

# Thinking the visible: Mallarmé, Boulez, Lyotard

## Introductory Note

This paper examines Lyotard's analysis of *Un coup de dés* alongside Boulez's reception of Mallarmé. What is at stake in both Lyotard's and Boulez's reception of *Un coup de dés* is the way in which visual elements of the poem, namely the page layout and typographical character, relate to signification and the referent of the poem (chance). In order to establish the conceptual framework against which these two readings of the poem will be discussed, Lyotard's theorising of the postmodern is next briefly exposed.

### 1. Lyotard on the postmodern

Lyotard puts forward a definition of postmodern thought as "incredulity towards metanarratives" (1984: xxiv). It aims at undoing the totalizing rationality which, according to him, underlies modern thought (1984; 1993). Rather than a conceptual framework, the postmodern is thus conceived as a critical strategy and practice defined solely by the play of incommensurable elements. "Postmodern knowledge", he writes, "refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable" (Lyotard 1984: xxv).

Art is a field where Lyotard finds particularly pregnant examples of this play of incommensurable elements (1971; 1984; 1988b; 1993). In the visual arts, for example, he comments on the work of Cézanne and Klee

for showing the existence of a systematic support of sense alongside its deconstruction (1971; 1984; 1988b). In the case of Cézanne, Lyotard stresses the deconstruction of form by colour and the deconstruction of the focal zone by the diffuse periphery (1971: 158; 1988b: 19). In the case of Klee, he points out the violation of the rules of perception and gestalt by processes such as condensation and displacement of objects (1971: 231).

In both cases, the canvas offers a configuration of elements which delays the unity of representation. Such deferral of closure and wholeness constitutes as much a testimony to, as a tool for critical thought. In fact, according to Lyotard, it is only by depriving itself of the unity of consciousness that thinking, and art, for that matter, remain within a paradigm of critical rationality (1984; 1988a; 1988b). From this absence of wholeness follows also the critical potential of art as much as a homology between art and postmodern thought. It was shown that the postmodern is defined by Lyotard as resistance towards totalizing modes of thought. Any work of art to be understood under this cultural paradigm would have to undo a unified articulation of elements.

At this point, a difficulty arises for both art and cultural theory: the deconstruction of a unified framework of sense must be achieved without withdrawing from it. In fact, as Lyotard points out, the understanding of the postmodern either as a historical period or as a radically new conceptual framework (a fresh start of reason) would deprive it from its critical potential since the rejection of tradition built on a conceptual *tabula rasa* was precisely the mechanism of renewal of modernity (1993). From this reasoning follows Lyotard's theorising of incommensurable elements as the condition of a critical thought. In both fields of art and theory the subject is constantly searching for a unity which is, paradoxically, continuously postponed. In Lyotard's words:

A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules (...). The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*. (...). *Post modern* would have to be understood according to the paradox of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*).

(Lyotard 1984: 81)

This description illustrates as much the uneasiness of Lyotard's posture as the critical stand aimed at: the subject is constantly thrown into a fragmentary condition of representation not searched for.

## 2. Two Receptions of Mallarmé

### 2.1. Lyotard on Mallarmé

Coherently with the above, Lyotard's 1971 analysis of *Un coup de dés* is devoted to showing that the expressiveness of the poem relies on two distinct and incommensurable modes of meaning, namely, signification and visibility (the page layout and typographical character in which the poem is presented); that is, a systematic support of sense is co-present with something that is expressive in a sensory manner and must thus be thought of as a radically other to structure. What Lyotard stresses is that the referent of the poem (chance) is as much represented as it is presented; it is as much to be understood as it is to be seen; it is as much to the mind as it is to the eye.

Lyotard's claim is not that senses and reasoning come together in the poem but (and here lies the subtlety of the analysis) that the two modes of sense are incommensurable. In this way, a structural mode of sense is deconstructed without being dispensed with. The linguistic structure is thought of after Saussure's model and therefore, characterised as a closed, unmotivated, and self-referential system of signs. Consequently, insofar as it is signified (given the arbitrary nature of the sign), the referent must be conceived of as exterior to discourse. In addition, given the closure of the system, a determinable degree of complexity must be assumed in order for the system to function.

The deconstruction of the system is performed in two ways: at its interior, stylistic resources such as figures of style violate the linearity of sense and increase the complexity of the system to the point of undecidability of sense; at the exterior of the system, the referent of the poem emerges as visibility, that is, the referent, which, from the point of view of the linguistic structure must simultaneously be understood as exterior to discourse, emerges as visibility. From this co-presence of two modes of sense should not follow their complementariness. In fact, they should be understood as incommensurable: neither visibility can be signified nor the arbitrariness of the sign can be dispensed with. On this incommensurability of modes of sense would reside not only the expressiveness of the poem but also its cultural significance. In fact, an analogy between the expressiveness of the poem and Lyotard's more general cultural theory may be inferred: the deconstruction of the linguistic system performed by Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés* is analogous

to the postponement of a totalizing rationality proposed by Lyotard as much in a prescriptive as in a descriptive sense (incredulity towards metanarratives).

## 2.2. Boulez's *Third Sonata*

A different reception of the poem is found in Boulez's writings and in the composer's *Third Sonata* for piano.

Composed in 1952, the *Third Sonata* was an attempt to escape the musical impasse arrived at by the technique of integral serialism.<sup>1</sup> Moving away from integral serialism, the composer nevertheless severely criticises Cage's radical indeterminate music (concerning both composition and performance). While the former is referred to as "purely mechanist, automatic, fetishist", the latter is dismissed by Boulez as "fetishist again, but deliver[ing] one from choice, not by numbers, but by means of the interpreter" (Boulez 1986: 38). Trying to preserve structural thought alongside to integrate elements of Cage's approach, he moves carefully and describes this symbiosis as "useful madness" (Boulez 1968: 48-9).

The *Third Sonata* for piano comprehends five movements called *formants*. Only the second and third movements are currently available in print but for the intended form of the work all five movements must be considered. The first and second as well as the fourth and fifth movements may be played in any order provided that the third movements remains central. The inner structure of each formant also allows freedom of choice: in the Trope, each of the four fragments (Text; Parenthesis; Commentary and Gloss) may be taken either as beginning or end; in *Constellation/constellation-miroir*, some connections are obligatory,

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<sup>1</sup> Integral serialism is a compositional technique aiming at subsuming as many musical parameters as possible under a common rationale. This rethinking of the musical process was an effort developed by composers acquainted with the Darmstadt courses initiated in 1946, of which the prominent names were Boulez and Stockhausen. The term "parameter", originally used in mathematics only, was introduced into musical vocabulary by Meyer-Eppler in the '50s. Häussler (in Landy 1991:9) defines "musical parameter" as "all sound or compositional components which can be isolated and ordered".

Total organisation of the four main parameters (pitch, duration, dynamics, and attack) was experimented with for the first time in Messiaen's *Mode de Valeurs et Intensités*. However the work that would remain as the landmark of integral serialism is Boulez's *Structures Ia*. The work was written in 1952 under the direct influence of Messiaen who was Boulez's teacher from 1943.

others are optional. In *Constellation/ constellation-miroir*, at the beginning and end of each fragment, there are instructions on how to proceed to another one.

The possibility of choosing the path of performance was a way of introducing randomness in an otherwise overdetermined musical structure. However, as shown by Vieira de Carvalho (1997), this interchangeability of parts may be seen as a manifestation of serial principles. It constitutes what is termed by Vieira de Carvalho as autopoietic composition, that is, a self-regulated functioning of the compositional material exhausting all analytical meaningful relations. In fact, no path of performance exists which is not previously contemplated by the composer. In Boulez's words, "the ultimate ruse of the composer [is] to absorb chance" (1986: 38). In this way, not only the form of the work is not affected by the performer's options but also indeterminable aspects of this choosing are integrated by the compositional structure. Again in his words: "If the interpreter can modify the text in his own image, it is necessary that this modification be implied in the text, that it not be (...) imposed upon it" (Boulez 1968: 41).<sup>2</sup>

This understanding of composition in general, and of the *Third Sonata* in particular, is coherent with Boulez's reading of Mallarmé. Referring to *Un coup de dés*, Boulez points out pagination and typographical character for stressing the way in which sense is made visibility: the pagination and the typographical character are said to "constitute a prismatic subdivision of the Idea" (1986: 146). Boulez informs us to have been struck by the layout and to have searched for a musical equivalent of the poem. The composer envisaged a musical design in

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<sup>2</sup> Stockhausen's *Klavierstück XI* is another work in which the performer is confronted with random procedures. The score consists of nineteen fragments printed in one sheet of paper (37 by 21 inches) and randomly distributed on the paper. The pianist is required to look at random at the paper and to start with the first fragment "that catches the eye". For the first group, the pianist should choose himself the tempo, dynamic level and type of attack. Stockhausen (*Klavierstück XI*-Instructions) provides the following instructions for proceeding:

At the end of the first group, he reads the tempo dynamic level and attack indication that follow, and looks at random at any other group, which then he plays in accordance to the latter indications. Looking at random at any other group implies that the performer will never link up expressly chosen groups or intentionally leave out others. Each group can be joined to any of the other 18; each can thus be played at any of the six tempi and dynamic levels and with any of the six types of attack. (...) When a group is arrived at for the third time, one possible realisation of the piece is completed.

These random procedures notwithstanding, Vieira de Carvalho (1997) considers Stockhausen's work as an example of musical autopoiesis.

which the notational appearance would correspond to the structural musical fabric. Having completed most of the *Sonata*, Boulez found in Mallarmé's projected *Livre* a structural homology of his *Sonata* regarding the complementary ideas of closure and permutation: closure in the sense that the work is never exhausted in one performance, and permutation in the sense that diverse possibilities of assemblage do not alter form.

As a summary of Boulez's reception of Mallarmé, we would retain the fact that the composer understands visual elements and structural coherence in terms of identity, that is, visual elements are understood as making apparent the structure of music, and, conversely, the analytical coherence of the work legitimises visual presentation. In sum, visual elements and music structure are an instance of each other.

### 3. Conclusion

The two receptions of Mallarmé described above can now be discussed in terms of broader cultural theory, namely regarding Lyotard's account of postmodern thought.

It was shown that Lyotard understands the postmodern as a critical response to totalizing rationality (1984: xxiv). Rather than a historical period or a conceptual framework, it is defined as resistance towards metanarratives. Conversely, modernity is not understood primarily as a historical period (although time underlies both concepts) but rather as synonymous with that same totalizing rationality that the postmodern is devoted to undoing.

From the exposition of literary and musical elements, a distinct relation between structure and presentation was found to prevail: whereas, according to Lyotard, visual elements deconstruct the structural functioning of language in the poem of Mallarmé, elements of musical notation duplicate the structure paradigm of (serial) composition in Boulez's *Sonata*. It was shown that Lyotard understands the poem as blocking a structural framework of meaning and a mode of sense incommensurable with it – visibility, whereas Boulez understands visibility as an integral part of the structure of the poem. It can thus be argued that while Lyotard theorises visual and structural elements in terms of difference, Boulez puts forward the same elements in terms of identity.

Knowing that the postmodern is theorised as resistance to a totalising rationality, and that modernity is synonymous with that character, the

reception of Mallarmé must be thought to generate readings that fit distinct cultural paradigms: Boulez's reception of Mallarmé would have to be thought of as pertaining to modernity, whereas Lyotard's reception of the poet would be better understood under the postmodern paradigm of culture.

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