Testimony and the Affect-phrase

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Abstract

The idea of the affect-phrase (outlined in essays collected in Misère de la philosophie) is one of the most important of Lyotard’s later philosophy, in so far as it revises, and attempts to give more definition to, a notion central to his earlier thought: the silent phrase. The silent phrase indicates the limits of representation, and testifies to the existence of something unpresentable. My aim here is to explore the nature and significance of the affect-phrase by contextualising it within the framework of an issue arising from The Differend and related works: the problem of testimony. The problem is this: if the Holocaust, or any other specific injustice, is construed as unpresentable, how is bearing witness to it possible? What distinguishes one unpresentable, traumatic historical event, from another? Moreover, Lyotard identifies other, quite different things – such as Ideas in the Kantian sense, and sublime works of art – as unpresentable. Given this, what distinguishes testimony to one unpresentable – such as the Holocaust – and another unpresentable – such as the Idea of freedom, or the sublime feeling inspired by an artistic work? The problem, in short, is the possibility of testifying to something specific when the theme of unpresentability can appear to have a homogenising effect which erases this specificity.

This chapter explores the bearing of Lyotard’s later philosophy of the affect-phrase on this problem of testimony in three parts. The first part outlines Lyotard’s argument for the unrepresentability of the Holocaust in Heidegger and “the jews,” the text in which the case for this unrepresentability is most strongly and clearly made. This section then outlines the problem of the nonspecificity of the unpresentable, drawing on Dominick LaCapra’s criticisms of Heidegger and “the jews”. The second part outlines Lyotard’s philosophy of phrases in The Differend, and examines the way testimony is treated in that text. Part three draws these themes together around the affect-phrase, and attempts to specify how this later supplement to The Differend alters the parameters of testimony, and how it bears on the stakes of the problem identified here. With the idea of the affect-phrase, the theme of unpresentability becomes radicalised. While it may initially appear that the affect-phrase only exacerbates the problems of nonspecificity, homogeneity, and the erasure of difference, I argue that within the context of Lyotard’s philosophy of phrases, testimony to “specific unpresentables” is nevertheless a coherent possibility, even as the silence of the affect-phrase maintains Lyotard’s insistence that justice requires resistance to representation and articulation. This under-appreciated aspect of Lyotard’s later work is important for a wide range of current debates insofar as it bears on the separation of the cognitive and the ethical, and explores how these twin demands might be negotiated.

Keywords

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Fingerprint
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