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*postmodern fables*

Jean-François  
Lyotard

Translated by Georges Van Den Abbeele

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megalopolis? Isn't this misery what writing, Celine's for example, must bear witness to, at the price of going to the end of its night? Isn't writing, reflexive writing in particular, the writing of the philosopher today, still what must obtain the credit of immortality by snatching it from the aseptic death that constitutes our existence as rich zone dwellers? We will never *know* what is called knowledge. The megalopolis, in any case, is perfectly well organized to ignore or forget these questions, this question. And nevertheless, the forgetting of forgetting still makes enough of a sign for writing—art, literature, and philosophy all mixed together—to insist on bearing witness to the fact that there is something left behind.

## Paradox on the Graphic Artist

— They're terribly cornered. Very little freedom of movement. Not only under stringent constraints, but various kinds of constraints, completely heterogeneous ones. They struggle in this web like crazy people. Each in his or her own way. Each one crying out that he/she is still alive. Long live graphic artists, but what does living mean for a graphic artist? To be still alive. All these constraints put together, maybe each in particular, are mortifying.

— What constraints?

— The heavy-duty ones are obvious: to be liked, to be persuasive, and to be just. What I mean to say is that the object (so I call the product resulting from the graphic artist's labor) gives pleasure to the gaze; that the object induces a disposition in the viewer to buy into (in the double sense of going there and believing in it) the demonstration, the exhibit, the institution, etc.; that the object is faithful to the thing (institution, exhibit,

etc.) it promotes, faithful both in the spirit and in the letter.

— You mean to say that by targeting the pleasure of the eyes . . .

— Of those eyes that engage thought not in knowing, but in enjoying . . .

— By targeting this pleasure, the object falls into the realm of aesthetics; by targeting belief, it derives from rhetoric. And by respecting the truth of the thing . . .

— Or by revealing it . . .

— The truth of the thing promoted, the graphic object takes on the value of testimony, it belongs to the art of proving, to inquiry, to history, to the establishment of knowledge.

— They are in fact at once artists, lawyers, witnesses, historians, and judges.

— Why judges?

— Because they interpret. They are also interpreters. What would the fidelity of the object to the thing to which it refers be, if this reference were not supported by an interpretation? There is fidelity only because infidelity is possible. What would it be to represent the thing by the object, *right down to the letter*? A simple photograph interprets its subject. The “letter” is to be deciphered and interpreted. Take the title of a film, an exhibit, an institution, a play. Let’s say it is the letter of these things. It distinguishes them from other things in a general table of titles (a catalog of works, for instance) but only by a simple process of opposition. It says what the titled thing *is not*, it almost never says what it is. Now, the graphic artist must signify what it is or what

he or she thinks it is, even while putting the title of the thing back onto the object. The graphic artist “deals with” the thing as red or blue, figuratively or abstractly, as a realist, a surrealist, or a conceptual artist. The graphic artist interprets the thing. The way in which he or she inscribes the title onto the object, positions it, the character and font of the letters used for this inscription, are so many interpretations. And so many judgments.

— Art is free. With all these constraints, is graphic art therefore not an art?

— First of all, art is not free. It is freedom, within constraints at every level, conscious and unconscious. But then, aesthetics is an art, the art of producing or of feeling pure (disinterested) pleasure. Rhetoric is an art of persuasion. History is an art of true recounting. And interpreting is the hermeneutic art, perhaps the most difficult of them all. Its rules are almost unknown. We know mainly the negative ones: add nothing to the thing that is interpreted, do not make it say the opposite of what it says, do not ignore previous interpretations, do not impose one interpretation as definitive. The tradition of reading the Torah has blocked some kinds of positive rules by making distinctions in the text of the Scriptures between literal, hidden, moral, and allegorical meanings.

— Do graphic artists know all this?

— There’s no need to know the rules, which are not very prescriptive in any case, in order to interpret something as a graphic object. It’s better to recognize what you don’t know. Hence, the freedom of graphic

artists, chained to their constraints. Imagine (this must happen) that a "subject" is imposed on them, a poster for a public commemoration, for example. By the variety of objects this occasion gives birth to, you can see what great latitude interpretation leaves them.

— Do you mean to say that some will emphasize persuasive force, others the aesthetic excellence of their object, and still others the veracity of their testimony?

— Not only that. Each will appeal more to a given literal, allegorical, etc. sense of the commemoration, that is, of the event the poster is supposed to recall and celebrate. Take the bicentenary of the French Revolution . . .

— I beg of you. You were saying that these were just the heavy-duty constraints, the most obvious ones. What else is there?

— One more word, before we go on. The word *intrigue*. The object made by the graphic artist must be intriguing. By being intriguing, it might satisfy all the constraints at once. What is beautiful catches the eye, stops the permanent sweeping of the field of vision by the gaze (which is what happens in ordinary sight), visual thought pauses, and this point of suspension is the mark of aesthetic pleasure. It is what is called contemplation. You wait, you linger, you wonder why, how it is that it is pleasing, say, to view the *Horatii* (by David) making their oath with the meadow of Valmy in the background. But, on the other hand, that which persuades is also surprising, or rather what surprises is in and of itself persuasive. Wow, you say, I never thought of that (representing the French Revolution this way).

You give yourself over to the object as to something that has remained unthought but that you recognize right away as if it belonged to you. Just like in a dream, or a slip of the tongue. What is more persuasive than a slip of the tongue? It is certain that it means something you were thinking about, while being unaware of it, while being unaware of *what*, while being unaware *that* you were thinking it. Perhaps there is a slip of the tongue in a good graphic design, the slip of the tongue that *you* the viewer were able to make with regard to the thing promised. "La liberté de Mandé la libertheid" works on the call for Mandela's freedom just like the dream works on the remnants of the day. And in the third place, what is also, above all, intriguing is the self-evidence of a truth that bursts on the scene, its tenacious trace, something other than an opinion skillfully brought out by a well-honed argument, more like a kind of immediate or "plastic" certitude. How about an example? A man's face, a woman's face, at very close range, cut off from each other by a kind of vertical tear, staring at each other across this tear, he with an intense blue iris, she with her gaze masked by a scarf of the same blue. A poster for a play: *Les Yeux d'encre* (Eyes of Ink). The plastic truth of sexual difference: the ink of separation displaced *between* the blue gazes.

— To listen to you speak, what is intriguing always stops the flow of time.

— Because the time of graphic art is one of those more subtle constraints I had in mind. Much is said about communication with regard to graphic art. But we have more material than is needed, if by communi-

cation we mean the transmission of a message. A message gives information in the strict sense. That is, an answer or a set of answers that are specific and useful for a specific question. Now, we do "have" language: conversations, interviews, and all their spin-offs, telephones, radio, fax, computers, newspapers, handouts, the mail. I cite these haphazardly, some characterize means of support, others procedures for transmission and diffusion, some interactive, others not, etc. Never, in human societies, has there been so much talking as today. We are so happy to dispose of these means of communicating that you would think it was above all a question of making sure they're really there. The message, that is to say, the information that answers a question, is pretty much neglected. On all the supporting devices, there is an abundance of false questions, the ones everybody knows or whose answers can be guessed. We don't inform, we reassure: oh yeah, that's just what I thought. The opposite of intriguing. We're starting to get bored. We dream of being upset. We wait for an event.

— Graphic art certainly derives from communication, doesn't it? It informs about the thing it promotes, it answers questions. That's its testimonial function, after all.

— In part. But it also derives from the visual arts, its situation is more complicated. It has recourse to the components of the visible, the chromatic, the organization of a motionless two-dimensional space, drawing, tracing. It is thereby the cousin of painting, engraving, photography. You know that many pictures, engraved

works, and photographs that belong to tradition may be considered as graphic art. They too informed their contemporaries by visual means. Look at the Madonnas and Child by the hundreds in the museum of Siena. Or the great tableaux of battles in the Ducal Room of the Doge's Palace. And despite all this, what interests us is less their information content than their beauty or truth. The aesthetic event that they are. The absolute evidence of a visual manner. The manner of dealing with space, depth, or light, color, or just the subject matter. The Annunciation is an old subject, but Tintoretto's angel at the School of San Rocco cracks through the Virgin's wall like a missile, while the one by Simone Martini in the Uffizi makes a quivering "declaration of love" to Mary, all against a backdrop of gold. They interpret the same "thing" by visual means. Both are faithful.

— You were talking about the time of graphic artists, now we are in the space of painters.

— You might judge it unbecoming here, but there would be no unease, to compare the graphic artists we are introducing by utilizing analogous, that is, aesthetic criteria. Criteria of light, line, color, spatial composition, etc. If there are not schools, in any case there are tendencies—which sometimes share the same graphic artists. Unable to comment on all of them, I will comment on none. But all of them share the same business of having to be intriguing, in any way they can.

— But this constraint to be intriguing is due to beauty, as you said, to the powers of unexpected emotion that lie dormant within colors, surfaces, lines. Once

again, it's the artist within the graphic artist who cannot help awakening them, unleashing the inexhaustible potential of sensible events.

— That's true, but it's not everything. That temporality, given rhythm by the deliverance of the powers of the visible, is not exactly all their doing. They have to be intriguing too because they have to deal with passersby, with eyes that wander, with minds on information overload, bored, threatened by a sense of disgust with everything new, which is everywhere and the same, with thoughts that are unavailable, already occupied, preoccupied, notably with communicating, and quickly. Graphic artists have to arouse them from the comforting slumbers of generalized communication, to slow down their unfortunate speed of life, to make them lose a little time.

— But this loss is profitable, bottom line. A good movie poster fills the cinema, a good logo favors investment by capturing attention, it disposes it to exchange, to commerce, to consumption, it speeds up communication. Your loss of time is a gain, counted from a marketing standpoint. Their graphic commodity brings commodities into circulation. It promotes them. Whether it is cultural and of public or social interest, or of private use and interest is a difference forever futile once culture has become part of the market and the public is privatized. With a good graphic object, a little lost time means a lot of money is made, through commercial success or prestige, for the happy owner or the exploiter of the "thing" promoted.

— Your observation is true in general, but all too

generally. What can you not say this same thing about, when in fact culture is a market? Thirty years ago, they said that cinema was unique because it was both an art and an industry. And what about architecture? And the theater? And publishing? And exhibits and concerts and records? What you're not telling is what makes for a *good* poster, a *good* logo . . . And there is where we come across the constraint I'm talking about. Graphic art is not just good to sell things. It is always an object of circumstances, and consequently ephemeral. Of course, you can put it in archives, collect it and exhibit it—this is what we're doing here. You thus suspend certain of the finalities we have designated: persuading, testifying. You retain only pleasing, which exceeds circumstance. You turn a piece of graphic art into an artwork. But you deceive and are deceived. The graphic object is circumstantial, but *essentially* so. Inseparable from the event it promotes, thus from the location, the moment, and the public where the thing happens. Grant me that an Annunciation remains as current as the New Testament. Even the painting of a coronation or a victory remains current so long as the dynasty or the regime lasts. But a film program in some viewing room today? An exhibit (justly) labeled temporary? The freeing of a political prisoner?

— I agree that the thing is of little duration and the graphic artists must make a living from this "despite it all."

— But just as the thing testified to by the object is of little duration, so is the public of little stability—what we stupidly call the public, as if it existed. And

graphic artists cannot make a living without making hypotheses about the public. This is not a civilization nor even a culture, in the anthropological sense. This is the combination, endlessly unmade and remade, of temporary sensibilities . . .

— Nonetheless, the public has some constants, language, a certain idea, be it unconscious, of its national or local traditions, it undergoes definable conditions of life, of work, of economic growth or recession. And then there is the air of the time, which does not change so fast.

— But you cannot determine the proportion of these components, nor consequently between them, which the graphic object must address in order to intrigue the said public. You are reduced to making hypotheses. Even for the French, the French Revolution is not a determinate motif that would be easy to animate or reanimate by some rhetorical turn or aesthetic gesture. For the Greeks, only a few tropes sufficed to arouse the idea of the polis in a funeral oration; and for the Japanese, a few internal or external architectural dispositions from the temple and some musical and choreographic figures for a Shinto ceremony to evoke the presence of the gods. In the society we live in today, most motifs are uncertain, many motivations are unforeseeable (especially outside the sphere of retail consumption), and the art of the graphic artist is risky. You may bore when you thought to move, you imagine yourself cynical and turn out to be authentic. There is a wager to be made on the current state of the big, black beast's sensibility.

— The big, black beast? You mean the public?

— It doesn't know what it likes or doesn't like. It doesn't exist for itself as a sensibility. It knows itself only indirectly, through situations, and these no longer have the regularity of rituals. The graphic object must constitute one of these situations. It lands in a "blank," neutral, perhaps deserted, region of the public's affective continent, and it is presumed to populate it, to draw sensation to it.

— Good graphic art would then be sensational?

— Sensation is the contrary of sensational. The latter is calculable from what we think we know about the most ordinary emotiveness. It is the trivial mode of seduction. A newspaper boss "knows" what he has to get out in six columns on the front page. But whether beautiful, persuasive, or true, graphic art does not seduce. You seduce by way of an interest, a passion that you make work. The graphic artist constrains the viewer to suspend his or her reactivity, to dream, to interrupt his or her preoccupations. The graphic artist gives the viewer over to the freedom to feel something other than what he or she believed, to feel otherwise. The graphic artist is a street artist, a peddler. The street (European, New York, Japanese) is a figure of public daily life, a scene of encounters. In the street, encounters are not tragic. Tragedy is the encounter within the familial home. What you encounter in the street is the unexpected, what "passes by," that woman passing by. The art of modern cities, graphic art is exclusively dependent on cultural, commercial, political, utilitarian events, all placed on the same gauge, subject to the same rule



of what is without rules, of the event. Graphic art grasps the daily public in its monotonous "passing by," and it gives its other measure, of possible beauty and self-evidence. It transmutes the public. It brings it to see otherwise because it interprets it, and it also brings it to interpret. That's why it *stops*.

— Popular art?

— I would like to call it popular if I knew what "people" meant today. Popular arts, in Europe and outside of it, are a discovery or invention of the Romantic nineteenth century, which, for the Western world, lasts until the years of the Great Depression. The totalitarisms, which issued forth from it, were popular and made great use of the popular arts, that is to say, the sensibilities inscribed within local traditions, with a view to *mobilizing* people. But graphic art is not propaganda. As I said, it intrigues, thus immobilizing and causing reflection. Take a Suprematist or a Constructivist poster from the twenties by Malevich or Lissitzky, and then take some Stalinist posters (on the same subjects) from the mid-thirties. You can see how the "popular" is used by the latter, and how it is put into suspense, in every sense of the word, by the former. The dissolution or dissipation of the entity "people," as is the case in the modern city, is essential to the art of the graphic artist, whether abstract or not. The public does not mean people, but the absence of the people, the loss of shared beliefs, what they called the masses, during the intermediary period, the crisis years of the depression. Today, decades have passed since the capitalist societal mode dissolved popular communities. It is in

the process of straddling nation-states, well past their prime.

— Enough of this historical panorama.

— The absence of a people is what obligates graphic artists to wager and also what leaves the field wide open for them. Graphic artists "target" an object, but the target keeps shifting. It cannot be said that they commune, or even dialogue, with "their" people. On the contrary, they are banking on an unsure, unforeseeable, perhaps impossible communication. They are the popular artists of cities without people and populations without traditions. Their addressees, all of us, are inhabited by the monotonous passion of "performances," only thinking about what is possible, about what is "feasible," as one says. They hurry along. They let go of the past if it can't be exploited. "Having experience" is a depth that makes them laugh, it's ballast to be jettisoned, better to have amnesia, so you can go faster.

— But never has there been so much experimenting!

— Yes, and the graphic artist also experiments with ways of intriguing. But experimentation is precisely not experience. To explore the future is not to inhabit the past. Graphic artists stick to the present by the occasion circumstances offer them. But also because they are exploring processes as their contemporaries do with everything. They too are launched out front, and they too, at full speed, I imagine. It is a rapid art. But it is an art, and a modern one, and as such, its aim is to surprise. You have to freeze the eye, quickly. The passerby stops, turns back, and examines the poster.

— But if the passerby only contemplates the poster

and its art, all is lost. The poster for a show does not fulfill its function if it doesn't make the passerby go to the show.

— That's why I repeat to you that graphic artists are cornered. Artists, yes, but promoters too. They have to offer their work and something other than their work: the thing. Their work is an object that must induce something other than the pleasure drawn from its beauty. It is a subordinate, "applied," art, as they say. It requires of the graphic artist the humility of a servant, perhaps even a humiliation. The graphic artist signs a contract, he or she then has (in principle) the mastery to choose the thing his or her object will promote. But the contract stipulates that the object must promote the thing. The graphic artist thus interprets, but here in the actor's sense, for the actor too is a servant. Just as for the actor, there is a paradox in the graphic artist. The more graphic artists make a void in themselves, in order to let themselves be inhabited by the thing, the more the object is faithful to the thing it promotes. This is a fidelity that is not mimetic, but inventive.

— The paradox is constant, but it is obscure.

— So constant that it must be extended. Who would say that the art of the actor (or the director) is secondary, or even second? Is there even one art form, be it held as noble, that does not conceal this paradox? Doesn't Picasso spend his time in interpreting, in this sense, in "playing," in replaying therefore, scenes, subjects, treatments, already proposed by others before him (or by him)? Look at all the variants and studies together that fill the two rooms dedicated to his *Las Meninas* at the

Picasso Museum in Barcelona. They are like a big sketchbook for a poster announcing a Velázquez exhibit.

— So, graphic art would reveal a truth about art, period?

— That's it. About contemporary art, period.

— Why contemporary?

— Because of the big, black beast. How can you be intriguing, in these cities full of intrigues? How can you stop the gaze of passersby upon the Infanta's dog, when they already know it by heart?