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Viral Poetics in Manuel Joseph's Baisetioles

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ABSTRACT. Against the idea that poetry has no performative force, I argue in this paper that there is a viral poetics at play in some contemporary practices. I, therefore, reinterpret Austin's characterisation of poetry as a parasite in a positive way: rather than being an idle parasite, poetry functions as an active virus within our linguistic practices. Building on the French notion of *dispositif*, I illustrate my claim by giving an interpretation of Manuel Joseph's *Baisetioles*. This viral poetics leads me to characterise poetry as a performative *dispositif* that acts upon ordinary language and, through it, upon our forms of life.

1. Introduction: Austin's Parasites

All this we are excluding from consideration (Austin 1975, 22)

Despite a genuine interest in importing speech act theory into literary studies, it seems that J. L. Austin's initial exclusion of poetic utterances from consideration has been a yet insurmountable obstacle to an ordinary language poetics.⁶¹ Indeed, Austin considers utterances

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⁶¹ According to Mary Louise Pratt, one of the appeals of speech-act theory to literary scholars is the possibility it offers 'of integrating literary discourse into the same basic model of language as all our other communicative activities.' (Pratt, 1977, 88) Sandy Petrey argues something similar by considering that 'The imperative to socialize that erases the dividing line between constative and performative also erases that between literary and performative.' (Petrey, 1990, 51) From a slightly different perspective, Stanley Fish considers that: 'What philosophical semantics and the philosophy of speech acts are telling us is that ordinary language is extraordinary because at its heart is precisely the realm of values, intentions, and purposes which is often assumed to be the exclusive property of literature.' (Fish, 1982, 108) Following Fish, Toril Moi considers there is nothing extraordinary to literary language: 'Ordinary language is certainly not the opposite of 'literary' language. (In my view, there is no such thing as 'literary language.')

in poems, on stage, or in soliloquy to be 'parasitic upon [their] normal use.' (Austin, 1975, 22) Following a certain trend in Ordinary Language Philosophy (OLP) reinstating the literary within an Austinian framework, my paper aims to reconfigure Austin's notion of parasite from a negative criticism (exclusion) to a positive evaluation (inclusion).⁶² Against exclusion—which requires a sharp distinction between poetic and ordinary uses that is often (if not always) difficult to make—I argue that such uses are in fact revelatory of the potential for creativity in language and hence not limited to poetic utterances or forms of 'extraordinary' uses. Whereas Austin's notion of parasite gives a conservative picture of language—i.e. there are some linguistic institutions and parasitic uses feed upon them—I argue that one of the effects of so-called parasitic uses is precisely to reveal that such a conservative picture fails to describe how new meanings and new uses of language come into existence.⁶³ My paper thus aims to turn this conservative picture into a progressive one in which creative uses of language such as poetic utterances are of central importance. Michel Serres describes this creative action of the parasite as follows: 'People laugh, the parasite is expelled, he is made fun of, he is beaten, he cheats us; but he invents anew.' (Serres, 2007, 35) Following this inventive force of the parasite, I coin the shift from conservation (exclusion) to progression (inclusion) as one from *passive parasite* to *active virus*.

There are three steps to my argument: first, building on a remark from Wittgenstein's

language." The extraordinary is at home in the ordinary. (We share perfectly ordinary criteria for when to apply the concept.) There is nothing extraordinary about the extraordinary.' (Moi, 2017, 162)

⁶² Cavell is the most famous to pursue such a programme to merge OLP with literary investigations, thus bringing philosophy and literature closer to one another, as the last sentence from *The Claim of Reason* suggests: 'Can philosophy become literature and still know itself?' (Cavell, 1979, 496) Further exploring the attunement between philosophy and poetry, Maximilian de Gaynesford argues that: 'An attuned approach, in which each takes the other as an opportunity to exercise itself, ought not to seem so alien to either poetry or philosophy. As a starting point, and only that, it is clear enough that appreciating poetry as such has intimately to do with what language is, what it does, and what it is for, just as philosophy as such has intimately to do with these same questions. On the one hand, these questions invoke a good deal of philosophy. On the other hand, abstract ingenuity and formal resourcefulness alone are rarely enough to answer them. Sensibility and receptivity to the varied uses of language are also called for, capacities that are sustained and developed by appreciating poetry. Building on this commonality, it ought to be possible to find mutually enhancing ways of appreciating poetry and doing philosophy, rather than simply using one to illustrate the other, or to ornament the other, or, worst of all, to pay the other elaborate and ultimately vacuous compliments.' (de Gaynesford, 2017, 11)

⁶³ In his introduction to Manuel Joseph's *Baisetioles*, Christophe Hanna argues: 'Lorsque je parle, ces conditions sont réunies, ou pas : si elles le sont, mon énoncé possèdera cette force performative (je suis sérieux en promettant, je fais une promesse et elle me contraindra), sinon (si je plaisante), il ne la possède pas. Tellement bien qu'à lire Austin, il semble que ce genre de conditions ne puisse émerger accidentellement, localement ou se constituer progressivement : elles ne peuvent être autre chose que là ou pas, que préexister aux actes de langage. Moyennant quoi la théorie d'Austin fait plutôt obstacle à l'idée que puissent se créer de nouvelles formes de performativité.' (Hanna, in Joseph, 2020, p. 15)

Philosophical Investigations, I consider the doing of language, what Austin calls the performative, in terms of *dispositif*, reading OLP through the lens of French philosophers such as Michel Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard,⁶⁴ second, I relate this *dispositif* to Christophe Hanna's conception of 'viral poetics' in order to show, third, how poetry operates as a performative *dispositif* in Manuel Joseph's *Baisetioles*.

2. Doing and Dispositif

To shift from a *passive parasite* to an *active virus*, we need to grasp how change can occur in language, how invention operates in our linguistic practices. Although Austin's theory is rather conservative, this inventive dimension is crucial to Wittgenstein's philosophy who places invention at the heart of his philosophical method.⁶⁵ Remark 492 from his *Philosophical Investigations* (PI) epitomises this importance of invention in Wittgenstein's conception of language:

To invent a language could mean to invent a device for a particular purpose on the basis of the laws of nature (or consistently with them); but it also has the other sense, analogous to that in which we speak of the invention of a game.

Here I am saying something about the grammar of the word "language", by connecting it with the grammar of the word "invent". (Wittgenstein, 2009, PI 492)

According to Wittgenstein, there are two ways of considering invention in language: as a device following a purpose or as a game following a rule.⁶⁶ Rather than focusing on the details of

⁶⁴ The connection between OLP and French philosophy is often made through Jacques Derrida because of the Derrida-Searle debate that arose from Derrida's paper on Austin. Much has been said about this debate but Derrida's focus on the parasite seems to point out an interesting weakness of Austin's theory. However, the debate with Searle has proven to be much less productive. Raoul Moati and Jesús Navarro have both written book-length explorations of this debate. (Moati, 2014; Navarro, 2017)

⁶⁵ See for instance in the *Blue Book*: 'That is also why our method is not merely to enumerate actual usages of words, but rather deliberately to invent new ones, some of them because of their absurd appearance.' (Wittgenstein, 2008, BB, p. 28) This sentence epitomises the difference between Austin's and Wittgenstein's methods. While Austin seems to correspond to the first part of the sentence, 'enumer[ating] actual usages of words', Wittgenstein focuses on 'invent[ing] new ones.' In this opposition resides a different approach to poetic and creative uses of language: excluded from Austin, included in Wittgenstein. Rather than considering these views as contradictory, I would argue that they complement each other.

⁶⁶ Oskari Kuusela offers an analysis of these two senses of inventing a language: 'Consequently, we can spell out Wittgenstein's distinction in PI §492 as follows. The two senses of inventing a language, to which he refers, make

these two forms of invention, I want to investigate the word 'device' (or *Vorrichtung* in German) that Wittgenstein uses to enlighten two conceptions of *dispositif*. By reading this remark in an anachronical way, the notion of device can indeed be connected to the exploration of *dispositif* Foucault and Lyotard.⁶⁷ I believe that Wittgenstein's distinction between two forms of invention enlightens their two conceptions of *dispositif*, respectively highlighting a normative dimension and a poetic or creative one.

The notion of *dispositif* is generally related to Foucault who considers it as having 'a dominant strategic function.' (Foucault, 1980, 195) A *dispositif* consists in 'strategies of relations of forces supporting, and supported by, types of knowledge.' (Foucault, 1980, 196) Foucault especially focuses on the repressive dimension of the *dispositif*, for instance in his analysis of the *panopticon* in *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1977). Insofar as it has a dominant strategic function, Foucault's *dispositif* can be understood as a device created for a specific purpose. This device is not necessarily a building (as in the case of the *panopticon*) or an object but can be a conceptual or linguistic device (as the structure of language reflects the structure of power relations). Foucault's *dispositif* therefore sheds a special light on Wittgenstein's first conception of invention: a device for a specific purpose (although Wittgenstein's notion of invention is not limited to a repressive function *à la* Foucault).

Foucault's emphasis on the repressive dimension however misses an important point regarding the creative or poetic potential of the *dispositif*. In contrast, Lyotard's conception of *dispositif pulsionnel* offers the space for such an exploration. As Stuart Sim argues, Lyotard's focus on the libidinal aspects of *dispositif* opens the space for creative freedom against Foucault's repressive strategy.⁶⁸ The libidinal dimension of Lyotard's *dispositif* counters the

manifest two different aspects of the concept of language: (i) language as analogous to games and defined by arbitrary rules and (ii) language as analogous to instruments that serve particular external purposes, i.e. not arbitrary but determined, for instance, by their effects.' (Kuusela, 2006, 329) Joseph Medina relies on PI 492 to explore the necessity of inventing new language-games: 'These alternative contexts may not always be available; they may require inventing new language-games or radically transforming existing practices until they acquire a new face. Indeed Wittgenstein often talks about the invention of new language-games (e.g., PI §492) and of the possibility of replacing old games with new ones (e.g., PI §64). He emphasizes that language-games are constantly fluctuating and that this fluctuation allows for radical changes in which our practices can be twisted, bent, and rearranged beyond recognition. It is purely arbitrary to insist that these transformations always have to be understood as internal changes or reforms of the *same* practice. This insistence is just an arbitrary imposition of *a priori* constraints on our conceptualizations of the evolution of linguistic practices.' (Medina, 2004, 568–69)

⁶⁷ Device (and *Vorrichtung*) is indeed one of the translations of *dispositif* in English, although 'apparatus' is often preferred and 'dispositive' also exists. In this paper, I will keep the French *dispositif* for more clarity.

⁶⁸ Foucault certainly emphasises this repressive aspect of the phenomenon, and Lyotard is very aware of it too, hence his concern to draw our attention to the limitations that all dispositifs share. *Libidinal Economy* is an

power of control and becomes a transformer of energy, creating meanings or, in a Wittgensteinian interpretation, creating a game, creating rules and uses: 'What we have here is a linguistic *dispositif*, i.e. an arrangement that allows for *libido to be connected* [literally plugged into] *to language* (support, surface of inscription).'⁶⁹ (Lyotard, 1994, 121) Through its connection between libido and language, the *dispositif* transforms libidinal energy and produces 'effects of meaning.' In other words, there are two important aspects of the *dispositif* for Lyotard: first, as it is a linguistic *dispositif*, it connects libido and language against the rather common idea that language is alien to libidinal energy (the tension between the 'rationality' of language and the 'irrationality' of emotion). This connection produces meaning in the naming of affects. Second, the *dispositif* circumscribes a linguistic modality which transforms libidinal energy into linguistic energy and, in turn, into affects, emotions, etc. This transformation of libidinal energy into meanings produces what Lyotard calls 'intensities:' 'The "intensities" are what imports, not the meaning.' (Lyotard, 2020, chap. 7) Indeed, this producing device is an affirmative power that, however 'always disrupts [libidinal intensities] until dysfunction.'⁷⁰ (Lyotard, 1994, 160) The *dispositif* distributes libidinal intensities but, through this distribution, it also brings them to dysfunction, something of a parasitic disturbance.

In this sense, we can consider poetry as a linguistic *dispositif* that distributes libidinal intensities by bringing them to dysfunction, to the disruption of communication (parasite *qua* static), and that reveals the failure of meaning. Against the normativity of Foucault's *dispositif* (that represents the normativity of Austin's ordinary language), Lyotard's *dispositif* is a meaning-producing game. In this sense, it follows Wittgenstein's second form of invention in which inventing a language is analogous to the invention of a game. It is primarily in this second sense of *dispositif* that poetry can arise: a *dispositif qua* game opens a space of expression for creativity, a space for poetry to occupy. These two conceptions of *dispositif* reflect Austin's distinction between ordinary (normative) and parasitic (poetic) uses of language. However, the common term '*dispositif*' shows that both ordinary and parasitic uses

exasperated response to how we have allowed certain *dispositifs* to control our thought, with Lyotard repeatedly making the point that libidinal energy makes a mockery of all such pretensions to regulation. Given that any power the *dispositif* has is illusory, we have far more freedom within it than we tend to believe; freedom to construct oppositional little narratives, for example.' (Sim, 2011, 56)

⁶⁹ My translation: 'On a là un *dispositif* langagier, c'est-à-dire un agencement qui permet de *brancher la libido sur le langage* (support, surface d'inscription).'

⁷⁰ My translation: 'formation toute positive, affirmative, de distribution des intensités libidinales, mais les détraquant toujours jusqu'au dysfonctionnement.'

are doing something, both are performative. Reading these two conceptions of *dispositif* through Wittgenstein's remark reveals that they are two sides of a same process.

3. Hanna's Viruses

The move from meanings to intensities brings to the fore the interactional aspect of the *dispositif*. Christophe Hanna, a French theorist, and poet connects the *dispositif* to poetry through the notion of 'language-game,' thus pursuing a Wittgensteinian line of thought: 'The *dispositif* cannot be considered as a kind of proposition but as a kind of interaction, as a language-game implemented in a given form of life.'⁷¹ (Hanna, 2010, 24) What is important here is the idea that *dispositifs qua* language games are implanted on certain contexts: they operate in relation to ordinary practices and are not separated from them nor in opposition to them. The idea of interaction suggests that parasitism is not a one-way matter.⁷² The parasite needs a host concept to operate on, but this host concept is enhanced and transformed by the parasite. If following Serres, the parasite is an active force, the *dispositif* operates in the context it is implanted in rather than only passively feeding on it.

More than the image of the parasite who lives off the hospitality of others, and hence has no creative force (i.e. the parasite as idle), poetic *dispositifs* are best defined as viruses that operate on language and the world. Hanna defines the viral action of poetry as follows:

The viral action operates directly in the space of communication considered as a set of symbolic subsystems in relation, capable of becoming target-zones. Each target-zone represents a **potential context** in which a viral language is **immediately performative** like a pure illocutionary act.⁷³ (Hanna, 2003, 22)

Hanna explicitly relates viral poetics to the notion of performative and Austin's speech act

⁷¹ My translation: 'Le dispositif ne peut pas être envisagé comme une forme d'énoncé mais comme une forme d'interaction, un jeu de langage qui vient s'implanter dans une forme de vie donnée.'

⁷² It is worth noting that French does not distinguish between host and guest, only using the word 'hôte'. In this context, parasite and parasited thus coalesce.

⁷³ Hanna's emphasis, my translation: '**L'action virale s'effectue directement** dans l'espace de la communication considéré comme un ensemble composite de sous-systèmes symboliques en relation, susceptibles de devenir des zones-cibles. Chaque zone-cible représente un **contexte potentiel** dans lequel un langage viral est **immédiatement performatif** tel un pur acte illocutoire.'

theory. There are three elements on which I want to focus: 1. 'direct action', 2. 'potential context', 3. 'immediately performative' and 'pure illocutionary act'.

- 1.) A viral action is direct in the sense that it operates without mediation of any kind, it operates immediately in the space of communication because it is made of language and operates within language. This is what Wittgenstein already suggests when he says: 'Do not forget that a poem, although it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language-game of giving information.' (Wittgenstein, 1981, Z 160) The language of poetry is not ontologically different from the language of information we use in our everyday lives. Poetry has a direct viral action because it cannot be, at least at first glance, distinguished from the language of information.
- 2.) The space of communication is a set of symbolic subsets and the viral action can operate on each of these. These symbolic subsets, therefore, become potential contexts for the action of poetry, potential cells for the virus to infect. In this sense, language appears as a set of potential contexts for viral action. Viral language requires these contexts and cannot be self-sufficient: 'In principle, a virus can therefore not be an autonomous and self-sufficient autotelic form; the virus engages with its context, transforms it by adapting to it structurally. The action of a virus is fundamentally a transformation by addition.'⁷⁴ (Hanna, 2003, 23) Viral language operates on its context and transforms it. Against the idea that poetry is isolated from the world, viral poetics suggests that it must be at its heart. Against the idea that poetry is *subtractive*, i.e., that it removes the subject from the mundane and that, in Austin's words, it belongs to the '*etiologies* of language,' the action of the virus is an *additive* function, in Serres's words, 'it invents something new.' The 'new' is therefore at the heart of language as language precisely needs this capacity to evolve and adapt to new situations.

⁷⁴ My translation: 'Par principe, donc, un virus ne saurait être une forme autonome-autosuffisante, autotélique ; le virus embraye sur son contexte, il le transforme en s'y adaptant structurellement. Fondamentalement l'action d'un virus est une transformation par addition.'

- 3.) In its doing, viral language is immediately performative, it is directly and immediately in action. But in what sense is it an illocutionary act? According to Austin's theory, an illocutionary act is conventional, and it seems that it is not the case for viral language. However, because viral language operates on the space of communication *qua* symbolic system, it operates directly on the conventions that uphold illocutionary acts. In this sense, the illocutionary force of viral language is that of sabotage: 'P'3 [virus] is therefore nothing else than a process of sabotage of the symbolic systems of a society.'⁷⁵ (Hanna, 2003, 25)

Hanna, therefore, considers the poetic *dispositif* as an *active virus* rather than a *passive parasite*. It transforms the symbolic systems of society by adding new layers of meaning, new 'intensities.' Operating directly within the space of communication, a poetic *dispositif* is therefore immediately performative. Manuel Joseph's *Baisetioles* is a perfect illustration of how a poetic *dispositif* operates on the space of communication in a viral way, i.e. by implanting itself on it.

4. Joseph's *Baisetioles*

Language is a virus from outer space (William S. Burroughs)

Les Baisetioles contains so many elements that my analysis will necessarily be restricted to a few specific points: I will first focus on explaining the title of the poem and then take a closer look at two pages at about the middle of the book.⁷⁶

The title *Les Baisetioles* plays on the word *bestioles* (bugs) and *baiser* (to screw) and suggests that there are not only some bugs that come to disrupt (to screw with) the space of communication, thus following Austin's and Hanna's metaphorical line of parasites and viruses, but also that this space itself is screwing with us, bugging our minds; the context in

⁷⁵ My translation: 'P'3 [virus] n'est donc rien d'autre qu'un processus de sabotage des systèmes symboliques d'une société.'

⁷⁶ Among the many aspects that I must unfortunately overlook are the references to TV shows, the use of text message language, works of contemporary art, and many more.

which we come to encounter language frames and restrains our possibilities of thinking. These two interpretations reflect the two conceptions of *dispositif*: the normativity of language constrains our thoughts while its poetic capacities disrupt this normativity. Joseph's reference to *baiser* further connects to Lyotard's notion of *dispositif pulsionnel* in which libido connects to language. In *Baisetioles*, Joseph plays with the performativity of language, more specifically with the performativity of mediatic language, which reflects Wittgenstein's reference to the language of information. As Hanna writes in his preface to Joseph's work: 'They are empty, impersonal, and tautological [ideological] statements, threadbare clichés, reasons without any logical force. However, when uttered in the press at the right moment, they seem to possess a strong performative power.'⁷⁷ Like Austin's analysis of utterances that are performed only in specific contexts (such as 'I do' in a wedding ceremony), mediatic language seems to be empty outside of the mediatic space. All these sentences are bugs that come back into the mediatic space, parasites that however possess a performative force when rightly uttered. It is not only poetic language but the whole of language that is '*in a peculiar way hollow or void.*' Against Austin's view that parasitic uses of language have no performative force, Joseph questions this hollowness of utterances. To what extent would the mediatic stage not be a stage like any other? *Les Baisetioles* therefore begins on a stage, more specifically at Sting's concert at Paris Bataclan one year after the 2015 terrorist attack.

My analysis focuses on two pages at about the middle of the book (Joseph, 2020, 54–55). We are at Sting's concert, people are laughing, drinking, etc. Joseph investigates the use of the word barbarism (*barbarie*) and the idiom 'art is a bulwark against barbarism' (*l'art est un rempart contre la barbarie*). This idiom is one of the abovementioned empty clichés that nevertheless has a performative force on the mediatic stage. This cliché is recurrently used to show the supposed superiority of culture over barbarism or, in other words, of us over them. Joseph considers this cliché to be problematic in a least four ways.

- 1.) The mediatic use of barbarism never mentions the barrel organ (*orgue de barbarie*) although it is one of the uses of the word in French. In this context,

⁷⁷ My translation: 'Il s'agit d'énoncés [idéologiques] creux, impersonnels, tautologiques, de poncifs usés jusqu'à la corde, de raisons sans aucune force logique. Pourtant, proférés dans la presse au bon moment, ils semblent posséder un fort pouvoir performatif.' (Joseph, 2020, 14)

barbarism is part of culture rather than opposed to it. This musical instrument, at least through its name, weakens the opposition between barbarism and culture.

- 2.) Following the first point, mediatic language restrains the scope of barbarism: 'there is no other word in barbarism than arab' (*il n'y a pas d'autre mot dans barbare qu'arabe*). Playing with the letters, mediatic language uses barbarian (*barbare*) as a quasi-anagram (and hence synonym) for Arab (*arabe*). Mediatic language is performatively doing something that it cannot say. It therefore excludes some uses of language (to avoid positive evaluations) and imposes specific meanings (to impose negative evaluations).
- 3.) One of the ways mediatic language operates is by imposing a specific format which Joseph calls '#élément formant#.' The formatting dimension of such an element is further reinforced by framing it with ##. By following such a format, mediatic language—and Sting on stage represents such mediatic language—is not using the creative powers of language but submitting to a certain frame of thought that prevents invention.
- 4.) One of these forming elements is the idiom 'art is a bulwark against barbarism.' However, if barbarism is part of culture (following point 1) and if art is submitted to a frame of thought (following point 3), how can art be a bulwark against barbarism? By blurring the frontiers between culture and barbarism, Joseph breaks down the performative force of this idiom. Culture as suggested by mediatic language is less a bulwark against barbarism than a form of propaganda against the other (us against them), something that Montaigne already suggested in his essay 'On Cannibals': 'we all call barbarous anything that is contrary to our own habits.' (Montaigne, 1993, 108)

Joseph, therefore, shows how the performative force of the empty statement 'art is a bulwark against barbarism' is purely conventional and conveys problematic prejudices. Sting on stage is therefore not a bulwark against barbarism, but an empty statement of propaganda aiming at performative force in the mediatic space, The Police on stage. This performative force of empty statements surprises Joseph: 'Surprise to see how in such a context the words [or lyrics]/ can

acquire/ another force carry a meaning we didn't see.' (Joseph, 2020, 55). By bringing the reader's attention to the emptiness of mediatic language, Joseph aims to generate a similar surprise in his readers.

As a performative and viral *dispositif*, poetry subverts and disrupts mediatic uses of language. This subversion occurs because the language of poetry is not ontologically distinct from ordinary language (the language of information). It is only because it is at first glance unrecognisable as a virus, as a *baisetiole*, that poetry has a subversive force. Poetry acts as a virus within our uses of language, but rather than a dangerous virus, it aims to warn us against the performative emptiness of the mediatic stage and to incite us to regain and reinvest this stage in order to make sense of the world. What poetic uses of language teach us is that the 'new' is at the heart of language. Against the repetition of mediatic language and its formatting, poetry alters such formatting to show the linguistic potential for invention. In this sense, poetry *qua active virus* is the antithesis of the *passive parasite*. Joseph inverts Austin's evaluation: mediatic (ordinary) language is a parasite that feeds on empty idioms, endlessly reproducing clichés, while poetic language disrupts this picture by actively deconstructing mediatic propaganda while poetic language is a disruptive and subversive force revealing spaces for invention within language. Rephrasing William Burroughs's famous sentence, poetry is a virus from outer space that operates within the space of language but outside the mediatic space which restrains language. The mediatic space would be language *qua* Foucault's repressive and normative *dispositif* whereas poetry operates as a performative *dispositif* in Lyotard's sense of creating new intensities.

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