

Jean-François Lyotard. By KIFF BAMFORD. (Critical Lives.) London: Reaktion Books, 2017.
176 pp., ill. [long draft version 21/11/18]

In his entertaining and rewarding intellectual biography, Kiff Bamford cuts to the chase right away. Why is it appropriate and useful to write a biography about a thinker whose works contest the very idea of a life retold? Famously, Jean-François Lyotard proclaimed the end of grand historical and political narratives. It is less well known how this view extended to any life: we are multiple and fragmentary collages of influences, events, and acts. Our names are therefore mere matters of convenience. They anchor contingent and changeable ways of aggregating labyrinths that remain resistant to treatment as a whole.

In the period of *The Differend*, the subject is replaced by overlapping and competing language games, with no central command structure, but where different powers and interests come into conflict through linguistic rules and forms of resistance. I've always liked that side of Lyotard's deeper understanding of existence, such that when we write a letter to ourselves we are challenging who we are thanks to a range of grammatical and literary techniques; similar to our interpretation or repression of our dreams, when we struggle to impose temporary identity and order on an unruly, painful, distressing and exciting hubbub.

The response Bamford offers to the problem of inappropriate biography is also the reason why his book is worthwhile. Instead of giving us a simple biography, or a simple intellectual biography, in the sense of a recounting of the scholarly sources of Lyotard's work, Bamford plays them off each other. Biographical facts, such as Lyotard's teaching in Algeria in the lead up to the War of Independence and his subsequent posting to an elite military academy to teach philosophy, are put alongside writings, such as his anonymous articles on Algeria for

the militant group Socialisme ou Barbarie. On this fiftieth anniversary of May '68, I will single out Bamford's precise and sensitive account of the 'transformative' effect of that stifled revolution on Lyotard's writing (p. 67), leading him to drift away from Marx and Freud, and towards twin concerns for art and the impossibility of understanding one another. Bamford is good at expressing the deep scars left on Lyotard by the revolution; in particular, in the violence and repression in and outside factories and universities. These remained a feature of his writing from then on, as the memory of signs of a certain kind of impossibility and yet also of a more important continued duty to resist and transform.

With the recent publications of *Discourse, Figure* in English and the comprehensive editions of Lyotard's many essays on art and artists, he is becoming better known for his aesthetics. Another valuable aspect of this biography comes from Bamford's background in art. It has allowed him to offer provocative and enlightening explanations for how Lyotard co-organized the 'giant exhibition Les Immatériaux' at the Pompidou Centre in 1985 (p. 104), or why he wrote one of his deepest and most technical books on Marcel Duchamp. Since Lyotard's aesthetics and writings on art are not subservient to his philosophy, but are rather a form of related and superior sensibility and exploration, it makes more sense to read philosophy and art-appreciation alongside each other. This is the kind of 'art-philosophy' Lyotard excelled at, perhaps more than any other philosopher, because his philosophy innovates yet remains exceptionally sensitive to what art can teach it and how art can force it to think differently. I've always been intermittently ashamed about the way my early books reduced his work on the sublime to a political role, without recognising how there was another reading available going in an opposed direction, drawing the political into myriad aesthetic resistances and new ways of becoming. Bamford is very good at communicating the underlying life-events infusing this new approach.

In our stupid age of rush to judgement and clamour to punish, aided by our amoral electronic toys, a final reason to recommend this beautiful book is its humanism. There is a persistent and self-serving error in accusing Lyotard and his fellow late-twentieth-century thinkers as anti-humanists as if this means they were inhumane. Bamford shows this to be a profound misrepresentation by giving glimpses of the love Lyotard gave and the love that was given to him. This affection was inscribed into his work. Where he criticizes and mocks our human ages, epochs, and lust for violence, it is never in the name of some non-human, cold-hearted cruelty, but rather to call us back to the effects and affects we share and how we can do justice to them. This book does the same, not least in the moving story of Bamford's research, in the aftermath of Lyotard's last years, and among those who still love those many labyrinths.

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