthusiasm, a typical response with the rise of modernity, colours the meanings of post-modernism as well, despite the post-modernist critique of capitalism.

Lyotard’s account of post-modernity is influenced by his enthusiasm in many ways. This is evidenced in his account of the demise of grand narratives while he remains blind to the universality typical of information; his portrayal of the changes in structure from the modern to the post-modern as the emergence of unstructured social relations; his emphasis on discontinuities in science which displace the continuities of the scientific-information relation; his critique of totality which ignores the logic of totalization implicit in information where relations and nature are de-materialized, where relations grounded in human presence are systematically displaced because they are ‘noise’ inhibiting the flow of free interchange. This is to say that Lyotard is blind to the contradictions implicit in his enthusiasms and this blindness is reflected in the categories of his analysis.

In this section the argument will be on two levels: firstly it will explore the nature of emancipatory narratives and will argue that Lyotard is an uncritical exponent of emancipation in both the realm of the sublime and in social practices carried by the information mode; secondly the argument will be made that his naivety towards information derives from his inability or unwillingness to engage with it social theoretically as a new level of the social with a distinctive logic. The combination of these two elements prevents him from grasping the nature of post-modern politics; as a consequence the possibility of rethinking Left politics in ways appropriate to post-modernity is systematically excluded.

I: Emancipatory Narratives

One element of Lyotard’s critique of emancipatory narratives is that they assume a tradition where ‘man is the measure’, the tradition of the subject. But if the question of the subject is put aside, Lyotard’s arguments are laden with emancipatory rhetoric. One need only refer to the notion of ‘de-materialization’ and how that captures the sense of liberation from the constraints of body, nature or even the planet. This last aspect, liberation from Earth, is confirmed by Lyotard’s enthusiasm for the project to ‘colonize the stars’. His wish to reconceive the social bond as loose, unstructured relations of free interchange also carries this logic of emancipation.
This is not a problem in Lyotard’s terms because universals, emancipatory or not, are restricted to the realm of the sublime. They are personal explorations of the limitless possibilities of what Lyotard has termed complexification. Totalization arises where meta-narratives of emancipation are constructed such that people begin to organize their social practices within these meta-narratives which now form the bridge from the personal to the social.

In this view the meta-narrative is a cognitive perspective drawn from the personal realm of feeling and imposed on social and political institutions. Whether it is a philosophical system or the more specific outlooks of Liberalism or Socialism which are under consideration, all are viewed as constructions of intellectuals which are simply imposed — as ideologies — upon subject peoples. Given this simplistic approach intellectuals might appear to construct ideologies in a social vacuum. If, however, the work of intellectuals is seen as a construction out of, a particular synthesis of, shared cultural assumptions the question then becomes one of how these assumptions are lent a specific character by the way in which intellectuals develop these assumptions under the conditions of their own specific mode of social engagement: engagement in a level of society which is typically ignored when the structures formed by the social classes determine the way of seeing society.

Meta-narratives then can be seen to be constructed out of cultural assumptions. Which is to say that the sublime, contrary to Lyotard, is a cultural expression — one where the personal and the cultural intersect. The universalizing emancipatory narrative is itself a cultural narrative, a shared narrative — not merely personal. Ironically given Lyotard’s critique of the modern it is an expression of the cultural tradition of the West.

But as a cultural narrative, at the level of assumption rather than philosophical perspective, the emancipatory narrative is not only a reality for the person in the realm of the sublime, it is also the frame of the social structure, of society. It frames society whether we have meta-narratives or not. In other words where meta-narratives have collapsed one can still expect universal narratives at the level of assumption to be at work both in relation to persons and the social structure.

That this is so in Lyotard’s argument is clear enough. Emancipatory universals in relation to the sublime, and implicit emancipation in the social structure through apparently structureless social relations, are sufficient illustrations.

This different categorization helps to show how we, especially
Lyotard, are drawn as individuals towards particular social forms. For where a social form can offer in a practical way the emancipation which we have internalized as an orienting myth from cultural assumptions, it has legitimized itself in our eyes.

The information revolution is set within emancipatory narratives and through definite developments in the social form offers 'emancipation' on a level far beyond the practical dreams of earlier forms. This setting of narrative assumptions can be illustrated — it is one among many — by reference to the narrative of light.

If we examine the information revolution in terms of industry we find a world-wide explosion of productive means which are often placed under the rubric of 'sunrise' industries. This terminology is not Lyotard's but it is employed world wide to describe production in a new mode comprising computer-based industries and other fields such as bio-technology.

Why is it that this development is so universally described as 'sunrise' industry? The 'sun' is among other things a symbol of 'light' and 'transcendence'. It is also the source of light. In relation to sunrise industry light illustrates what Lyotard refers to as the continuity of mind and matter. For on the one hand light in the information mode refers to the importance of knowledge, of enlightenment, for the development of this kind of industry. On the other hand information is dependent upon material light and what we know of the laws of light. It is not only that it 'travels' at the speed of light; optical fibres allow the transmission of light. In McLuhan's terms information is light; and if this begs the question of information as a social relational form, without the transmission of light there is no information.

Light is a symbol of liberation and emancipation. When we 'see the light' we transcend our state of ignorance and see 'anew'. Emancipation through technology and emancipation through light are also united in sunrise industry. For one of the cultural meanings of technology has been its ability to liberate the species from the constraints of nature. Now creative light embodiment in sunrise industry offers this liberation in the most 'developed' form yet produced: potentially we will be emancipated from work. And as this revolution of light unfolds and mind displaces the work of the hand, we move towards its ultimate expression; dominant mind and atrophied body. Sunrise industry draws on and gives particular expressions to a narrative of emancipation which is all the more powerful because it is screened by the language of efficiency and performativity.
Arthur C. Clarke’s *2001* is a popular form of this type of emancipatory myth. Technology and emancipation are the main themes of this epic. Life is portrayed as a series of developmental transformations which emanate from a mystery source somewhere in the stars. Our ape ancestors are manipulated into new levels of development always by processes bathed in blinding light. We are set on an epic adventure which carries the species stage by stage towards the stars. We falter in one phase by an over-reliance on computer as mind. Eventually the hero steps beyond the frame of what we can grasp and transcends time, place and the body. Through the hero we achieve our ultimate state, amidst the light of the stars, as pure mind moving through space.

*2001* is a secular immortality myth. It is also an emancipatory narrative. Its importance does not initially lie in the fact of its existence as literary representation but in how it speaks to, gives expression to, deeply embedded cultural assumptions which are widely shared.

Universal narratives of this kind are shared by socialists and capitalists alike. Certainly within modernity they were drawn into projects for the ‘good life’ which differed significantly depending on whether they were socialist or capitalist. But it is the intersection of the information mode with emancipatory narratives which both generates post-modernity and draws it into contradiction. And if the developmental distortions of this conjunction are to be confronted it is narrative at this level which must gain focus.

Yet Lyotard is possessed by emancipatory narratives of this kind. Witness the cover of *Les Immateriaux* where an image of a hand in translucent blue to capture the sense of de-materialization is set against the background of the stars. Its narrative holds together the information-based de-materialization of the body with the possibility of transcendence through the colonization of space. The image of reconstituted humanity—a ‘humanity of the laboratory ... an experimental humanity’—is described as ‘the best resolution of the crisis’. Medicine holds out the possibility of achieving ‘classical angelism’, of a practice which can ‘fabricate a third sex, a synthetic sex (transexuals as the unsexed)’. Post-modernity also moves beyond death for ‘death corresponds to definite or so-called “vital” states of certain organs; consequently it must be curable, like a clinical accident. In deferring death, humans serve their apprenticeship with immortality...’

30. Lyotard, ‘*Les Immateriaux*’, *Art and Text* 17, p. 52.
That this narrative of Lyotard is silent about the social whole and discards emphases typical of modernity is true; but its implicit narrative concerns the conjunction of emancipation and the 'real' — the information mode in general. In this sense it is a meta-narrative of the post-modern with definite political implications. It privileges renovated capital now joined by intellectuals and the intellectually trained (whether as managers or media personalities) over against the broad mass of people who in a variety of ways find those settings essential for co-operative organization radically diminished. It is a narrative which helps screen from view reconstituted class settings.

II: A Politics of the Sublime?

Given the changed significance of emancipatory narratives, a politics with a heightened insight into cultural meanings — a cultural politics — is today unavoidable. That is, politics must take account of levels of unawareness constitutive of persons and society. This is not to suggest, as Habermas seems to do, that all cultural meanings can or should be 'made conscious'. Complex and rich relations are inconceivable without implicit meanings yet in contemporary settings it is significant that elements of the implicit help draw us into paths of self-destruction. Is a politics at this level avoidable?

A politics of culture necessarily engages spheres which strongly resemble what Lyotard calls the sublime. Here the religious sublime or nature as sublime is not being referred to so much as the sublime as an unambiguously and humanly constructed category of culture. And one may speculate that the intensity of the personal experience of the sublime is a manifestation of the way in which 'unstructured' cultural realms seem to release the person into a medium of pure universality.

Characteristics of sublime experience are generated where social settings are remade by the cultural transformation typified by the ascendancy of the information mode. For example, as post-modern enlightenment enters a path whereby prior levels of social interchange grounded in human presence are displaced by the extended relations of the autonomous ego, the dual experience of pleasure/displeasure, fascination and awe/terror characteristic of the sublime typically emerges. The exhilaration of the new and uncharted, the sense of liberation from all prior forms, is counterposed with a sense of loss and of fear that there may be no way back: for instance, this ambiguity is clearly illustrated in Lyotard's discussion of in vitro fertilization and in fact the same ambiguity is widespread.
today towards the unstructured relations which he advocates. This
deep-set ambiguity may also be related to the defining event of the
emergence of post-modernity, the project to construct the atomic
bomb: the scientists concerned glimpsed the constitutive symbolic
expressive of formlessness, and responded with an overwhelming
exhilaration and awe.32

A politics of culture must struggle 'to represent the unpresentable'
in the sense that insight must be gained into that which in basic
respects must remain for its effectiveness in a form hostile to
representation. How this can be done without a reign of terror,
considering that elements of the implicit frame constitutive of the
self can no longer be taken for granted, is the project of the post­
modern era.

At this junction between the sublime and the logic of the
information revolution, it is one thing to warn of the dangers of a
politics of the sublime, quite another to rule it out. The post-modern
world and its conventional politics are both set within emancipatory
narratives which, given the information revolution, impel us in the
direction of such a politics. It is in this sense that conventional
politics is now cultural politics. Here politics now reaches into the
implicit and decides, for example, whether life begins one hour
or twenty hours after fertilization in order to facilitate embryo
research.

This represents a logic which cannot be allowed to hold sway,
but it can only be resisted by a cultural politics of a different order;
where cultural assumptions are brought more forthrightly into
contestation. To this end a meta-narrative is indispensable, though
it must be one differentiated from those of modernity, and those
implicit in Lyotard.

III: Information: A New Level of the Social

The choice posed by post-modernity between totalization and
heterogeneity has definite meanings for Lyotard. The strategy of
heterogeneity in his account gives emphasis to the aesthetic mode
and points to the need to mark off cognitive and social facts from
ethical facts as largely incommensurable realms. It is also this
that leads him to criticize consistent argument as an expression of
Reason.

Yet to argue against this separation of the real and ideal is not
necessarily to criticize heterogeneity. Rather the argument of this

32. See Robert Jungk, Brighter Than A Thousand Suns, Ringwood,
article is a rejection of his account of the circumstances which lead to diversity. Here it is ironic that Lyotard’s critique of consistent argument — its similarity with capital’s tendency to make all forms commensurable with each other — is set within a social theoretical framework which privileges the universalizing relations of information. For, it has been argued, this mode threatens to dissolve all relations not already fashioned after its own image. It is precisely in this tendency that the threat to heterogeneity lies.

Rather than accept Lyotard’s theory which would have us live by information alone, a theory able to defend heterogeneity must be able to differentiate between relations with different logics. In Geoff Sharp’s words:

... one might start by noting that constitutive forms differ radically in their extension in space: sexual relations are a trifle difficult without presence in the flesh while the extended symbolic exchange so characteristic of print and electronic media achieves its universality by way of abstraction from direct human presence.33

And given these different logics one must then give an account of the conditions which would allow them to be held in fruitful inter-relation. In order then to defend both consistent theory and diversity, one must explore the character of the information mode further.

Some sense of what this revolution means is reflected in the comment: ‘In the beginning was information.’ This captures a sense of a different relation of humankind to natural objects. One of the expressions of this ‘new way of seeing’ is the progressive attempt to reformulate all human processes, including productive processes, in terms of flows of information. That is, even earlier forms of industrialization — the so-called ‘rust bucket’ industries — can be redescribed in terms of information, just as humans are increasingly ‘seen’ in terms of encoded information.

It may be that as an act of the imagination this redescriptions of different forms as one form generates important new insights without dissolving the various forms. But the information technologies step well beyond an act of the imagination. They actually embody a process of practical abstraction. Amongst other things labour is increasingly drawn into the technology itself, being

33. Geoff Sharp, ‘Constitutive Abstraction and Social Practice’, Arena 70, 1985, p. 79. This section draws strongly upon the argument elaborated in this article. The significance of an intellectual practice grounded in extended and universalistic relations and the ways in which this practice is central to an understanding of the new constitutive level, the level of information, as well as the ideology of autonomy is the frame of interpretation which I have taken from this article.
practically transformed into information while the tangible person is displaced.

It is this relationship between abstraction and the tangible—grounded in the historical division between mental and manual labour—which is the key to understanding the impact of information as a new level of the social. Yet to refer to social abstraction and how it displaces the social in a more tangible mode is, because of its overly schematic distinctions, likely to lead to serious misunderstandings.

No society is without universality or social abstraction. For example, all language allows the expression of universals and these give a position from which the person can, to a degree, stand outside the particular forms of a given society. However, if we examine societies which are often described as ‘developed’, critical stages of reconstitution can be identified which allow the observation that they have entered a phase of enhanced social abstraction. Where societies, for example, have institutionalized a market and a level of commodity production, they have entered a social process where, in relation to that production, persons can only relate to use values, concrete labour, abstractly through a system of universal exchange. Given the ‘enlarged’ space created for the individual, societies of this type also develop other expressions of social abstraction such as literacy and intellectuality.

The printing revolution of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Europe is an example of a further stage which enhanced the hold of social abstraction over our lives. The printed word facilitated the circulation of ideas abstracted from particular contexts such that one can refer to an abstract social medium having come to layer over previous social forms and to some degree having remade them in the process. As this development engaged with the system of commodity production and exchange, we entered a process which eventually became known as the industrial era. But such illustrations, because of their brevity, are necessarily reductive. They do not conjure up the profound change in life settings or political and cultural institutions which are carried by successive phases of social abstraction. They merely illustrate how simple dichotomies of the abstract/concrete kind are inadequate for grasping actual or potential social change.

Sharp argues that what is needed is an ‘image of society as composed of an intersection of constitutive layers’. This concep-

tion of society as differentiated yet inter-related levels of social relations provides a frame for the exploration of the meanings of the information mode. Different expressions of social abstraction give priority to different human capacities and potentially narrow down the range of capacities through which we express our humanity. In particular, where one form of social abstraction dominates our lives, at a personal or societal level, we move towards contradiction. This potential at a societal and personal level is especially pressing with the information revolution, as will be argued below, but earlier forms of social abstraction also contain this possibility. To see the process at work one need only refer to persons possessed by their place in a system of money markets or cloistered intellectuals possessed by books such that all their other relations and activities are made over in the same extended mode. In these cases, abstraction — here in the form of money or books — displaces the rounded expression of imagination, hand and body in productive work and social interaction. Yet while these examples have been real enough historically for some individuals, they cannot be said to have ever characterized the social form. That is, while earlier forms of social abstraction brought with them a reconstitution of the relations between mind, hand and body, none transformed the social form such that one could describe it as offering only 'life on one level'. With the information revolution, however, this possibility moves into prominence.

Here the information revolution may be viewed as an illustration of a further enhancement of social abstraction. The ability of scientific intellectuals to conceptualize matter, including organisms, in terms of abstract concepts with a high degree of generality (nuclear physics and bio-technology are paradigmatic examples of this universalizing mode), and the practical manipulation of objects by the use of these concepts in order to reconstitute them, are basic elements of this revolution. Combined with the communications revolution, commodity production and exchange are facilitated on a scale beyond the dreams of even the nineteenth century. And with an explosion of social mediums, especially over the last thirty years, work and communication are progressively being remade after the mode of information.

As an extended mode of interchange, information technology helps perfect human communications on a level quite different from one of human interaction grounded in gesture, the intuitive, the body. As a social medium it draws people into inter-relation. But by and large persons do not know each other tangibly — in the flesh and blood — and the experience of our sociality is reduced as the presence of the tangible other diminishes. The way Rock
Culture, facilitated by the communications revolution, draws young people into abstract inter-relation around the Star as shared focus is illustrative; so too the way television simulates the presence of the other — the image of the other — while denying tangible presence.

Persons formed in these extended mediums do in a sense ‘broaden their horizons’. In the ‘global village’, on our common ‘planet earth’, this more abstracted level of the social helps elaborate a perspective which many, quite rightly, value positively: a vision of a global consciousness and universal humanity. Yet, as already indicated, the information medium carries a contradiction in the way it abstracts us from nature and the tangible presence of others. Thus Lyotard’s example of in vitro fertilization where high technology takes over key elements of conception and indicates a future where the act of conception no longer requires tangible presence; information calls out the dissolution of the body. Yet such choices are often experienced as liberation, as the expression of the autonomous self no longer constrained by the other; they are the choices of persons increasingly formed in extended relations experienced phenomenally as outside any identifiable and limiting context.

This depiction of the social logic of the medium of information conjures up a future where people will have ‘no choice’ but to live by that medium alone. Yet other levels of social abstraction have not so thoroughly constrained the range of potential human experience. Is there reason to believe that the information mode will?

At an implicit level people ‘know’ that there is a significant difference between a telephone call to a friend and speaking to that friend in a setting where presence combines with gesture, touch and other forms of body language as constitutive elements of what is communicated. Yet this tacit knowledge of different modes of communication is typically set aside when faced with the information revolution. A different kind of ‘common sense’ comes into play, one mesmerized by the information mode such that basic discriminations no longer inform practice; the value and character of relations constituted in one level of social abstraction are assumed to be identical with those constituted in other levels. Paul Goodman gives expression to this ‘common sense’ when he tells us that ‘fucking is just another form of communication’. If only, he implies, we can step beyond prudishness into a liberatory mode we will be able to make fucking one element of the free interchange of information flows. Arthur C. Clarke echoes the same ‘common sense’ when he informs us that: ‘The way in which information is stored
is of no importance; all that matters is the information itself.\[36\] For if this view is taken, whether or not an individual actually knows something is of no significance. The information form casts aside tangible presence.

Norbert Weiner, the founder of cybernetics, lifts this ‘common sense’ into his theory of communication. In *The Human Use of Human Beings* he argues\[37\] that bodily or tangible communication, communication grounded in presence and place, is in principle no different to other forms of communication. ‘The fundamental idea of communication is that of the transmission of messages, and that the bodily transmission of matter and messages is only one conceivable way of attaining that end.’\[38\] In other words transmission grounded in gesture and context is only one of the many forms of communication, one which in principle can be replaced by another. As he puts it, with a touch of science fiction yet nevertheless firmly within the standpoint of contemporary theories of communication,

there is no absolute distinction between the types of transmission which we can use for sending a telegram from country to country and the types of transmission which at least are theoretically possible for transmitting a living organism such as a human being.\[39\]

In these passages Weiner echoes the inability of communications theory to make basic distinctions. Communication is viewed from the standpoint of information, and without a theory which can conceptualize this development as a particular form of the social, different in crucial respects from other forms of constituted sociality, the ground is laid for experiencing life only as that flattened existence offered by living on one level alone.

The full significance of this lack of discrimination needs to be seen in the context of the sheer power of the information revolution compared with other forms of social abstraction. Whether we think of material production transforming into information flows; conception transforming into *in vitro* fertilization; politics transforming into media image; coupling transforming into computer matching; the flexible contract, as Lyotard puts it, marching through all our institutions: the information mode is taking hold of our lives. The attraction of the medium of information is intense, generating as it does that extended social relational form which allows us to experience ourselves more autonomously, encouraging

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the sense that we can remake our lives and selves many times over. As our sensibilities change, it becomes more difficult to experience the social — the tangible other — and this heightened 'individuality' diminishes commitments towards the socialist project, at least in its modern form.

On balance Lyotard's work recommends these post-modern forms of practical liberation: in part through his neglect of cultural narratives at a practical level; in part through his inadequate theory of information. It seems fair to say that he recommends that we live our lives on that one level of social abstraction alone. Here difference, that central motif of post-modernism, could only be, practically speaking, made trivial and superficial. Sociality in depth attained in living through a variety of constituted levels of the social, including those where tangible presence predominates, is displaced by a shift towards the predominance of a more abstracted level of social interchange and its totalizing potentiality. Indeed in these circumstances it would make sense to conclude that 'a self does not amount to much'.

Of course there is the other side of Lyotard — his wish to defend the body, the concrete, and the local narrative. This aspect of his theory resonates with many contemporary manifestations of this broadly experienced orientation. One could refer to those who seek to re-engage with nature through environmentalism, those who seek to defend their bodies through fun runs, those who seek to renew the older crafts, those who resist the patenting of plants. But while these and many other such manifestations signify a sense of loss and an apparent valuation of the tangible, in unreconstructed form they are unself-conscious products of the same trajectory. The question is whether this orientation can be drawn on in order to generate a cultural politics able to dominate the information revolution and through this contribute to a reconstruction of the socialist project in circumstances of post-modernity. But this is not to speak of socialism as defined by the centralized state. Rather it suggests a social form founded in a non-exploitative mode of co-operation which ensures the dominance of relations of human presence.

Conclusion

Lyotard's discussion of the post-modern condition raises many questions which are basic for a politics after the modern age. He identifies developments which our familiar perspectives can only take hold of by forcing events into categories which reduce their significance and ignore the sensibilities of the present. For Lyotard
the information revolution changes our relation to nature, changes the relation of knowledge to knower by externalizing knowledge in data banks, and changes our relation to others by making such relations more flexible. Information also transforms the workplace and productive potential that there is no prospect for the broad mass of people; it transforms our relation to our bodies so that the body begins to lose substantial significance for the person. The information revolution draws into being a context which calls for a development of theory as well as political practices of a different order to those of the modern.

Lyotard takes the information revolution as a given, as a material fact which won’t go away. The question for him, and the counter-argument on which this article centres, is: what is to be our relation to such a transformation? Here, and this is where differences of perspective emerge, he formulates his argument by drawing a distinction between totalizing strategies and those which emphasize the local and the particular. A social form oriented to totality in the era of information is a society dominated by techno-science and reason. This form of society comes about in Lyotard’s view because of the hold of grand emancipatory narratives over our thought and action. They lead to the dominance of the system, to an era of terror. And if we take this consequence or others such as the unavailability of work or the dissolution of the body, doesn’t this point to the failure of those narratives — to what he calls the failure of the universal?

This points to Lyotard’s view of a different social orientation in the face of this crisis: an orientation towards local narratives, discontinuities, the body. In relation to the information revolution Lyotard sees a future struggle over access.

A struggle for access to data banks is of course worthwhile. Access is one possible expression of equality in society. Yet this struggle leaves untouched, unproblematised, the character of the information revolution, as does Frederic Jameson’s call for ownership of data banks. Lyotard is critical of information in some of its expressions but assimilates these to totalizing strategies.

The argument against Lyotard has two broad aspects to it. Firstly his critique of grand narratives cannot be sustained because if we focus on the level of cultural assumptions held by the broad mass of people — rather than philosophical narrative — universalizing narratives are alive and ‘well’ even though they project us into cultural contradiction. That is, amongst the cultural meanings by which we are constituted there are complexes which contain assumptions about development, emancipation. It is this range of meanings
which are taken hold of by and act to legitimize sunrise industry. Sunrise industry is emancipatory in particular ways: ways which gain one expression in ‘liberation’ from work and the changing character of work, another in the atrophied body. And, it has been argued, it is grand narratives of this post-modern type which Lyotard pursues with zeal while ignoring the cultural politics they contain.

The form this emancipation takes can be better specified if the second aspect of the critique is taken up: the nature of information. Here it was argued that information does not merely consist of elements at the level of cognition. It is an expression of a new level of the social, a particular form of social abstraction. And if this social abstraction is to be differentiated from earlier historical forms, society itself must be conceived in terms of levels of constitutive abstraction. In relation to such a concept information is a layer of relations which enhance social abstraction; it gains its special character through the enhanced ability of scientific intellectuals to take nature apart at the level of its fundamental components. Information does not merely refer to science; through the power of this form of knowledge and its relation to commodity production and circulation, it interpenetrates all areas of social life to a degree not comparable with earlier forms of social abstraction. Life ways and institutions are progressively made over in its image. We are called by the emancipatory possibilities of this revolution, and how these touch our cultural meanings, to live at one level of constitutive abstraction alone, and it is this development which produces culture as the ‘circulation of information’.

The kinds of interpretations made of these new developments do make a difference. Theory or perspective can help shape practice. If these criticisms of Lyotard hold, the two poles of universal and concrete no longer hold. There is no such thing as a return to the concrete. But there is the possibility of a social programme which dominates information by its insistence on a social form which can hold together the different levels of social abstraction, generating a context which defends human presence and perceptible nature.

This account of levels of social abstraction also avoids the privileging of the aesthetic as a taken-for-granted category. It avoids having to cast aside consistency in the name of a struggle against Reason: it does so by allowing a rational understanding of the pervasive phenomenal form of heterogeneity. For the problem of Reason is the problem of social abstraction on one level alone, a reason which remakes all other levels in its own image. No political movement can move beyond an intellectual perspective into a practice within society without substantial consistency. Certainly a
consistent perspective may be inappropriate to circumstances, as seemed to be so for those marxists Lyotard observed in 1968. But neither consistency nor efficiency are a problem as long as we have a perspective which helps defend differentiated levels of practice which contradict the one dimensional form of the information society. In other words efficiency should always be within social relational limits which are basically not to be negotiated. If it becomes more ‘efficient’ to produce children by use of laboratories or to produce commodities without workers, that notion of ‘efficiency’ can be rejected by a cultural political programme committed to the maintenance of social settings which reproduce human identities with depth and diversity.

Such a programme does not invalidate working-class politics. Rather it places it in a larger frame given the reality of the information revolution. For this new level of social abstraction threatens the taken-for-grantedss of working-class life. Those modes of production which were the assumed frame of the working class now have to be defended if tangible nature is to mean anything outside of mystical environmentalism. And to do this, working-class politics can never be the same again. This calls for a more reflexive attitude, a transformation of the new level of the social from an instrumental to an interpretative mode. If this cannot be achieved, the observation made long ago by Goethe that the world is becoming ‘one huge hospital’ will become a reality: a reality of a totalizing system in the image of information seeking to contain its contradictions.