

# The Future of the Image



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## Are Some Things Unrepresentable?

The issue raised by my title does not call for a straightforward yes or no. Instead, it bears on this question: under what conditions might it be said that certain events cannot be represented? Under what conditions can an unrepresentable phenomenon of this kind be given a specific conceptual shape? Obviously, this line of inquiry is not neutral. It is motivated by a certain intolerance for an inflated use of the notion of the unrepresentable and a constellation of allied notions: the unrepresentable, the unthinkable, the untreatable, the irredeemable. This inflated usage subsumes under a single concept all sorts of phenomena, processes and notions, ranging from Moses's ban on representation, via the Kantian sublime, the Freudian primal scene, Duchamp's *Grand verre* or Malevitch's *White Square on White Background*, to the Shoah; and it surrounds them all with the same aura of holy terror. The issue then becomes how, and under what conditions, it is possible to construct such a concept, which proposes to cover all spheres of experience univocally.

I would like to introduce this general question starting from a narrower inquiry that focuses on representation as a regime of thinking about art. What precisely is being said when it is maintained that certain entities, events or situations cannot be represented by artistic means? Two different things, it seems to me. First, that it is impossible to make the essential character

of the thing in question present. It cannot be brought before our eyes; nor can a representative commensurate with it be found. A form of material presentation that is adequate to its idea; or, conversely, a scheme of intelligibility equal to its material power – these are not to be found. This first impossibility thus posits an incapacity on the part of art.

The second, by contrast, challenges art's exercise of its power. It says that a thing cannot be represented by artistic means on account of the very nature of those means, of three characteristic properties of artistic presentation. Firstly, the latter is characterized by its surplus of presence, which betrays the singularity of the event or situation, recalcitrant as it is to any plenary material representation. Secondly, this surplus of material presence has as its correlate a status of unreality, which removes from the thing represented its weight of existence. Finally, this interplay of surplus and subtraction operates according to a specific mode of address that delivers the thing represented over to affects of pleasure, play or distance which are incompatible with the gravity of the experience it contains. Some things, it is then said, fall outside the competence of art. They cannot adapt to the surplus of presence and subtraction of existence peculiar to it, and which in Platonic terms define its character as simulacrum.

To the simulacrum Plato counter-poses the straightforward tale, one without artifice, removed from the interplay of enhanced presence and diminished existence, and likewise free of doubt as to the identity of its teller. It is this contrast between straightforward tale and mimetic artifice which today governs the prestige accorded to the word of the witness in its two forms. The first of these esteems the straightforward tale, which does not constitute art but simply conveys an individual's experience. The second, by contrast, regards 'the

witness's narrative' as a new mode of art. This involves not so much recounting the event as witnessing to a *there was* that exceeds thought, not only through its own particular surplus, but because the peculiarity of the *there was* in general is to exceed thought. Thus, in Lyotard in particular, the existence of events that exceed what can be thought calls for an art that witnesses to the unthinkable in general, to the essential discrepancy between what affects us and such of it as our thinking can master. It is then the peculiarity of a new mode of art – sublime art – to record the trace of the unthinkable.

An intellectual configuration has thus developed that revokes representation in favour of either a Platonic plain tale or a new art of the sublime, placed under the patronage of Burke and Kant. It pursues two lines. On the one hand, it argues for the internal impossibility of representation, the fact that a certain type of object leaves representation in ruins by shattering any harmonious relationship between presence and absence, between the material and the intelligible. This impossibility therefore appeals from the representative mode of art to a different kind of art. On the other hand, it argues for its indignity. It then places itself in a quite different framework – a Platonic ethical framework that does not involve the notion of art, but where what is judged is simply *images*, where what is examined is simply their relationship to their origin (are they worthy of what they represent?) and their destination (what effects do they produce on those who receive them?).

Thus, two logics become intertwined. The first concerns the distinction between different regimes of thinking about art – that is, different forms of the relationship between presence and absence, the material and the intelligible, exhibition and signification. The second does not involve art as such, but only different types of imitation, different types of image. The

intertwining of these two heterogeneous logics has a very precise effect: it transforms problems of the adjustment of representative distance into problems of the impossibility of representation. Proscription is then slipped into this impossibility, while being disclaimed, presented as a simple consequence of the properties of the object.

My aim is to understand this intertwining and try to disentangle it. In order to separate out the elements, I shall start with a straightforward case of unrepresentability – one involving an adjustment of representation. I have already had occasion to analyze the problems encountered by Corneille in composing his *Oedipe*. Sophocles' Oedipus was literally unrepresentable on the French stage for three reasons: the physical horror provoked by Oedipus's gouged-out eyes; a surplus of oracles, which anticipate the unfolding of the plot; and the absence of a love story.<sup>1</sup> I tried to show that what was involved was not merely the female sensitivities invoked by Corneille and the empirical relationship with the audience of his time. It concerns representation as such. It concerns *mimesis* as a relationship between two terms: a *poiesis* and an *aesthesis* – that is, a way of making and an economy of affects. The blinded eyes, the excessive obviousness of the oracles, and the absence of love interest pertain in effect to one and the same imbalance. On the one hand, there is a surplus of the visible, which is not subordinated to speech, which imposes itself. On the other hand, there is a surplus of the intelligible. The oracles say too much. There is too much knowledge – knowledge that arrives prematurely and overarches what the tragic action should only gradually unveil, through the operation of peripeteia. Between what is visible and what is intelligible there is a missing link, a specific type of interest capable of ensuring a suitable relationship between the seen and the

unseen, the known and the unknown, the expected and the unexpected; and also of adjusting the relationship of distance and proximity between stage and auditorium.

### WHAT REPRESENTATION MEANS

This example helps us understand what *representation*, as a specific mode of art, means. The representative constraint is in effect threefold. It is first of all a dependency of the visible on speech. In it the essence of speech is to make seen, to order the visible by deploying a quasi-visibility wherein two operations are fused: an operation of substitution (which places 'before our eyes' what is removed in space or time) and an operation of exhibition (which makes what is intrinsically hidden from sight, the inner springs motivating characters and events, visible). Oedipus's blinded eyes are not merely a disgusting spectacle for ladies. They represent the brutal imposition in the field of vision of something that exceeds the subordination of the visible to the making-visible of speech. And this excess reveals the normal dual operation of representation. On the one hand, speech makes visible, refers, summons the absent, reveals the hidden. But this making-visible in fact operates through its own failing, its own restraint. This is the paradox explained by Burke in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. The descriptions of Hell and the angel of evil in *Paradise Lost* produce a sublime impression because they do not allow us to see the forms they evoke and affect to show us. Conversely, when painting renders the monsters that besiege St. Anthony's retreat visible to us, the sublime is transformed into the grotesque. This is because speech 'makes visible', but only in accordance with a regime of under-determination, by not 'really' making visible.

In its ordinary unfolding, representation employs this underdetermination, while masking it. But the graphic representation of monsters or the exhibition of the blind man's gouged eyes brutally undoes this tacit compromise in speech between *making visible* and *not making visible*.

Corresponding to this adjustment of vision is a second adjustment, which concerns the relationship between knowing and not knowing, acting and suffering. This is the second aspect of the representative constraint. Representation is an ordered deployment of meanings, an adjusted relationship between what is understood or anticipated and what comes as a surprise, according to the paradoxical logic analyzed by Aristotle's *Poetics*. This logic of gradual, thwarted revelation excludes the abrupt emergence of speech that says too much, speaks too soon, and makes too much known. This is indeed what characterizes Sophocles's *Oedipus rex*. Aristotle makes it his model of the logic of dénouement through peripeteia and recognition. But this logic is itself caught up in a constant game of hunt the thimble with the truth. In it, Oedipus embodies the figure of the one who wants to know beyond the bounds of what is reasonable, who identifies knowledge with the unlimited character of his power. Now, this madness immediately marks Oedipus out as the only one whom the oracle and the blemish can concern. Confronting him there is, conversely, a character – Tiresias – who knows, who refuses to say what he knows, but nevertheless says it without saying it, and thus prompts in Oedipus a conversion of the desire to know into a refusal to hear.

Accordingly, prior to any ordered logic of peripeteia, we have an interaction between wanting to know, not wanting to say, saying without saying, and refusing to hear. A whole *pathos* of knowledge characterizes the ethical world of tragedy.

This is the world of Sophocles, but it is also the world of Plato – one in which the point of mortals knowing things that are the preserve of the Immortals is in question. This is the universe from which Aristotle sought to extract tragedy. And in it lay the construction of the order of representation: transferring the ethical *pathos* of knowledge into a stable relationship between a *poiesis* and an *aesthesis*; between an autonomous arrangement of actions and the bringing into operation of affects specific to the representative situation and it alone.

Now, Corneille believes that Aristotle did not succeed in this endeavour. Oedipus's *pathos* of knowledge exceeds Aristotle's plot of knowledge. There is an excess of knowledge that thwarts the ordered unfolding of significations and revelations. Correlatively, there is an excess of pathos that thwarts the free operation of the spectator's affects. Corneille has literally to deal with this unrepresentable thing. He therefore strives to reduce it, to render the story and character representable. To adjust the relationship between *mimesis*, *poiesis* and *aesthesis*, he takes two negative steps and one positive step. He places off-stage the undue visibility of the blinded eyes, but also the excessive knowledge of Tiresias, whose oracles are only reported. But above all, he subjects the *pathos* of knowledge to a logic of action by palliating Sophocles's third 'defect': the lack of love interest. He invents for Oedipus a sister by the name of Dirce, daughter of Laius, who has been deprived of the throne by the election of Oedipus. And he invents a suitor for her, Theseus. Given that Theseus has doubts about his parentage, and Dirce considers herself responsible for the voyage that cost her father his life, that makes three real or potential children of Laius; three characters whom the oracle might refer to; and, above all, according to Corneille's logic, three people who dispute the honour

of that identification. The relationship between knowledge-effects and *pathos*-effects is thereby subjected to a specific form of intelligibility: the causal connection between actions. By identifying the two causalities which Aristotle separated – that of actions and that of characters – Corneille succeeds in reducing the ethical *pathos* of the tragedy to the logic of the dramatic action.

Thus, the 'empirical' issue of the audience and that of the autonomous logic of representation are linked. And this is the third aspect of the representative constraint. It defines a certain adjustment of reality. This takes the form of a dual accommodation. On the one hand, the entities of representation are fictional entities, exempt from any judgement of existence, and thus released from the Platonic question about their ontological consistency and ethical exemplariness. But these *fictional* beings are none the less *beings of resemblance*, beings whose feelings and actions must be shared and appreciated. The 'invention of actions' is both a boundary and a passage between two things: the events, at once possible and incredible, which tragedy links; and the recognizable and shareable feelings, volitions and conflicts of will that it offers the spectator. It is a boundary and passage between the enjoyment of suspense in fiction and the actual pleasure of recognition. And through this dual mechanism of distance and identification, it is also a boundary and passage between stage and auditorium. This relationship is not empirical. It is constitutive. The preferred site of representation is the theatre, a space of exhibition entirely given over to presence, but held by this very presence to a double restraint: the restraint of the visible under the sayable and of meanings and affects under the power of action – an action whose reality is identical to its unreality.

One author's difficulties with his subject therefore enable us to define a specific regime of art that exclusively merits the name of the representative regime. This system adjusts the relations between what can be seen and what can be said, between the unfolding of schemas of intelligibility and the unfolding of material manifestations. From it we may deduce that if there are things which cannot be represented, it is precisely in this regime. It is what defines compatibilities and incompatibilities in principle, conditions of receivability, and criteria of non-receivability. Thus it is that the character of Oedipus, although it satisfies in exemplary fashion the Aristotelian criterion of the prince who suffers reversals of fortune in accordance with a paradoxical logical sequence, proves 'unrepresentable' for Corneille, because it distorts the system of relations that defines, more fundamentally, the representative order itself.

But such unrepresentability is doubly relative. It is relative to the representative order, but it is also relative to the very heart of this order. If Oedipus's character and actions are inappropriate, they can be changed. And this is what Corneille does, by inventing a new fictional logic and new characters. This not only makes Oedipus representable. It makes this representation a masterpiece of representative logic. The audience, Corneille tells us, reckoned that of his tragedies it was the one which contained the most art. In fact, none of the others offers such a perfect combination of inventions aimed at integrating something that did not fall within the representative framework into it.

The result is that this tragedy is never staged today. Not by chance, but precisely because of this excess of art, this perfection of a certain art and the presupposition that grounds it. This presupposition is that some subjects are suitable for

artistic presentation, while others are not; that some are appropriate for a particular artistic genre, while others are inappropriate. And it is also the presupposition that a series of changes can be made which render the inappropriate subject appropriate and establish the appropriateness that was wanting. The whole art of Corneille's *Oedipe* rests on this dual presupposition. If his play is no longer staged, it is because our perception of art has, since Romanticism, rested on strictly converse presuppositions that define not a particular school or sensibility, but a new regime of art.

### WHAT ANTI-REPRESENTATION MEANS

In this new regime, there are no longer appropriate subjects for art. As Flaubert put it, 'Yvetot is as good as Constantinople' and the adulteries of a farmer's daughter are as good as those of Theseus, Oedipus or Clytemnestra. There are no longer rules of appropriateness between a particular subject and a particular form, but a general availability of all subjects for any artistic form whatsoever. On the other hand, there are certain characters and certain stories that cannot be altered at will, because they are not simply available 'subjects', but founding myths. Yvetot and Constantinople can be rendered equivalent, but one cannot do anything one likes with Oedipus. For the mythical figure of Oedipus, which encapsulates everything the representative regime rejected, is emblematic of all the properties that the new regime of art – the *aesthetic* regime – attributes to artistic phenomena. What in fact is the 'disorder' of Oedipus, which ruined the balanced distribution of knowledge-effects and *pathos*-effects specific to the representative regime of art? It consists in the fact that he is the one who knows and does not know, who acts absolutely

and suffers absolutely. It is precisely this double identity of opposites that the aesthetic revolution counter-poses to the representative model, by subsuming artistic phenomena under the new concept of aesthetics. On the one hand, it counter-poses to the norms of representative action an absolute power of *making* on the part of the artwork, pertaining to its own law of production and self-demonstration. But on the other, it identifies the power of this unconditioned production with absolute passivity. This identity of opposites is summarized in Kant's theory of genius. Genius is the active power of nature, opposed to any norm, which is its own norm. But a genius is also someone who does not know what he is doing or how he does it. What is deduced from this in Schelling and Hegel is a conceptualization of art as the unity of a conscious process and an unconscious process. The aesthetic revolution establishes this identity of knowledge and ignorance, acting and suffering, as the very definition of art. In it the artistic phenomenon is identified as the identity, in a physical form, of thought and non-thought, of the activity of a will that wishes to realize its idea and of a non-intentionality, a radical passivity of material being-there. Oedipus is quite naturally the hero of this regime of thinking, which identifies artistic phenomena as intellectual phenomena in as much as they are modes of a thought that is immanent in its other and inhabited by its other in turn.

The opposite of the representative regime in art is thus not a regime of non-representation, in the sense of non-figuration. A convenient tale identifies the anti-representative break as a transition from realism of representation to non-figuration: a form of painting that no longer offers resemblances, a literature that has wrested its intransitive character from the language of communication. It thus aligns the anti-representative revolution with some general destiny of 'modernity', either by

identifying the latter with the positive principle of a generalized autonomy which anti-figurative emancipation forms part of; or by identifying it with the negative phenomenon of a loss of experience, of which the retreat from figuration is the inscription.

This fable is convenient, but it is inconsistent. For the representative regime in art is not one in which art's task is to fashion resemblances. It is a regime in which resemblances are subject to the triple constraint that we have noted: a model of visibility of speech that at the same time organizes a certain restraint of the visible; an adjustment of the relations between knowledge-effects and *pathos*-effects, governed by the primacy of the 'action', identifying the poem or painting with a story; and a regime of rationality peculiar to fiction, which exempts its speech acts from the normal criteria of authenticity and utility of words and images, subjecting them instead to intrinsic criteria of verisimilitude and appropriateness. This separation between the rationale of fictions and the rationale of empirical facts is one of the representative regime's main elements.

We can deduce from this that the break with representation in art is not emancipation from resemblance, but the emancipation of resemblance from that triple constraint. In the anti-representative break, pictorial non-figuration is preceded by something seemingly quite different: novelistic realism. But what is novelistic realism? It is the emancipation of resemblance from representation. It is the loss of representative proportions and proprieties. Such is the disruption that critics of Flaubert denounced at the time under the heading of realism: everything is now on the same level, the great and the small, important events and insignificant episodes, human beings and things. Everything is equal, equally representable.

And this 'equally representable' spells the ruin of the representative system. Contrasting with the representative scene of visibility of speech is an equality of the visible that invades discourse and paralyzes action. For what is newly visible has very specific properties. It does not make visible; it imposes presence. But this presence is itself singular. On the one hand, speech is no longer identified with the gesture that makes visible. It exhibits its particular opacity, the under-determined character of its power to 'make visible'. And such under-determination becomes the very mode of material presentation specific to art. At the same time, however, speech is invaded by a specific property of the visible: its passivity. The performance of speech is struck by this passivity, this inertia of the visible that comes to paralyze action and absorb meanings.

This is the change at stake in the controversy over description in the nineteenth century. The new novel – the novel called realist – is criticized for a primacy of description over action. The primacy of description is in fact that of a form of the visible which does not make visible, which deprives action of its powers of intelligibility – that is, of its powers of ordered distribution of knowledge-effects and *pathos*-effects. This power is absorbed by the apathetic *pathos* of description that merges wills and meanings in a succession of little perceptions where activity and passivity can no longer be distinguished. Aristotle contrasted the *kath'olon* – the organic totality – of poetic plot to the *kath'ekaston* of the historian, who follows the empirical succession of events. In the 'realist' use of resemblance, this hierarchy is overturned. The *kath'olon* is absorbed into the *kath'ekaston*, absorbed into little perceptions, each of which is affected by the power of the whole, in as much as in each the power of inventive, signifying thought is equal to the passivity of sensation. Thus the novelistic realism regarded by

some as the acme of representative art is quite the opposite. It is the revocation of representative mediations and hierarchies. In their stead, a regime of immediate identity between the absolute decision of thought and pure factuality is established.

Likewise retracted therewith is the third major aspect of representative logic – the one that assigns a specific space to representation. An emblematically entitled prose poem by Mallarmé might be taken to symbolize it. 'Le spectacle interrompu' presents us with the exhibition of a dancing bear by a clown, which is disrupted by an unforeseen incident: the upright bear puts his paws on the clown's shoulders. Around this incident, which the clown and the audience experience as a threat, the poet/spectator composes his poem: in this clinch of bear and clown he perceives a question addressed by the animal to the human being about the secret of his power. And he makes it the very emblem of the relationship between the auditorium and the stage, where the animal's pantomime is elevated to the stellar grandeur of his namesake, the Great Bear. This 'accident of representation' functions as an emblem of the aesthetic revocation of the representative regime. The 'interrupted spectacle' revokes the privilege of the theatrical space of visibility, the separate space where representation offered itself up to vision as a specific activity. Now there is poetry anywhere and everywhere – in the attitude of a bear, the flick of a fan, or the movement of a head of hair. There is poetry wherever some spectacle can symbolize the identity of what is thought and what is not thought, what is wanted and what is not wanted. What is revoked, at the same time as the poem's specific space of visibility, is the representative separation between the rationale of facts and the rationale of fictions. The identity of the wanted and the unwanted can be located anywhere. It rejects the separation between a specific world of

facts pertaining to art and a world of ordinary facts. Such is the paradox of the aesthetic regime in the arts. It posits the radical autonomy of art, its independence of any external rule. But it posits it in the same gesture that abolishes the mimetic closure separating the rationale of fictions from that of facts, the sphere of representation from other spheres of existence.

In an artistic regime of this kind, what substance and meaning might the notion of the unrepresentable possess? It can mark the difference between two regimes of art, the withdrawal of artistic phenomena from the system of representation. But it cannot signify, as it did in that regime, that there are events and situations which are excluded in principle from the adequate connexion of a process of exhibition and a process of signification. Indeed, subjects in it are no longer submitted to the representative adjustment of the visibility of speech, no longer subject to the identification of the process of signification with the construction of a story. We can, if we wish, summarize this in a formula of Lyotard's, when he refers to a 'failing of the stable adjustment between the perceptible and the intelligible'. But this 'failing' precisely signifies an exit from the representative universe – that is, from a universe defining criteria of unrepresentability. If there is a failing of the representative adjustment, it means, contrary to Lyotard, that exhibition and signification can be harmonized *ad infinitum*, that their point of agreement is everywhere and nowhere. It lies wherever an identity between meaning and non-meaning can be made to coincide with an identity between presence and absence.

## THE REPRESENTATION OF THE INHUMAN

Now, this possibility knows no objects that infirm it on account of their particular singularity. And it has proved

perfectly suited to the representation of phenomena that are said to be unrepresentable – concentration camps and extermination camps. I would like to show this by deliberately taking two very well-known examples of works devoted to the horror of the camps and the extermination. I take the first from the beginning of Robert Antelme's *The Human Race*:

I went outside to take a piss. It wasn't yet daylight. Beside me others were pissing too; nobody spoke. Behind the place where we pissed was the trench to shit in; other guys were sitting on the little wall above it, their pants down. The trench was covered by a small roof, but not the urinal. Behind us there were sounds of galoshes, of coughing; that came from the others who were arriving. The latrines were never deserted. A steam floated above the urinals at all hours . . . Nights were calm at Buchenwald. The huge machine of the camp would go to sleep. From time to time, searchlights came on on the watchtowers: the eyes of the SS would open, would close. In the woods that hemmed in the camp patrols made their rounds. Their dogs did not bark. For the sentinels time went quietly by.<sup>2</sup>

This is commonly regarded as a form of writing that corresponds to a specific experience – the experience of a life reduced to its most basic aspects, stripped of any horizon of expectations, and merely connecting simple actions and perceptions one after the other. Corresponding to this experience is the paratactic linking of simple perceptions. And the writing evinces the specific form of resistance that Robert Antelme wants to highlight: the one that transforms the concentration camp's reduction of life to naked existence into the affirmation of fundamental membership of the human race, even in its most basic gestures. Yet it is clear that this paratactic writing is not born out of the camp experience. It is

also the style of writing of Camus's *L'Étranger* and the American behaviourist novel. To go back further, it is the Flaubertian writing style of small perceptions placed side by side. The nocturnal silence of the camps reminds us in fact of other silences – those that characterize amatory moments in Flaubert. I propose to hear the echo of one of the moments that mark the meeting of Charles and Emma in *Madame Bovary*:

She sat down again and resumed her work, a white cotton stocking that she was darning. She worked with her head lowered. She did not speak, neither did Charles. The draught beneath the door blew a little dust over the flagstones, and he watched it creep along. He could hear nothing but the throbbing inside his head and the cackle of a laying hen somewhere away in the farmyard.<sup>3</sup>

Doubtless the subject is more trivial and the language more basic in Robert Antelme than in Flaubert (even so, it is remarkable that the first line of this urinal scene and of the book itself is an Alexandrine: *Je suis allé pisser; il faisait encore nuit*). Here Flaubert's paratactic style becomes, if I can put it like this, a paratactic syntax. But this story of waiting before the departure of the convoy is based on the same relationship between exhibition and signification; the same regime of rarefaction is found in both. The concentration camp experience as lived by Robert Antelme, and the invented sensory experience of Charles and Emma, are conveyed according to the same logic of minor perceptions added to one another, which make sense in the same way, through their silence, through their appeal to a minimal auditory and visual experience (the sleeping machine and the dozing farmyard; the dogs that do not bark and the cackle of hens in the distance).

Thus Robert Antelme's experience is not 'unrepresentable' in the sense that the language for conveying it does not exist. The language exists and the syntax exists. Not as an exceptional language and syntax, but, on the contrary, as a mode of expression peculiar to the aesthetic regime in the arts in general. The problem is in fact rather the reverse. The language that conveys this experience is in no way specific to it. The experience of a programmed de-humanization quite naturally finds itself expressed in the same way as the Flaubertian identity between the human and the inhuman, between the emergence of an emotion uniting two beings and a little dust stirred up by a draught in a farm kitchen. Antelme wants to convey a lived, incomparable experience of the parcelling out of experience. Yet the language he selects for its appropriateness to this experience is the common language of literature in which the absolute freedom of art has, for a century, been identified with the absolute passivity of physical matter. This extreme experience of the inhuman confronts no impossibility of representation; nor is there a language peculiar to it. There is no appropriate language for witnessing. Where testimony has to express the experience of the inhuman, it naturally finds an already constituted language of becoming-inhuman, of an identity between human sentiments and non-human movements. It is the very language whereby *aesthetic* fiction is opposed to *representative* fiction. And one might at a pinch say that the unrepresentable is lodged precisely here, in the impossibility of an experience being told in its own appropriate language. But this principled identity of the appropriate and the inappropriate is the very stamp of the aesthetic regime in art.

This is what a different example, taken from a significant work, indicates. I am thinking here of the beginning of Claude

Lanzmann's *Shoah*, a film around which a whole discourse of the unrepresentable or of the interdiction of representation nevertheless floats. But in what sense does this film attest to some 'unrepresentability'? It does not claim that the fact of extermination is removed from artistic presentation, from the production of an artistic equivalent. It only denies that such an equivalent can be provided by a fictional embodiment of the executioners and the victims. For what is to be represented is not executioners and victims, but the process of a double elimination: the elimination of the Jews and the elimination of the traces of their elimination. This is perfectly representable. Only it is not representable in the form of fiction or testimony which, by bringing the past 'back to life', renounces representing the second elimination. That is representable in the form of a specific dramatic action, as announced by the film's opening provocative sentence: 'The action starts in our time . . .'. If what has occurred, and of which nothing remains, can be represented, it is through an action, a newly created fiction which begins in the here and now. It is through a confrontation between the words uttered here and now about what was and the reality that is materially present and absent in this place.

But this confrontation is not restricted to the negative relationship between the content of the testimony and the emptiness of the place. The whole first episode of Simon Srebnik's testimony in the clearing of Chelmno is constructed according to a much more complex mechanism of resemblance and dissemblance. Today's scene resembles yesterday's extermination through the same silence, the same tranquillity of the place, by the fact that today, while the film is being shot, as yesterday, when the killing machine was functioning, everyone is quite simply at their post, not speaking of what they are

doing. But this resemblance lays bare the radical dissemblance, the impossibility of adjusting today's tranquillity to yesterday's. The inadequacy of the deserted site to the words that fill it imparts an hallucinatory quality to the resemblance. This sense, expressed in the mouth of the witness, is communicated differently to the viewer by the framing shots that present him as a miniscule figure in the middle of the enormous clearing. The impossibility of adequate correspondence between the place and the speech and very body of the witness goes to the heart of the elimination that is to be represented. It touches the incredible character of the event, programmed by the very logic of the extermination – and confirmed by negationist logic: *even if one of you survives to bear witness, no one will believe you* – that is to say, *no one will believe in the filling of this void by what you will say; it will be regarded as an hallucination*. This is what the speech of the witness framed by the camera responds to. It avows the incredible, the hallucinatory, the impossibility that words could fill this empty place. But it reverses their logic. It is the *here and now* that is stamped by hallucination, incredulity: 'I don't believe I'm here', says Simon Srebnik. The reality of the Holocaust that is filmed is indeed then the reality of its disappearance, the reality of its incredible character. The reality of the incredible is stated by the speech of the witness in this interplay of resemblance/dissemblance. The camera has him pace up and down the enormous clearing as a tiny figure. It thus makes him measure time and the incommensurable relationship between what speech says and what the place attests to. But this measuring of the incommensurable and the incredible is itself not possible without a trick of the camera. Reading the historians of the extermination who provide us with its exact dimensions, we learn that the clearing of Chelmno was not as huge as that.<sup>4</sup>

The camera has had to magnify it subjectively to mark the lack of proportion, to fashion action commensurate with the event. It has had to use special effects when representing the place in order to account for the reality of the extermination and the erasure of its traces.

This brief example indicates that *Shoah* only poses problems of comparative representability, of adaptation of the means and ends of representation. If one knows what one wants to represent – i.e., in the case of Claude Lanzmann, the reality of the incredible, the equivalence of the real and the incredible – there is no property of the event that proscribes representation, that proscribes art, in the precise sense of artifice. Nothing is unrepresentable as a property of the event. There are simply choices. The choice of the present as against historicization; the decision to represent an accounting of the means, the materiality of the process, as opposed to the representation of causes. The causes that render the event resistant to any explanation by a principle of sufficient reason, be it fictional or documentary, must be left on hold.

But respecting such suspension is not in any way opposed to the artistic means at Lanzmann's disposal. It is in no way opposed to the logic of the aesthetic regime in the arts. To investigate something that has disappeared, an event whose traces have been erased, to find witnesses and make them speak of the materiality of the event without cancelling its enigma, is a form of investigation which certainly cannot be assimilated to the representative logic of verisimilitude that led to Corneille's *Oedipe* being recognized as guilty. On the other hand, it is perfectly compatible with the relationship between the truth of the event and fictional invention specific to the aesthetic regime in the arts. And Lanzmann's investigation is part of a cinematic tradition that has established its pedigree.

This is the tradition that counter-poses to the light thrown on the blinding of Oedipus the simultaneously solved and unresolved mystery of Rosebud, which is the 'reason' for Kane's madness, the revelation at the end of the investigation, beyond investigation, of the nullity of the 'cause'. According to the logic specific to the aesthetic regime, this form/investigation abolishes the boundary between the connection of fictional facts and that of real events. This is why the Rosebud schema has recently been able to serve in a 'documentary' film like *Reprise*, for an investigation aimed at tracking down the female worker in the minor 1968 documentary film on the resumption of work at the Wonder factory. A form of investigation that reconstructs the materiality of an event, while leaving its cause on hold, proves suitable to the extraordinary character of the Holocaust without being specific to it. Here again the appropriate form is also an inappropriate form. In and of itself the event neither prescribes nor proscribes any artistic means. And it does not impose any duty on art to represent, or not to represent, in some particular way.

### THE SPECULATIVE HYPERBOLE OF THE UNREPRESENTABLE

Thus, the 'failing of the stable relationship between the perceptible and the intelligible' might perfectly well be construed as the unlimited character of the powers of representation. In order to interpret it in the sense of the 'unrepresentable', and posit certain events as unrepresentable, a double subreption has to be made – one involving the concept of event, the other the concept of art. This double subreption is what is presented in Lyotard's construction of a coincidence between something unthinkable at the heart of the event and something unpre-

sentable at the heart of art. *Heidegger and 'The Jews'* creates a parallel between the immemorial fate of the Jewish people and the anti-representative modern destiny of art. Both similarly attest to an original poverty of mind. This is only set in motion when moved by an original terror, an initial shock that transforms it into a hostage of the Other, that unmasterable other which, in the individual psyche, is simply called the primary process. The unconscious affect, which not only penetrates the mind but literally opens it, is the stranger in the house, always forgotten, and whose mind must even forget this forgetting in order to be able to pose as master of itself. In the Western tradition, this Other has supposedly assumed the name of the Jew, the name of the people that is witness to forgetfulness, witness to the original condition of thinking which is hostage of the Other. It follows that the extermination of the Jews is inscribed in the project of self-mastery of Western thought, in its will to have done with the witness of the Other, the witness of what is unthinkable at the heart of thought. This condition is supposedly comparable to the modern duty of art. The construction of this duty in Lyotard causes two heterogeneous logics to overlap: an intrinsic logic of the possibilities and impossibilities specific to a regime of art and an ethical logic of denunciation of the very phenomenon of representation.

In Lyotard this overlap is created by the simple identification of the divide between two regimes in art with the distinction between an aesthetic of the beautiful and an aesthetic of the sublime. 'With the aesthetic of the sublime,' Lyotard writes in *The Inhuman*, 'what is at stake in the arts is their making themselves witness to the fact that there are things which are *indeterminate*.' Art supposedly makes itself the witness to the 'it happens' which always occurs before its nature, its *quid* can be grasped; witness to the fact that there is something

unpresentable at the heart of thought which wishes to give itself material form. The fate of the avant-gardes is to attest to this unpresentability that seizes hold of thought, to inscribe the shock of the material, and testify to the original gap.

How is the idea of sublime art constructed? Lyotard refers to Kant's analysis of the powerlessness of the imagination which, faced with certain spectacles, feels itself carried off beyond its domain, led to see in the sublime spectacle – what is called sublime – a negative presentation of the ideas of reason that elevate us above the phenomenal order of nature. These ideas manifest their sublimity by the powerlessness of the imagination to create a positive presentation of them. Kant compares this negative presentation with the sublimity of the Mosaic command 'Thou shalt not make graven images'. The problem is that he does not derive from it any idea of a sublime art attesting to the gap between Idea and material presentation. The idea of the sublime in Kant is not the idea of a kind of art. It is an idea that draws us outside the domain of art, transferring us from the sphere of aesthetic play to that of the ideas of reason and practical freedom.

The problem of 'sublime art' is thus posed in simple terms: one cannot have sublimity both in the form of the commandment prohibiting the image and in the form of an image witnessing to the prohibition. To resolve the problem, the sublime character of the commandment prohibiting the image must be identified with the principle of a non-representative art. But in order to do that, Kant's extra-artistic sublime has to be identified with a sublime that is defined within art. This is what Lyotard does when he identifies Kant's moral sublime with the poetic sublime analyzed by Burke.

What, for Burke, did the sublimity of the portrait of Satan in *Paradise Lost* consist in? In the fact that it brought together

sentable at the heart of art. *Heidegger and 'The Jews'* creates a parallel between the immemorial fate of the Jewish people and the anti-representative modern destiny of art. Both similarly attest to an original poverty of mind. This is only set in motion when moved by an original terror, an initial shock that transforms it into a hostage of the Other, that unmasterable other which, in the individual psyche, is simply called the primary process. The unconscious affect, which not only penetrates the mind but literally opens it, is the stranger in the house, always forgotten, and whose mind must even forget this forgetting in order to be able to pose as master of itself. In the Western tradition, this Other has supposedly assumed the name of the Jew, the name of the people that is witness to forgetfulness, witness to the original condition of thinking which is hostage of the Other. It follows that the extermination of the Jews is inscribed in the project of self-mastery of Western thought, in its will to have done with the witness of the Other, the witness of what is unthinkable at the heart of thought. This condition is supposedly comparable to the modern duty of art. The construction of this duty in Lyotard causes two heterogeneous logics to overlap: an intrinsic logic of the possibilities and impossibilities specific to a regime of art and an ethical logic of denunciation of the very phenomenon of representation.

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death and its implementation. It attests to the unthinkability of the initial shock and the unthinkable project of eliminating this unthinkability. It does it by testifying not to the naked horror of the camps, but to the original terror of the mind which the terror of the camps wishes to erase. It bears witness not by representing heaps of bodies, but through the orange-coloured flash of lightning that traverses the monochrome of a canvas by Barnett Newman, or any other procedure whereby painting carries out an exploration of its materials when they are diverted from the task of representation.

But Lyotard's schema does quite the opposite of what it claims to do. It argues for some original unthinkable phenomenon resistant to any dialectical assimilation. But it itself becomes the principle of a complete rationalization. In effect, it makes it possible to identify the existence of a people with an original determination of thought and to identify the professed unthinkability of the extermination with a tendency constitutive of Western reason. Lyotard radicalizes Adorno's dialectic of reason by rooting it in the laws of the unconscious and transforming the 'impossibility' of art after Auschwitz into an art of the unrepresentable. But this perfecting is ultimately a perfecting of the dialectic. What is assigning a people the task of representing a moment of thought, and identifying the extermination of this people with a law of the psychic apparatus, if not a hyperbolic version of the Hegelian operation that makes the moments of the development of spirit – and forms of art – correspond to the concrete historical figures of a people or a civilization?

It will be said that this attribution is a way of disrupting the machine. It involves halting the dialectic of thought at the point where it is in the process of plunging in. On the one hand, however, the plunge has already been taken. The event has

occurred and this having-happened is what authorizes the discourse of the unthinkable-unrepresentable. On the other hand, we can query the genealogy of this sublime art, anti-dialectical witness to the unrepresentable. I have said that Lyotard's sublime was the product of a singular montage between a concept of art and a concept of what exceeds art. But this montage, which confers on sublime art the task of witnessing to what cannot be represented, is itself highly determinate. It is precisely the Hegelian concept of the sublime, as the extreme moment of symbolic art. In Hegel's conceptualization of it, the peculiarity of symbolic art is that it is unable to find a mode of material presentation for its idea. The idea of divinity that inspires Egyptian art cannot hit upon an adequate image in the stone of the pyramids or colossal statues. This failing of positive presentation becomes a success of negative presentation in sublime art, which conceives the non-figurable infinity and alterity of the divinity and, in the words of the Jewish 'sacred poem', states this unrepresentability, this distance of divine infinity from any finite presentation. In short, the concept of art summoned to disrupt the Hegelian machine is none other than the Hegelian concept of the sublime.

In Hegel's theorization, there is not one moment of symbolic art but two. There is the symbolic art prior to representation. And there is the new symbolic moment that arrives at the end, after the representative era in art, at the end of the Romantic dissociation between content and form. At this extreme point, the interiority that art wishes to express no longer has any form of determinate presentation. The sublime then returns, but in a strictly negative form. It is no longer the simple impossibility of a substantial thought finding adequate material form. It is the empty infinitization of the relationship

between the pure will to art and the things – which can be anything – in which it asserts itself and contemplates its reflection. The polemical function of this Hegelian analysis is clear: it aims to reject the notion that another art might be born out of the dissolution of the determinate relationship between idea and material presentation. For Hegel such dissolution can only signify the end of art, a state beyond art. The peculiarity of Lyotard's operation is to reinterpret this 'beyond', to transform the bad infinity of an art reduced to reproducing solely its signature into a fidelity to an original debt. But sublime unrepresentability then confirms Hegel's identification between a moment of art, a moment of thought, and the spirit of a people. The unrepresentable paradoxically becomes the ultimate form in which three speculative postulates are preserved: the idea of a correspondence between the form and the content of art; the idea of a total intelligibility of the forms of human experience, including the most extreme; and, finally, the idea of a correspondence between the explanatory reason of events and the formative reason of art.

I shall conclude briefly with my opening question. Some things are unrepresentable as a function of the conditions to which a subject of representation must submit if it is to be part of a determinate regime of art, a specific regime of the relations between exhibition and signification. Corneille's *Oedipe* provided us with an example of maximum constraint, a determinate set of conditions defining the properties that subjects of representation must possess to permit an adequate submission of the visible to the sayable; a certain type of intelligibility concentrated in the connection of actions and a well-adjusted division of proximity and distance between the representation and those to whom it is addressed. This set of conditions exclusively defines the representative regime in art, the regime

of harmony between *poesis* and *aesthesis* disrupted by the Oedipal *pathos* of knowledge. If there are things which are unrepresentable, they can be located in this regime. In our regime – the aesthetic regime in art – this notion has no determinable content, other than the pure notion of discrepancy with the representative regime. It expresses the absence of a stable relationship between exhibition and signification. But this maladjustment tends towards more representation, not less: more possibilities for constructing equivalences, for rendering what is absent present, and for making a particular adjustment of the relationship between sense and non-sense coincide with a particular adjustment of the relationship between presentation and revocation.

Anti-representative art is constitutively an art without unrepresentable things. There are no longer any inherent limits to representation, to its possibilities. This boundlessness also means that there is no longer a language or form which is appropriate to a subject, whatever it might be. This lack of appropriateness runs counter both to credence in a language peculiar to art and to the affirmation of the irreducible singularity of certain events. The assertion of unrepresentability claims that some things can only be represented in a certain type of form, by a type of language appropriate to their exceptionality. *Stricto sensu*, this idea is vacuous. It simply expresses a wish: the paradoxical desire that, in the very regime which abolishes the representative suitability of forms to subjects, appropriate forms respecting the singularity of the exception still exist. Since this desire is contradictory in principle, it can only be realized in an exaggeration which, in order to ensure the fallacious equation between anti-representative art and an art of the unrepresentable, places a whole regime of art under the sign of holy terror. I have tried to show that this

exaggeration itself merely perfects the system of rationalization it claims to denounce. The ethical requirement that there should be an art appropriate to exceptional experience dictates exaggeration of the forms of dialectical intelligibility against which the rights of the unrepresentable are supposedly being upheld. In order to assert an unrepresentability in art that is commensurate with an unthinkability of the event, the latter must itself have been rendered entirely thinkable, entirely necessary according to thought. The logic of the unrepresentable can only be sustained by a hyperbole that ends up destroying it.

- 12 See Elie Faure, *Histoire de l'art*, Le Livre de Poche, Paris 1976, volume four, pp. 167–83.
- 13 See *La Fable cinématographique*.

### 3 PAINTING IN THE TEXT

- 1 Clement Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting', in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, *Art in Theory 1900–1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Blackwell, Oxford and Cambridge 2001, pp. 754–60 (here p. 756).
- 2 Denis Diderot, 'Le Salon de 1769', in *Oeuvres complètes*, Le Club français du livre, Paris 1969, volume eight, p. 449.
- 3 See *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1998, volume one, pp. 168–9, 597–600 and volume two, pp. 885–7.
- 4 Marcel Proust, 'Within a Budding Grove', in *Remembrance of Things Past*, volume one, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1983, p. 893.
- 5 Edmond and Jules Goncourt, *French Eighteenth-Century Painters*, trans. Robin Ironside, Phaidon, Oxford 1981, pp. 115–17.
- 6 G. Albert Aurier, *Le Symbolisme en peinture*, L'Échoppe, Paris 1991, pp. 15–16.

### 4 THE SURFACE OF DESIGN

- 1 The bases of the thinking of the *Werkbund* and Behrens are analyzed in Frederic J. Schwartz's book *The Werkbund: Design Theory and Mass Culture before the First World War*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1996.

### 5 ARE SOME THINGS UNREPRESENTABLE?

- 1 See Jacques Rancière, *L'inconscient esthétique*, Galilée, Paris 2001.
- 2 Robert Antelme, *The Human Race*, trans. Jeffrey Haight and Annie Mahler, The Marlboro Press, Marlboro (Vermont) 1992, pp. 9–10.

- 3 Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. Allan Russell, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1950, p. 35.
- 4 We also have a sense of this in Pascal Kané's film *La Théorie du fantôme*, in which the director finds the place where several members of his family disappeared.
- 5 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful and Other Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, ed. David Womersley, Penguin, London 1999, pp. 105–06.