

Cybersublime

Representing the Unrepresentable in Digital Art and Politics

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On Thursday, 3rd September 1998, the Mediated Nations Panel of the Ninth International Symposium of Electronic Arts (ISEA98) was joined via a live link by the Kurdish Satellite station Med TV. For one hour, a special broadcast of the regular programme *Zaningehe Med* (University Med)¹ took the form of a discussion programme focusing on the impact of technology on cultural identity. Using phone-in, fax and e-mail interactivity, guests in Med TV's Belgian studios (who included the programme's producer and host Joe Cooper, Gilane Tawadros, Director of inIVA, Mustafa Rasid, specialist in Kurdish Folklore and Computer Engineering and the artist Simon Tegala) were joined, via phone, by Professor Amir Hassanpour of the Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilisation at the University of Toronto, and by Dee Dee Halleck and José Carlos Mariátegui who phoned in questions from the panel session in Liverpool, UK. According to the October 1998 edition of Med TV's *Sterka Med* newsletter,²

the unique nature of the event meant that the broadcasting agency of a stateless nation was participating in a section of an international conference". For Hikmet Tabak, then Director of Med TV, the venture showed "how Med TV is involving itself in the academic debates on the interaction between technology and culture". As we enter the millennium, according to Tabak, Med TV provides "a wonderful example of how the satellite technology of the modern world, so often seen as an implement to abolish cultural differences, can also be a tool to preserve them."³

During the post-broadcast debate in Liverpool, a member of the audience raised the question of what he perceived to be the programme's poor production standards. What, he asked, was the point of a minority Kurdish broadcasting agency imitating the kinds of programmes made by the BBC? Surely part of the issue for such broadcasting agencies was to find their own

1 *Zaningehe Med* was broadcast daily, for an hour, at 5 pm GMT. The only educational programme to be broadcast in Kurdish, it offered a unique insight to its viewers whilst, at the same time, ensuring the survival and propagation of Kurdish languages. *Zaningehe Med* was programmed by Dr Musa Kaval who was kind enough to facilitate this broadcast. As such I personally owe him my regards and kind wishes.

2 *Sterka Med*, issue two, October 1998, pp 1-2.

3 *Ibid.*

way of producing programmes, one which would represent, more clearly, the station's own specificity. This, to a greater or lesser degree, was a fair point to make and engendered some lively debate amongst the audience who stayed to watch the show. However, as it transpired some time later, there were other less medium specific reasons for the 'quality' of the programme. To put it simply, due to newsworthy developments which were happening in Turkish Kurdistan, Med TV's journalistic responsibilities to a Kurdish diaspora across the footprint of Hotbird 4 (Europe, the Middle East, North Africa and large parts of the former Soviet Union) came before the broadcast of a minority arts and cultural programme in English. In a paradoxical way, our questioner was probably more accurate than he could have imagined.

Some months later, whilst browsing through the Documenta X catalogue, *Politics – Poetics*,⁴ I came by chance across two articles by Jean-François Lyotard on the Algerian crisis. Intrigued by the appearance of these texts, I consulted the introduction to *Documenta X – The Short Guide*. The introduction informed me that:

In the age of globalization and of the sometimes violent social, economic, and cultural transformations it entails, contemporary artistic practice, condemned for their supposed meaninglessness or 'nullity' by the likes of Jean Baudrillard, are in fact a vital source of imaginary and symbolic representations whose diversity is irreducible to the (near) total economic domination of the real.⁵

What struck me here was a certain set of assumptions: the 'likes' of Baudrillard, the 'age of globalization' and the presumption of radical social and cultural transformation. However much I may sympathise with a utopian political role and function for art (whatever that maybe), such assumptions, like the question levelled at Med TV's production standards, are obviously questions of representation themselves. Questions of representation at the level of assumption, at the level of common sense, at the level of reality.

Intriguingly enough, the two articles embedded in the Documenta X catalogue are, like Lyotard's later writings on the sublime and the differend,⁶ about a western inability to represent. In both essays, taken from 'The Social Content of the Algerian Struggle' and 'Algerian Contradictions Exposed' (originally published in 1958 and 1959 respectively) Lyotard questioned both the legitimacy and the possibility for the French Left Wing to account for the complexity and diversity of the Algerian crisis. More specifically he took, as his core critical concern, the inability of the French Left Wing to account for the complexity and diversity of the Algerian crisis without the paradoxical imposition of inadequate, misrepresentative and colonialist terms.⁷

In the light of this, what follows is, from my partial and western perspective, an attempt to re-map some of the co-ordinates which have haunted the perennial problematic of representation and the production of identities and subjectivities in the western tradition. More specifically, I would like to re-address the general relationship between art and politics as they have mutated in and between the cultural shift from analogue to digital forms of production, reproduction and exchange. Finally, I would like to take the opportunity to begin to make sense of, and to offer a way of reading, the use of technology that was Med TV.

4 Catherine David and Jean-François Chevrier et al (eds), *Politics–Poetics, Documenta X, The Book*, Edition Cantz, London, 1997.

5 Catherine David (ed), *Documenta X: Short Guide*, Edition Cantz, London, 1997, p 7.

6 On the subject of the sublime, I am here referring principally to Lyotard's two articles published in *Artforum*. These are 'Presenting the Unpresentable: The Sublime', *Artforum*, vol XX no 8, April 1982, pp 64–70, and 'The Sublime and the Avant-Garde', *Artforum*, vol XXII no 8, April 1984, pp 36–43. There are also clear references to both the 'avant-garde' and the 'sublime' in the appendix to *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* which I will refer to later in the article.

7 Versions of these two articles are also to be found in Jean-François Lyotard, *Political Writings*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1993. In *Politics–Poetics, Documenta X, The Book*, they can be found in the section titled 'Budapest' (which, ironically, is in the section next to 'Algeria') on pages 204–205 and 207–208 respectively.

I

In his paper, 'The Establishing by Metaphysics of the Modern World Picture', originally given to the Society for Aesthetics, Natural Philosophy and Medicine at Freiburg in 1938, Martin Heidegger identified the philosophical production of a modern subjectivity and individualism which, he contended, freed man from the bonds of the Middle Ages.⁸ For Heidegger, however, this was a development which also prevented 'Modern Man' from establishing the true conditions of the 'Modern Age' itself. Here, scientific objectivity, cast in the role of the tool which finally enabled man to undertake the project of accurately representing, became, all too quickly the very guarantee of existential existence:

We first arrive at science as research when and only when truth has been transformed into the certainty of representation. What is to be is for the first time defined as the objectiveness of representing, and truth is first defined as the certainty of representing, in the metaphysics of Descartes.⁹

Within the now familiar discourses of a dominant postmodernity, the sanctity of the Enlightenment subject and the grand or master narratives of modernity have been, we are told, thoroughly deconstructed. Yet the period of modernity itself seems to remain stubbornly resistant to its supposed dissolution into a brave new world of global telecommunications and digital forms of production, reproduction and exchange. Furthermore, the celebratory rhetorics of cybersociety — its speed, progressivism and potential for providing individual liberty and emancipation — are more than reminiscent of the globalising meta-narratives of political modernity. If this is the case, could it be argued that cyberspace is already full, in advance, of a familiar ideological baggage which utopian futurologies have naively consigned to a modern past? In order to address this question I would like, briefly, to examine two seemingly opposing views of the communications age offered by Baudrillard and Zizek.

Jean Baudrillard begins his analysis of third order simulation, or simulacra, by citing a tale from Jorge Luis Borges.¹⁰ It is a tale of loss in which cartographers draw up a map, so accurate in every detail, that it covers every inch of the empire's territory. However, with the decline of the empire, the map itself begins to disintegrate until only a few shards and remnants remain as reminders of an imperial pride that was. For Baudrillard, this fable has come full circle within an age of digital representation. The territory of the real is that which is now dissolving into memory, whereas the map remains as a testimony to the generation of a real without origin — a 'hyperreality' in which territory no longer precedes the map or survives it. For Baudrillard, the object is no longer the necessary *a priori* of representational activity. Representation now measures itself simply in terms of other representations. So Disneyland acts as the false concealment of a reality that no longer is, functioning as the imaginary encapsulation of an ideological America that, in the past, would have acted as the guarantee of the real America which it misrepresents.

Similarly, according to the critic Slavoj Zizek in his *Mapping Ideology*, we are living in an age of Debordian spectacle in which the mechanisms of mass mediated communication structure our perception of reality in advance — rendering it indistinguishable from its aestheticised image. Zizek, however, criticises those who would condemn the ideological edifices of modernity.

8 Re-printed as Martin Heidegger, 'The Age of the World Picture', in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt, Harper and Row, London, 1977, pp 115–154.

9 *Ibid*, p 127.

10 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, Semiotext(e), New York, 1983.

There exists an argument that modernity is incapable of accounting for both the fragmentation of discursive practices into specialist fields and the proliferation of individual perspectives independent of dominant discourses of race, gender, sexuality and politics. But this argument misses the crucial point: that ideologies of bourgeois liberalism have finally materialised themselves within a discursive field which, paradoxically, prides itself on the surrogate rationale that the age of digital communications somehow marks a post-ideological transgression of modernity's universalising problematics.¹¹

For Žižek, the shift to a 'post-ideological' society of media globalisation masks a more subtle shift from the palpable embodiment of bourgeois mechanisms of coercion, domination and control within institutionalised mechanisms of judicial law, regulated economy and their supplementary discourses of moral, political and ethical practices: in short, a move away from the imposition of Althusserian Ideological State Apparatuses and towards the hegemonic infusion of ideology into every nerve and fibre of a self-regulatory, post-capitalist social body.¹² Here, the grand master narratives of modernity function rather like an inversion of Baudrillard's Disneyland — dominant ideologies no longer constitute the identifiable baggage of a utopianist past, but the very condition of a bloodless postmodernity whose celebratory rhetoric of endless diversity collapses all too frequently into endless indifference.

As periodising discourses, both the liberal postmodernity of Baudrillard, and the post-ideological Marxism of Žižek hinge around fundamental cultural shifts which seem to coincide with the shift from analogue to digital forms of communication. It is evident that both are predicated on the loss of a stabilised referent from which more traditional notions of signification and communication can be drawn. For Baudrillard, this is the loss of the real itself, the very rationale of an empiricist will towards cartographic objectivity. For Žižek, it is the loss of an identifiable base of material productive forces which could be mapped through the mediating and (mis)representational mechanisms of an attendant ideological superstructure.

Baudrillard and Žižek's structurally similar though politically opposed conclusions mark the theoretical and philosophical dissolution of the previously distinct categories of subject and object into a cultural impasse which, paradoxically, is haunted at every turn by the spectre of a lost subjectivity. This subjectivity's possible separation from that which it represents acts as the very epistemological predicate of its own ontological status. If this is the case, then modernity must be re-mapped in order to establish why the representational activity of this subjectivity so intransigently resists its representation in third order simulation.

II

It is clear, then, that we cannot read the cultural shift from analogue to digital forms of production, reproduction and exchange simply in terms of a break, however radical, from second to third order forms of signification. Such a history would, in fact, become no more than a heightened illusion by which we sought to paper over the cracks and fissures of an inadequate present. In the light of this, I would like to propose that the projects of mapping our futures, and re-mapping our pasts, be seen less as rupture followed by progress, and more as an act of recurring palimpsest, of erasure in order to re-write. Here 'erasure' would not mean the obliteration or negation of past histories, but a

11 Slavoj Žižek, *Mapping Ideology*, Verso, London, 1994.

12 I am referring here to the introductory comments, made by Slavoj Žižek, in his editorial introduction to *Mapping Ideology*, which concern the mutation, rather than the simple dissolution, of an ideological subject/subjectivity into the framework of postmodern communications technologies: "...all of a sudden we become aware of a For-itself of ideology at work in the very In-itself of extra-ideological actuality... the form of consciousness that fits late-capitalist 'post-ideological' society — the cynical, 'sober' attitude that advocates liberal 'openness' in the matter of 'opinions' (everybody is free to believe whatever she or he wants; this concerns only his or her privacy), disregards pathetic ideological phrases and follows only utilitarian and/or hedonistic motivations — *stricto sensu* remains an ideological attitude: it involves a series of ideological presuppositions (on the relationship between 'values' and 'real life', on personal freedom, etc) that are necessary for the reproduction of existing social relations." *Ibid*, p 15.

dialectical engagement with both the past, as the echoes and cries of former communities, and the ghosts of memory that play and inform our choice of future, which exists for us as the history we build today.

Such strategies are apparent even within the project of European modernity itself, among whose fringes we find a complex of cultural, philosophical and political projects which have sought to critique the failure of modernity to map itself to itself. The rationalist belief in technological progress could neither be reconciled with the apparent fixity of bourgeois relations of production, nor, under the pressures exerted by technological rationalism itself, with the radical self-alienation of a supposedly free subjectivity. In the avant-garde practices of Dada and Surrealism, and the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, this schism manifested itself in the philosophical and sociological separation which had opened up within modernity between a scientifically accountable material life and a contingent and relatively autonomous sphere of cultural activity — a separation which was, by the mid-1930s, becoming increasingly problematic to the propagation of a revolutionary Marxist project under the encroaching shadow of Fascism.

Read in this light, I would argue that Walter Benjamin's 1936 essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'¹³ can be seen as a direct *attack* on the inability of photomechanical reproduction to shatter the bourgeois ideology of art for art's sake. In denying that reproductive technologies are inherently revolutionary in themselves, Benjamin is able to identify the failure of the Socialist project of the Popular Front in terms of its inability to bring art and politics into a dialectical relationship. Instead, Benjamin warns us of the counter-revolutionary condition that has resulted from the elision of technological utopianism with the Enlightenment ideology of progress as a determining force within modernity. As a result, the sanctity of the Enlightenment subject itself, once modernity's ideological cornerstone, had become an integrated part of a social whole to such an extent that a new, radically self-alienated subject could begin to witness its own destruction as aesthetic pleasure. Under such a condition, in which the individual subject came into contradiction with the collective will or identity of a social body that lay beyond its control or intervention, the catastrophic moment of Fascism occurred: an historical moment of destruction in which politics itself had become aestheticised.

However, as Alexander Düttmann has pointed out,¹⁴ the moment of Fascism had, for Benjamin, not been destructive enough. It had set in motion the paradoxical tradition of revolution — a tradition in which the moment of fascism is guaranteed by the repeated revolutionary promise that each new phase of technological progress will radically shift the existing relations of production, distribution and exchange. But that promise can never be fulfilled in so far as fascism, in its actuality, relies upon the reproduction of existing relations of production for its very survival. Because of this, it is the *failure* of photomechanical reproduction to de-stabilise in any genuinely radical way the bourgeois ideology of art for art's sake and, concomitantly, the identification of the self-referential work of art as an indexical guarantee of authorial intent, which illuminates the political function of the ritualistic work of art.¹⁵ The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction becomes that which resists reproduction itself under the conditions of a counter-revolutionary fascism. The ghosts and spectres of an originary historical act haunt every reproduction by their irreproducible absence. It is reproducibility itself, then, which submits the art object to its authenticity by the very denial of its unique presence — its

13 Reprinted in *Illuminations*, (ed) Hannah Arendt, Cape, London, 1970, pp 219–226.

14 Alexander Garcia Düttmann, 'Tradition and Destruction: Walter Benjamin's Politics of Language', in (eds) Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne, *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, Routledge, London, 1994, pp 32–58.

15 Düttmann usefully quotes Benjamin here, "in principal a work of art has always been reproducible" (from 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', op cit, p 218). From here, Düttmann goes on to suggest "Reproduction is not contrary to authenticity. Tradition and traditional reproduction authenticate the work of art by (temporal) distance and (spatial) propagation", *ibid*, p 47. This is useful, I think, because it tends to move beyond the more normative, if not superficial, art historical readings of Benjamin's text. These have a tendency to grant an over simplistic emphasis on the revolutionary nature ascribed to mechanical reproduction and, in the light of this, its ability to politically transgress bourgeois (modernist) notions of the role and function of the artwork. Not only do such readings, ironically, overemphasise the medium specific possibilities of mechanical reproduction, they have a tendency to 'personalise' them as well.

soul is guaranteed only at the precise moment of its loss.

It is at this point, I would contend, that Benjamin's project of re-reading the Marxist revolutionary project — in and through the ritualistic nature of the work of art — bears remarkable similarities to Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology of the same period.¹⁶ Heidegger also saw the work of art as resisting the rationalism of modernity's mapping projects and, as such, worthy of question in and for itself. Like Benjamin, he saw that, if the act of representation or reproduction guarantees the ritualistic authenticity of the work of art in the modern age, then it is through the work of art that the contemporary nature of representation and reproducibility must be established. As such, the work of art became the tool which allowed both to re-map modernity from within.

III

16 For Düttmann, it is a reading of Benjamin's 'Work of Art' text which identifies reproduction as the "gesture which discloses the fundamental trait of the work of art by bringing back out its originary unity with the place" that "draws together this text on technical reproducibility and the lectures that Heidegger devoted to the origin of the work of art", *ibid*, p 49. (Martin Heidegger's 'The Origin of the Work of Art' is reproduced in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Harper and Row, New York, 1971.) More prosaically, both articles date from the same period (1935 for Heidegger's 'The Origin of the Work of Art' and 1936 for Benjamin's text respectively). Also, Benjamin's own preoccupation with Heidegger has frequently been recorded. For example, Susan Buck-Morss (in *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, MIT Press, London, 1991) comments that it was Benjamin's intention "to achieve that phenomenological hermeneutics of the profane world which Heidegger only pretended", p 3. Further to this, Morrs goes on to quote Benjamin's notes concerning a crossroads in the development of modern thought itself prompting a decision must be made as to "its reactionary or revolutionary evaluation. In this sense, the same thing is at work in Surrealism and Heidegger", *ibid*, p 34.

For Heidegger, as we have seen, the modern age was demarcated by its ability to conceive of itself in terms of its own world picture. Modernity also signalled the move from art to aesthetics which, for Heidegger, also meant that the artwork became the mere object of subjective experience and, consequently, an expression of human life. Here, Heidegger was referring to the development of the meaning of the terms 'art' and 'aesthetics' which took place in western philosophy of the 18th century. The European 18th century also established classificatory systems of knowledge, and the now common distinction between the empirical accuracy of science and the subjective and incalculable domain of taste. For Heidegger, this modern distinction has its roots in the earlier establishment of Cartesian ratiocination as the basis for all forms of empirical scientific mapping. It is only with the development of modernity, as that period which can imagine itself as a world picture, that truth becomes determined by scientific certainty and that certainty itself comes to be located in the subject which measures.

In the light of this, the realm of the aesthetic, from Kant onward, becomes key to defending the concept of individual subjectivity from its own imminent collapse into processes of scientific representation. In other words, if a Cartesian subject, whose presence to itself is predicated upon the exteriority and otherness of that which it measures and represents, regresses, via a solipsistic and narcissistic twist, into the ultimate subject of its own operations of mapping, then how can this subject guarantee, any longer, the truth of its own objectivity? It is at this philosophical juncture, that art, the aesthetic and the sublime (in the Kantian sense of an experience which lies beyond our means of representation but, however, requires us to try) begin to function as the palpable borders of a reductive positivism which, if it were to encroach any further on such matters, would simultaneously deny its own possibility of meaning.

Heidegger wanted to trace back the roots of this impasse — the separation of idealism and materialism in the respective philosophical programmes of Plato and Aristotle — in order to think through the ontological nature of Being in a way that is not made possible by either school of thought. He did this by conceiving of both metaphysical idealism and scientific technologism as a 'forgetting' of being — a forgetting which has led to the alienation of modern man from himself within a barbaric, consumerist society. The irreducibility of the authentic work of art marked, for Heidegger, the resistance of Being itself

to the representative and reproductive machinations of Cartesian self-identification.¹⁷ So the thinker and the poet became, for him, those through whom Being represents itself or is spoken — a condition of responsibility which is opposed to the invasive discourses of a predatory science.

The work of art then comes to signal, for both Benjamin and Heidegger, resistance to a form of reproduction. The artwork promises, in this denial, the possibility of another, yet unimagined form of communicability, one which would destroy the 'tradition' of a reproducibility or mapping which is, of necessity, predicated on the supplementary *a priori* exile of bourgeois subjectivity. That subjectivity that, as we have seen, remains secure only in so far as it lacks identity with that which it must produce. In short, the resistance of the authentic work of art is a truly destructive and revolutionary cry for the collapsing of high and low culture into a radically new form of reproducibility and communicability which would finally re-admit a truly permeable subjectivity into the discursive matrix of its own identity.

But this radical cry from the 1930s, this utopian resistance of the work of art in the modern age of industrialised analogue production, reproduction and exchange is dispersed, all too quickly, across the complex network of choices and refusals which characterise the cultural shift to the Post. In the period since 1945, as we have already seen implied in the periodisations of Baudrillard and Žižek, the ideological function of representation, in the form of an emancipatory digital dream which needs no referent, begins to mutate into a nightmare of third order simulation which is haunted, in advance, by the ghost of a subjectivity which it cannot afford to kill. Under such conditions, how would one begin to reconcile the relationship between art and politics in the digital age?

In order to identify more clearly some of the problematics inherent in such a broad, complex and fundamental question, I would like to return briefly to the catalogue to Documenta X. More specifically, I would like to quote the final paragraph of rationale/disclaimer which is to be found on the inside of the book's dust jacket.

This book is necessarily incomplete, and necessarily biased by the subjectivity of those who contributed to it. Even more, it is internally fissured by the attitudes of utopian or critical intransigence which characterise the relations of art to the real.¹⁸

This is not to say that I don't find the catalogue either good or interesting. On the contrary I find it both. What I am trying to point to is a set of contradictory conditions whereby 'intransigence', either utopian or critical, is used to characterise *relations* of art to the real. In doing so, the relative separation of art and life is critically maintained. However the difference may now be that, rather than occupying a privileged position in cultural discourse, it is an antinomy which has simply become one amongst others. It is under these conditions that I want to return to the consideration of Med TV.

IV

While others worry about the media destroying national identity, MED-TV is proving that the opposite can be the case, even in the worst of circumstances. It is a remarkable unifying force, bringing together — perhaps in itself creating — a nation.¹⁹

17 This question is discussed at length by Heidegger in 'The Origin of the Work of Art', *op cit*.

18 Attributed to 'the editors', *Politics-Poetics, Documenta X, The Book*, *op cit*.

19 Nick Ryan, 'Television Nation', in *Wired*, March 1997, p 92.

As stated at the beginning of this article, Med TV was a minority language satellite TV station which had its main office based in London's Regent Street and its major production studios in Belgium. Privately owned and funded by the Kurdish Foundation Trust (an organisation that funds educative and relief projects in the Kurdish community around the world) and private investors, under the strict guidelines of the UK's Independent Television Commission (ITC), Med TV was a unique international enterprise, a shoestring operation relying heavily on volunteers but broadcasting across Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. Med brought Kurdish broadcasting to the scattered Kurdish nation.

In the 1930s, Britain and France created a set of borders which divide Kurdistan into four, splitting Turkish Kurds from Kurds in Iran, Iraq and Syria. Limiting the use of the Kurdish languages has been part of the policy of those governments which oppress the Kurds. On the 30th of March, 1995, Med TV began to broadcast the images of singers from the Yerevan radio, whom many Kurds had heard but never seen. Prior to this date, Yerevan radio was the only regular broadcasting that Kurds used to be able to hear in their own tongue. Transmitted from Armenia in the days of Soviet control, the station mainly transmitted news of cold war politics but it also broadcast Kurdish traditional music. Although Med TV had called neither a press conference, nor issued any press release, on the first day of its broadcast, according to former director Hikmet Tabak, "by word of mouth Kurds were waiting in front of their TV in anticipation".²⁰

As the sole existing Kurdish language broadcaster, its objective was the promotion of Kurdish language and culture. As such, Med TV sought to provide a familiar broadcast diet of news, entertainment and cultural programming to a dispossessed Kurdish diaspora. For Tabak, some of the issues that were raised by Med TV highlighted the problems of a region which is still struggling to define its relationship to western powers and the technology of the West. Satellite technology, for him, allowed Kurds to re-examine their past in a way they never thought possible. As Dr Amir Hassanpour of the University of Toronto has commented "Med TV has created an audiovisual culture, through satellite technology, that has crossed borders and created a national, or rather, a transnational audience".²¹

Med TV's objectives were neither to circumscribe nor to contain an identity that was geographically reducible to a nation or state: sovereignty has been denied historically to the Kurdish peoples. Instead, Estella Schmid, co-ordinator of the Kurdistan Solidarity Committee, said in a 1999 press interview "we didn't have a homeland but we had a Kurdish nation on the airwaves".²² In this sense, at least, Med TV functioned as the inversion of Baudrillard's map of hyperreality. For Baudrillard, the territory of the real has faded away, leaving us, as a society, mourning the loss of a referent which had once anchored our knowledge and saved us from being washed into a sea of meaningless spectacle. Med TV's function, on the contrary, was to produce just those political identities, and weave those referents across the airwaves, whose reality was denied to them by external forces. How can one begin, even speculatively, to represent this complex project which, by defying the technological collapse of identity into endless digital indifference, itself defies reduction to the colonial imposition of an abstract term or political predicate. And how, in the digital age, can one begin to approach terms such as 'identity' and 'referent' without equally running the risk of a politically conservative return to repressive modernist paradigms? In order to begin this undertaking,

20 Hikmet Tabak, Director of Med TV, from an unpublished conference paper delivered on September 3rd, 1998, at the Ninth International Symposium on Electronic Arts, Liverpool Art School, Liverpool John Moores University, UK.

21 Ibid.

22 Quoted by Nick Cohen, 'Little Biggam Man', *The Guardian*, 19th May, 1999.

I want to examine some writings of Jean-François Lyotard, concerning the sublime, the avant-garde and the postmodern condition, to test their critical and political legitimacy in accounting for the presentable, the unrepresentable and the political in the digital age.

V

Writing in 'Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?'²³ Lyotard attempts to address directly the problematic of sustaining "the severe re-examination which postmodernity imposes on the thought of the Enlightenment",²⁴ while simultaneously avoiding the familiar collapse of postmodern diversity into the fragmentation of eclecticism. He does this by conceiving postmodernity as a form of resistance. Principally, this resistance was to be applied to any type of neo-conservative manoeuvre which sought to dismiss the technical radicalism of modernity and to re-impose an ideological link between language and an external referent. However, Lyotard also sought to transcend re-appropriations of modernism, such as those found in Habermas, whereby the 'gap' between cognitive, ethical, political and aesthetic discourses could be bridged by a new kind of experience, or aesthetics, capable of opening up the way to a unified experience. In order to do this Lyotard, like Benjamin, began by re-assessing what he saw as the pivotal impact of reproductive technologies on the means of representation in the 19th and 20th centuries. Equally, like the author of 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', Lyotard saw no critical value residing in the revolutionary nature of the technologies themselves, but only in the challenge they raised to the regulatory discourse of representational realism.

Industrial photography and cinema will be superior to painting and the novel whenever the objective is to stabilize the referent, to arrange it according to a point of view which endows it with a recognizable meaning, to reproduce the syntax and vocabulary which enable the addressee to decipher images quickly, and so to arrive easily at the consciousness of his own identity as well as the approval he thereby receives from others — since the structures of images and sequences constitute a communication code among all of them.²⁵

This argument enables Lyotard, if somewhat oversimplistically, to identify consensus as the enemy of avant-garde radicalism and to place realism as a tool in the repressive hands of totalitarian party politics. Here any attack on experimentation is, when undertaken in the name of the party, inherently reactionary. Likewise, any aesthetic judgements made under such conditions of general consensus would be formal judgements, in the Kantian sense, according to which the only decision to be made would be whether or not a particular work conforms to an accepted standard of beauty. However, for Lyotard, when the power is no longer the totalitarian party but capital, the transavantgardism and eclecticism of such critics as Achille Bonito Oliva and Charles Jencks become the solution. Here art begins to imitate the fragmentary nature of its patron's tastes and, in the period of 'anything goes', art becomes assessed by profit. For Lyotard, such realism accommodates all needs and art itself becomes threatened not only by cultural policy but by the whims of the market.

In the same way, for Lyotard, science under capitalism is equally culturally

23 Reproduced in Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1991, pp 71–82.

24 *Ibid*, p 73.

25 *Ibid*, p 74.

constrained. Science does not match up to its ideological gloss of freedom and innovation, but produces objects and initiatives whose function is measured solely in terms of improved performance. Therefore, scientific developments within capitalism merely convey the rule which supports their own possibility — the rule that there is no reality (once again) unless testified to as a consensus between parties. Such consensus, necessary for the propagation of science, technology, art and capital as ‘performance’ is, for Lyotard, a flight from the questioning of Enlightenment modernity which made scientific innovation a possibility in the first instance. For Lyotard, “Modernity, in whatever age it appears, cannot exist without a shattering of belief and without discovery of the ‘lack of reality’ of reality, together with the invention of other realities”.²⁶ This ‘lack of reality’ we are told, is close to the Kantian sublime and present in the negativity of the avant-garde.

For Meaghan Morris²⁷ there are obvious critical, theoretical and political drawbacks to a postmodern re-institution of a term more frequently associated with Kant and Burke. Not the least of these is that Lyotard, in denouncing the “wanton yet dreary limbo of our times” could himself be accused of initiating a “(revived) Methodist revival”. How else, asks Morris, could we initially receive Lyotard’s position as being anything other than “both fundamentalist, and Protestant”?²⁸ However, Morris resists simply circumscribing the sublime as a set of contemporary art discourses in Lyotard’s name. Instead, she sets about a critical re-examination of the political potential of the sublime itself as a discourse on historical experience to which Lyotard has contributed. In doing so, Morris is able to re-address Lyotard’s use of the sublime in the broader context of his philosophical work.

Initially, Morris likens Lyotard’s use of the ‘sublime’ as “lack of reality” and the invention of new realities to the role and function of a parallogism in science or philosophy. Parallogism is a formal trope in philosophy, “the unexpected move in a politics of opinion”, “the traditional imperative to break with tradition”. Morris argues that Lyotard distinguishes the figure of ‘true parallogism’ as “a ‘move’ of formal fallacy made to enable further thought and thus a displacement in the pragmatics of knowledge, from ‘innovation’ understood as a requirement of a given system to improve its efficiency”.²⁹ By appropriating for postmodernism a gesture classically associated with the avant-garde, Lyotard has, for Morris, achieved two key critical aims. First, the traditional role and function of the avant-garde becomes secured even at a time of ‘post’ rhetorics which predicate themselves on an escape from such modernist traditions. Second, and more crucially, Lyotard conserves the possibility of rejecting the academicisation of art which will, henceforth, become called modernism. This is achieved by Lyotard’s insistence that the sublime avant-garde act, as a moment of historical rupture, is the recurring moment of postmodernism. At this moment, that which has come before can be understood with the certainty of a consensus and, as such, becomes consigned to the modern historical past. The advantage of this, for Morris, is that it undermines the persistent normative opposition made between *modernism* as a problematic of self-reference, purism, ontological preoccupation and concern with media specificity, and *postmodernism* (avant-gardism) as an insistence on problems of reference. The disadvantage of this, for Morris, is that it runs the risk of turning the avant-garde gesture into a “rough equivalent of the Human Condition for the age of incredulity” and turning “the whole matter of ‘Postmodernism’ into an elaborate joke”.³⁰

In the face of such ontological and humanistic difficulties, Morris turns to

26 Ibid, p 77.

27 Meaghan Morris, ‘Postmodernity and Lyotard’s Sublime’ in *The Pirates Fiancée: Feminism, Reading, Postmodernism*, Verso, London, 1988, pp 213–239.

28 Ibid, pp 216–217.

29 Ibid, p 235.

30 Ibid, p 236.

Lyotard's earlier and more developed writings on the unrepresentable, the indeterminate and the inexpressible, concerned more with issues of reference and the strategic definitions of reality than with inspiration, self-expression or the ineffable. Morris specifies the Lyotard of *The Differend* as prepared to defend the reality of the Holocaust in the face of revisionist historians like Robert Faurisson, who claim that it did not take place. However, Morris does not view this as a political and historical retreat to common sense in Lyotard's work. Instead, Morris argues that, for Lyotard "the annihilation named Auschwitz now requires a formal transformation of what counts as history and as reality, and in our understanding of reference and the function of the proper name".³¹ It is now those historians who argue that the Holocaust never happened who have pushed common sense notions of reality and evidence to an extreme. Rather than argue that annihilation included the annihilation of evidence, they argue that if there is now no evidence it is because it didn't happen. As Morris points out, this is an argument which may confuse anyone who associates reality-values with the Left, and formalism with explicit or implicit conservatism.

It is at this point, for Lyotard, that the differend itself becomes one of the names of incommensurability. If no common ground can be found in a dispute between two or more parties, and the imposition of a final ruling may wrong one of the parties by the application of inappropriate criteria, then victimisation is the result. From this basic premise, as Morris points out, Lyotard rapidly expands the scope of the differend by subjecting it to constant enquiry. The differend becomes constitutive of victimisation if a victim (like those of the Holocaust) has not only been wronged but has also been deprived of the means to prove it. The differend becomes the lack of ability to prove that a wrong ever took place because the terms of what counts as proof have been changed, withdrawn, or are simply deemed inapplicable to a particular situation. The differend becomes that which cannot be presented, that which cannot be expressed, that which hovers in the spaces between legitimised discourses and carries with it the imperative to have it said. It becomes, for Lyotard, the imperative for historians to break the rules of their cognitive regimes and to listen to that which cannot be presented within their own reality.

VI

On the 23rd April 1999, the Independent Television Commission (ITC), Britain's regulatory body for television and radio, formally served Med TV a final notice revoking its licence to broadcast. The statute was to come into effect 28 days later and, until then, the service was to remain suspended. Med TV's licence had originally been suspended on 22nd March 1999, under Section 45A of the 1990 Broadcasting Act, following four broadcasts which allegedly included inflammatory statements encouraging 'acts of violence in Turkey and elsewhere'. According to the ITC, these broadcasts were "likely to encourage or incite crime or lead to disorder"³² counter to the 1990 and 1996 Broadcasting Acts. According to the diplomatic editor of *The Guardian* newspaper, the closure of Med TV followed repeated accusations by the Turkish government that Med TV supported the Kurdish Workers Party or PKK, whose leader, Abdulha Ocalan, was seized in Kenya earlier in the year and returned to Turkey to stand trial for treason.³³ Other reasons for the station's closure widely reported in the UK media included the suggestion of conflict of interest: Sir

31 Ibid, p 218, citing Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges van den Abbeele, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1988.

32 From 'ITC Revokes Med TV's Licence', the ITC's website, <http://www.itc.org.uk>, 23 April 1999.

33 Ian Black, 'Kurdish Anger as TV Station Closed Down for Incitement', *The Guardian*, 23 March 1999.

34 For example, see David Pallister "Hypocrisy" protest at BAe meeting', *The Guardian*, 28 April 1999.

35 Reprinted as 'Messages in a Bottle', in Slavoj Žižek, *Mapping Ideology*, op cit, pp 34–45.

36 Ibid, p 36.

Robin Biggam, Chairman of the ITC is also a board member of British Aerospace, who have extensive contracts with Turkey.³⁴ Moreover, Turkey was to be an important NATO ally in the renewed conflict in the Balkans during the same period. However, judging the political, social and economic legitimacy of Med TV's closure is not at all the point here. To deal in such broad terms as 'Turkey', 'PKK' and 'treason' — the necessary language game of political journalism — is exactly to fall into the trap, outlined by Lyotard in his articles on Algeria, of enforcing abstract representations on a diffuse and complex situation which defies the imposition of external consensus.

Med TV was a unique set of communicative possibilities. It provided an identity to a diasporan, stateless nation. This identity was not fixed, but was the shifting and developing result of a dynamic and ongoing debate held through the airwaves and across the traditionally mapped inscriptions of national borders. It would be simple enough to describe this activity as sublime, on the grounds that its scale and complexity defies the limited powers of description of any one commentator, but that would be colonialism in the name of the avant-garde. Rather, I want to suggest that in ensuing debates surrounding Med TV and any other communicative initiatives — be they political, artistic or both — we need not only to assess the measurable outcomes of audience figures and political influence, but also to analyse the necessity of constantly re-negotiating the borders between terms like sublimity and representation. Equally, we must also remain alert to the voice of the differend (or however we choose to describe it): to the cultural, ideological and political gap where Med TV, and the voice of the overlooked and dispossessed, can sometimes be heard most clearly in their struggle to have something said. Finally, we must also be constantly and critically vigilant when giving substance, in any language of representation, to the unrepresentable and the unspeakable in the futures we wish to build.

Theodor Adorno pointed to this when, in his original manuscript for *Minima Moralia*, he speculated on the conception and function of the term genocide. For Adorno the unspeakable, when named and codified in the International Declaration of Human Rights, "was made, for the sake of protest, commensurable".³⁵ Adorno contemplated what would happen if the United Nations were to debate the subject of whether or not a new atrocity should come under the heading of genocide. Would such a decision imply that member states should intervene on behalf of the international community? If so, would such an intervention be against their own interests? If this were the case, would a debate ensue and, as a result of the difficulty of applying the term genocide in practice, would the term be removed from the statutes altogether? Soon afterwards, Adorno speculated, there would be "inside page headlines in journealese: East Turkestan genocide programme nears completion".³⁶