



REVIEW ESSAY/ESSAI CRITIQUE

DICOURSE, FIGURE, FORTY YEARS ON

Jean-François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*. Trans. A. Hudek and M. Lydon. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011; 544 pages. ISBN 978-0816645657.

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2011 saw an important publication in continental philosophy by the University of Minnesota Press: Antony Hudek and Mary Lydon's English translation of Jean-François Lyotard's 1971 doctoral dissertation, *Discours, figure*. Prior to Hudek and Lydon's full translation, only excerpts and commentary had appeared in English, notably Lydon's rendering of "The Dreamwork does not Think" in Andrew Benjamin's *Lyotard Reader*.¹ A major gap in Anglophone Lyotard scholarship has been bridged, since *Discourse, Figure* is strikingly original and sheds light on many of Lyotard's more widely-read texts. A lapse of forty years between the French publication and its full availability in English underscores how important an occasion was the recent translation; but we can fairly question whether something of the immediate context, the living ground of the original, is lost four decades later.

Lyotard cut his teeth as a council communist, anti-colonialist reader of phenomenology; as an independent activist-scholar, he later organized with students during the Nanterre revolt.² *Discourse, Figure* is, certainly, a rigorous and erudite meditation on sensation, representation, desire, language, and art, but it is also—and perhaps, most essentially—the fruit of years of political engagement. In light of the recently available translation let me plead herein that new readers—or more seasoned readers returning to Lyotard's text—bear in mind *above all else* its political significance. It must be read as an intervention in or around the proper name "May '68." Only then

¹ Lyotard, "The Dreamwork does not Think," in *The Lyotard Reader*, (ed.) Andrew Benjamin (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 19–55.

² See Claire Pagès's recent *Lyotard à Nanterre* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2010).



can we pose the question of the *use* of this strange and wonderful text: more specifically, the question of whether or not its political aspect resonated in its day, and whether—and to what extent—it still resonates today.

To better understand its political aspect, *Discourse, Figure* should be read alongside the contemporaneous but more expressly political *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud*, Lyotard's 1973 collection of texts leading up to and written during the Nanterre days.³ (Unfortunately—and here again, we find a gap in the English literature—this text is only available in partial translation through Semiotext(e).)⁴ Lyotard's borrowing from Freud in this text, as elsewhere, is certainly far from orthodox; he departs from him in refusing to assume a privileged locus of intensity (*i.e.*, the libidinal rendering of "event"—essentially Heidegger's *Ereignis*, which holds central importance in Lyotard's postmodern and later writings), such as the phenomenological body, the "social body," or, as with certain Freudo-Marxists and the earlier Baudrillard, a particular region of the social body such as the working class or the lumpenproletariat. Lyotard thus also approaches a much more radical philosophy of intensity/event than he had ever attempted to formulate in his phenomenological/Marxist phase (wherein the human being was cast as the site of a permanent questioning of history and meaning; a Marxism "re-freshed" by phenomenology's basic style, and resistant to Stalinist economism).

By adopting Freud's distinction between primary and secondary psychic processes in *Discourse* and *Dérive*, Lyotard found a means to articulate his burgeoning philosophy of the event. The primary flow of psychic energy, *i.e.*, desire or libido, is an inarticulate process simultaneously creative and destructive, erupting in singular ways which Lyotard names "intensities." Secondary process belongs to (which is to say that it engenders and is engendered by) a meaningful, articulate, legible reality that nihilates (in the sense of only partially grasping or accounting for) primary flows or intensities in capturing and productively channelling them. Taken together, this describes Freud's death drive: chaos and order dissimulated in each other, serving impossible teleologies. But the Lyotard of *Discourse* and *Dérive* posits primary process well beyond the organic

³ In his politically attuned introduction to *Discourse, Figure*, John Mowitt notes a comment by Lyotard in *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud* according to which "the essays in *Dérive* are but the 'scaffolding' of or for *Discourse, figure*." (xiv)

⁴ Lyotard, *Driftworks*, (ed.) R. McKeon, (tr.) S. Hanson, et al. (New York: Semiotext(e), 1984).

body; what results is a metaphysics of desire, similar to the Spinozism or Nietzscheism of his contemporary Deleuze. Such a metaphysical rendering of Freud's later metapsychology seeks to articulate the singular in its relation to a nihilating philosophical transcendence. It is however at once both metaphysical and concretely political. Defence of the metaphysical singular reflects and is reflected in Lyotard's anti-authoritarian and pro-minoritarian politics, which becomes increasingly rigorous from the time of his anticolonial writings. Already in 1964, as a nominally Marxist member of *Pouvoir ouvrier*, Lyotard is experimenting with Freudian concepts.⁵

It must be driven home however that during the libidinal phase of his thinking Lyotard did not mark a strict disjunction between primary and secondary process. Nor did he wish, as one might expect, to claim to go over to the side of primary process, *tout court*. As he puts it in *Discourse, Figure*: "One cannot cross over to the side of the primary processes: this is merely a secondary illusion.... Desire has its rejection embedded within itself.... Desire is truly unacceptable. One cannot pretend to accept it, for accepting it is still to reject it. It will become event elsewhere." (18) Really there is only desire; primary and secondary processes are impossible aspects of desire. But impossibility is itself already a function of this distinction; paradoxically, Freud's oft-repeated and oft-quoted remark that there is no such thing as an unconscious "no" suggests that any exclusive disjunction—even the disjunction between primary and secondary process—already presupposes secondary process. We can already detect here that in turning to Freud's later metapsychology, Lyotard will mark any and all political *critique*, assuming a "subversive region" to ground itself, as already and essentially nihilistic and therefore recuperable as well as compromised by what it fights. Lyotard's mature libidinal politics will become, by the time of 1974's *Économie libidinale*, an ungrounded politics of naked will. He is simply too clever to blunder into the Habermasian trap of "performative contradiction," but what he sacrifices in eluding this trap is any claim to philosophical coherence or normative ground.

The particular way in which the Lyotard of *Discourse, Figure* puts Freud's later metapsychology into play should be noted. Irrespective of their logical impossibility, in a manner of speaking desire as event (primary) and/or as structure (secondary) runs together or co-presents impossibles—in terms of secondary elaboration—as if they were compossible. The compressions, distortions and inversions of dreams immediately come to mind, and the aforementioned

⁵ Lyotard, *Pourquoi philosophe?* (Paris: PUF, 2012).

chapter in *Discourse, Figure* entitled “The Dreamwork does not Think” indeed explores Freud’s mapping of these processes in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. But Lyotard extends the analysis to conscious figural representation. Think of a particularly heavy, gloppy brushstroke on a canvas. It might betray the existence of the paint and canvas partially constituting the painting, disrupting thereby the purely figurative space of the painting’s aesthetic economy with the suggestion of a textured, material, tactile space “below.” The painting would thereby betray two compossible-impossible spaces, neither of which would be “truer” than the other, strictly speaking, since both together constitute the painting.

Discourse, Figure, then, comprises by and large a radical Freudian reading of compossible-impossible spaces. What Lyotard calls *the figural*, the text’s privileged category, “arises as the co-existence of incommensurable or heterogeneous spaces, of the figurative in the textual or the textual in the figurative, for example.”⁶ The figural signals (but does not signify)⁷ how primary process erupts from within and thus distorts or disrupts, even while constituting the structures comprising discourse, or secondary process in both “figurative and textual space.”⁸ On the definition of the figural (as well as of discourse), it is worth quoting Bill Readings:

discourse is the name given by Lyotard to the process of *representation by concepts*.... The rule of discourse is thus the claim to order being as a structure of meanings, to identify existence with the representable by the establishment of the exclusive rule of a network of oppositions between concepts or signifiers.

Against the rule of discourse in figurative and textual space, Lyotard insists upon the figural... [T]he figural opens discourse to

⁶ Bill Readings, *Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 4.

⁷ Insofar as the positing of the signifier over the signified enacts the relation of nihilating transcendence that Lyotard wishes to avoid, he must adopt a terminology of signals, indexes and the like. Against the nihilism of semiotics, he wishes to articulate that something may wish to show itself but not succeed in doing so; as we will see later, rather than signification, a clear presentation of something by a sign, Lyotard is here concerned with the possibility of *negative* presentation (Kant’s term), the unclear, allusive presentation that-there-is (without stating what-there-is). See Alberto Gualandi, *Lyotard*, (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2004), 48–50, for a helpful breakdown of Lyotard’s more refined, tripartite definition of the figural into *figure-image*, *figure-forme* and *figure-matrice*.

⁸ Readings, *Introducing Lyotard*, 4.

a radical heterogeneity, a singularity, a difference which cannot be rationalized or subsumed within the rule of representation....

The figural is that which, in representation, makes us aware that there is something that cannot be represented, an other to representation.⁹

Naturally, since Lyotard marks no strict distinction between primary and secondary processes, he does not claim that the figural is strictly speaking independent of the discursive; neither does he wish to claim that it takes priority or that it is superior. Rather, the concept of the figural indicates that the discursive is always already saturated by the non-discursive.

There is a strategic dimension to the drawing of this (non)opposition. Lyotard's text "moves from the visible to the unconscious in its defence of the figural"¹⁰; in a manner of speaking, it employs phenomenological tools to critique structuralism but then employs psychoanalytical tools to critique phenomenology. (20) The intellectual context of *Discourse, Figure* helps to put this strategy in perspective. At the time, French structuralism was still hegemonic but losing ground. According to structuralism, the human mind (Lacan) and human social mores and societies (Lévi-Strauss) were to be read as analogues of languages in the precise sense elaborated by Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* as possessing both syntagmatic and paradigmatic dimensions that together constitute a fabric of meaning. Accordingly, *Discourse, Figure* is rightly considered a *post*-structuralist text to the extent that Lyotard seeks therein to complicate such readings of "structures" as well-ordered languages by means of the Freudian notion of a primary process of desire working "below" or "inside" of them, constituting them, but tending always to disrupt and distort them. An important aim of *Discourse, Figure* is, in short, to attack structuralism by partially excavating from its seemingly well-ordered structures that which both underpins and overflows them with singular richness.¹¹ But to the extent that phenomenology is also prisoner to the nihilating logic of Western philosophy, it, too, is submitted to an attack. Returning to the above example, the eruption of colour one finds in the

⁹ *Ibid.*, 3, 4, and 16-17; emphases in the original.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹¹ Another way of characterizing figure is that for Lyotard, primary process leaves "traces" of its work in secondary elaboration. See Lyotard, *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1973), 167-69.

brushstrokes of a canvas by Cézanne is said by Lyotard to overflow the work's compositional pictorial elements in a way that neither structuralism nor phenomenology can properly grasp. Similarly, one can imagine the institution of the university prior to May '68 as bubbling with the desire that will soon overflow the institution and constitute its radical questioning.

The intellectual context of the work is, however, always already political. At stake is more than intellectual secession from structuralism (itself a "rightist" deviation, on some contemporary readings), but rather the very definition of politics, and the search for a concrete political line. But for Lyotard, this raises the question of the scene of politics. Giving a negative definition of the figural, Lyotard invokes the notion of reality that he argues runs through all of Freud's work: "a collection of perceptions that are testable against each other, as well as testable by means of practical activity, and that are also able to be put into language [*un ensemble lié de perceptions vérifiables par des activités de transformation, et aussi signifiables par des ensembles liés de mots, c'est-à-dire, verbalisables*]." ¹² Lyotard notes that for Freud, at bottom, the criteria of reality are criteria of communication. To paraphrase Lyotard, objects are "real" in the Freudian sense to the extent that they can be communicated at two levels: that of language, and that of practice. Lyotard notes that this makes Freudian reality a notion that is deeply social; but, more importantly, it is a notion that is always to be taken in scare-quotes.

The linked, communicable ensemble of perceptions constituting Freudian reality is in fact quite skeletal, shot through with holes: that is, with that which cannot be communicated about perceptions and affects. ¹³ Freudian reality is, in short, only a stark and impoverished picture of the actual manifold of experience and, considered more generally, of what-there-is. One can speak of a "Freudian utopia" in the strict sense of the term "utopia": a rich, unaccountable *non-place*, a place that is not a place, because it cannot be located, and which is always indicated by the place that actually gets spoken in communication. ¹⁴ The figural is that which erupts in the thin framework of Freudian reality, indicating but not communicating or directly showing this non-place. Put inelegantly, the figural is the singularity or the event-ness of the particular event, felt or experienced as an inarticulate trace (*i.e.*, experienced as an affect). And as we saw, Freud himself provides the very conceptual tools to conceive of the figure in his

¹² Lyotard, *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud*, 230; my translation.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 231

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 229

notion of primary (for lack of a better term, “true”)¹⁵ as opposed to secondary (“communicative-real”) process. By drawing on Freud in this manner, Lyotard seeks support for his claim that transcendent structures of meaning are but thin, impoverished veneers imposed upon a much deeper process of permanent becoming.

It must therefore be kept in mind that what interests Lyotard in his turn to Freud can also be tied to a social fact that is at the same time to be furthered as a practical aim: the unprecedented phenomenon of political revolt by the affluent young, in many cases with no traditional political aim or transcendent structure of political criticism in mind. In short: a politics of the event, a politics consistent with Lyotard’s increasing drift away from Marxism and revolutionary party politics. I say that this is a “social fact” as well as a practical aim because for Lyotard, the May ’68 and the March 22 Movement, as social facts, resonated deeply with and went on to further inform his philosophy.¹⁶ The task for Lyotard, faced with such social facts, was to articulate, without domesticating, and, if possible, to foment such “evental” political interventions.¹⁷

This can be explained as follows. There is “modern politics,” in the sense of contesting the state of a field of discourse, communication, or representation: in Freudian terms, politics in the sense of contesting an actual state of reality, usually in the name of a counterfactual state of reality that is claimed to be more just or in some other way superior. There are two broadly-construed ways of doing this. An example of contesting the given state of reality by *reform* would be by working with or on behalf of, or simply voting for, a certain contender for parliament, or even to gain office as a member of parliament oneself, so as to change how things are run; one thinks for instance of right-wing populist tickets based on “lowering taxes” or

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 167: “Il y a, dans l’œuvre de Freud, un langage de savoir et il y a un travail de vérité.... La vérité *ne parle pas, stricto sensu*; elle travaille. La connaissance parle, elle appartient à la distance, à la rupture avec la chose, que le discours exige.” Roughly: “There is, in Freud’s work, a language of knowledge [corresponding to secondary process] and a work of truth [corresponding to primary process].... Truth *doesn’t speak, in the strict sense*; it works. Knowledge speaks, it belongs to the distance, to the rupture with the thing, that discourse demands.” (emphases in the original)

¹⁶ In the words of Peter Dews, the March 22 Movement (*Mouvement du 22 Mars*) was “the spontaneist, anti-authoritarian wing of the May [’68] movement.” See *Logics of Disintegration: Post-Structuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory* (London and New York: Verso, 1987), 111.

¹⁷ See especially *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud*, 305–316: how does one “give an account” of the March 22 Movement that does not thereby incorporate it into a nihilating system of transcendence?

“cleaning up corruption,” both of which contest a particular state of reality in the name of another, counterfactual state of reality that is purportedly better. In Canada, one hopes—and this indicates the profundity of our country’s investment in the reality principle—that the New Democratic Party will oust the Conservatives in the next parliamentary election. Contesting the state of reality by *revolution*, by contrast, could involve seizing or overthrowing the state, as in the Leninist strategy; in other words, instituting a new order from above. Contrarily, revolution could follow the anarchist strategy of simply smashing the state *tout court*, or at least rendering it irrelevant so as to institute and carry out politics direct-democratically, from below. At both ends of the revolutionary spectrum, the aim is still to change the given state of reality to a preferred, counterfactual state of reality. Thus under “modern politics” we have reform and revolution as means of changing a given state of reality to a preferred state of reality.

But reality in the Freudian sense, as we saw, is only the barest skeleton of the given. If this account of reality is compelling, one can question how much all such modern political moves and strategies, as matters of communication between persons and interests, *i.e.*, representations, actually link up to or “express” the underlying primary process, the lived experiences, and, to use a problematic term, deeper natures of individual political actors. For Lyotard, in addition to politics in the reformist and revolutionary senses of contestation of the given state of reality, conceived in representational terms, there is politics, more precisely *a-politics*¹⁸, as the *contestation of the very field of representation itself*. In the Freudian terms employed here, this would be politics as *the contestation of reality as such*. The *a-politics* of Lyotard’s position is therefore not the taking or dissolving of power, a given *state* of reality, by reformist or revolutionary means. Rather, it is the thoroughgoing rejection of politics as constituting a field of representation and therefore, of meaningful action. Such an *a-politics*, in outline, accords with Lyotard’s libidinal philosophy of the event, as expressed in *Discourse, Figure* and related texts. But it also describes, for Lyotard, what was genuinely novel about the protests of May ’68 and the March 22nd movement.

¹⁸ The introduction to Lyotard’s *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud*, translated as “Adrift” in *Driftworks*, admirably captures this rejection of reformatory and revolutionary politics as such, and the adoption of a stance that is activist, but not political or of the order of the political, “pas politique.” See also 202–209 of the same text.

If my hypothesis is correct, then *Discourse, Figure* is best read as a theoretical primer on the a-politics argued to be latent in the scene of politics. But the very fair question of what such an a-politics would look like in practice should here be posed. Empirically, political activism of the type espoused by the libidinal Lyotard (in the ballpark of punk, Situationism, etc.) was recuperable by capitalism. The brief efflorescence of desire which rejected both parliamentary politics and Leftist revolutionary frameworks was accommodated by more permissive and flexible political structures and more perversely gratifying commodity markets. Granting capital's ability to accommodate insurrectionary desire, there is apparently nothing revolutionary in a politics—even an “a-politics”—which rejects revolution. The ethical/political cul-de sac to which *Discourse, Figure* leads in *Économie libidinale* is expressed, of course, as the latter's accelerationist philosophy of capital.

But the question may be posed more theoretically. If the libidinal philosophy forged in *Discourse, Figure* is to mainly be useful in helping us to think and map out aleatory irruptions in the scene of representation—on the libidinal band, to use the later parlance of *Économie libidinale*—then irrespective of Lyotard's protestations it is “tailist” and spontaneist, to use Lenin's designations; always catching up to the political event, always retrospective. Occupy and Idle No More *will have been* irruptions that the philosopher may reconstruct as—paradoxically—singular. Unless, of course, the philosopher maps out political phenomena and institutions with the express purpose of “conducting intensities,” of creating political effects, which is precisely the aim of the mature libidinal philosophy. The philosopher may aim to create two, three, many Nanterres, but then, precisely at the price of abandoning philosophy as politics for pure politics (masked) as philosophy. For better or for worse, gone is any dialectical relationship between the political upheaval and what it is supposed to articulate-negate. And while Idle No More may come to tolerate philosophy's retrospective, topographizing glance, it is unclear whether it would look as favourably upon the idea that its primary value lies in an axiologically ungrounded acceleration of intensities.

This, then, is the dilemma that hangs over *Discourse, Figure*, forty years on. The stakes of representation and the figural are ultimately political, which means that fine art and representation per se are intrinsically political. But where politics more broadly construed conceives of itself in much less aesthetic and much more ethical terms—witness Idle No More's calls for justice, rather than simple self-expression and power—the libidinal politician waivers between

280 *Symposium, vol. 17 no. 2 (Spring/Printemps 2013)*

latecomer to the event and cynical betrayer of a political language that has not yet abandoned the claims of a moral absolute.

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