A RETURN TO JEAN-FRANÇOIS LYOTARD'S
DISCOURSE, FIGURE
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WHY *DISCOURSE, FIGURE* NOW ?

What is remarkable about *Discourse, Figure* is how Lyotard takes three separate strands of intellectual enquiry – (1) philosophy, in particular phenomenology, (2) structuralist linguistics and poetics and (3) aspects of Freudian theory – all of which he has mastered to a very high level, and plaits them together in such a way that each strand is continuously stretched and re-configured by the other strands to produce an approach to desire, artistic expression and being-in-the world that is much more complexly layered and subtle in its dynamics than any of its three component parts. The continuous stretching and re-configuring takes place on both micro and macro levels. The detailed and knowledgeable readings of material within the individual strands are always informed by fully internalized perspectives drawn from the other strands. For example, the notion of opacity in signification that Lyotard prises out of the linguistics literature owes an enormous amount to the concept of thickness explored in his reading of phenomenology, but there is a kind of blending: neither philosphy nor linguistics is made to predominate.

Something very similar happens in the extended analysis of "A Child Is Being Beaten" by Freud1 where an approach drawn from generative linguistics is essential for Lyotard's conclusions about the complex relatioship between phantasm and verbal expression. The cumulative effect of this small-scale *engrenage* is extremely important, but the interaction between the strands at a macro level is equally vital: important conceptual limitations within the individual strands are overcome by the three-fold nature of the plait. For example, the residually Cartesian quality of the subject in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty is remedied by the impersonal element in structuralist linguistics and the Freudian unconscious, while the flat, mental space of structuralism is remedied by Merleau-Ponty's sense of embodiment and the depth from which Freudian drives come, and the rather dialectical relationship between conscious and unconscious in Freud (and Klein) is remedied by anti-Hegelianism and the aspect of permutation and internal reflection in structuralist linguistics. Lyotard uses this tripartite interaction to transform the nature of the three terms in a kind of theorem – Unconscious, Subject and Artistic Expression – in such a way as to completely alter the character of the flow that exists between them.

This shift in Lyotard can best be understood if one looks at an author whose Freudian work on literature he occasionally refers to and rejects: Charles Mauron. The latter takes the work of, say, Molière or Nerval, and treats it as a coherent body of symptoms that reflects the content of an equally coherent phantasmic world. Both the phantasmic world and the literary work are predicated on a kind of default position Cartesian subject that is taken for granted without any discussion. The content of the phantasm is discharged via the literary work, but in a sense all that happens is that Archimedes has displaced a mass of water equivalent to the mass of his body, or A = A = A, or there are three oranges on the fruit machine (boing! boing! boing!). Lyotard makes a conscious choice to start from a non-Cartesian subject and an anti-Hegelian position in terms of the dialectic and the

role of the spirit, and he then establishes on the one hand the unconscious as being radically heterogeneous to this subject and on the other hand the space of the artistic work as a kind of hall of mirrors (Russian Formalist criticism is important here) in which the work of the phantasm can be played out rather than its content simply being repeated. There are immensely important possibilities here which go beyond the purely aesthetic dimension that *Discourse, Figure* seems to occupy: the subject can come to understand/feel her dreams and/or desires as operational possibilities rather than as manifestations of a transcendent spirit external to her or as mere escapist fantasy. One could say that the mechanics of *Libidinal Economy* were worked out in *Discourse, Figure*. The plays of Marivaux, with their fully mapped out phantasmic subtexts, complex relationship between desire and language and self-reflective *"double registre"* structure could almost be said to epitomize the combination of phantasm, subject and artistic text that Lyotard puts forward. It is worth adding that a comparison of *Discourse, Figure* with more recent American work in what can broadly be called neurophilosophy might be fruitful, even if there are definite "cultural" differences. Arnold H. Modell's *Imagination and the Meaningful Brain* (2003)2, which brings together phenomenology, the work of Lakoff and Johnson, neuroscience, philosophy of language, linguistics, psychoanalysis, the reinterpretation of Freud and some discussion of art, would be a good place to start: the different elements and the way they are combined remind one of *Discourse, Figure*, even if the explicitly anti-Cartesian and anti-Hegelian philosphical stance is lacking. The work of Catherine Malabou is beginning to bridge the gap between modern French thought and American neurophilosophy.

'SURREFLEXION'

How then is *Discourse, Figure* a seminal work of poststructuralist critique? First, it is the most comprehensive engagement with the full range of structuralist, phenomenological, Freudian and analytic philosophies of language in relation to aesthetic events. Second, that engagement has a greater range and subtlety of reference than found in other works. Thus we find an extensive critical reading of Merleau-Ponty, Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Frege and many others but this reading is exemplified, tested and enriched through aesthetic critical appreciations determined to give voice to the works and, more deeply, to a material event released by them.

Perhaps this dual function explains the delays and omissions in the reception of Lyotard's longest and most academic book. It does not lend itself to simple summaries either of its main lines of critique, or of its aesthetic positions. This is because Lyotard always sets his conceptual and critical innovations in the context of tactful and inventive interactions with an astonishing number of works. This surprising range covers the types, levels and detail of those works. Lyotard does not restrict himself to a particular medium but instead shifts from literature, art, theatre, sculpture, poetry and the graphic arts with ease and rapidity. Within each of these media he again avoids a narrow focus on set categories, for instance around epochs, styles, genres or high and low types. All he seems to require is an art event, whether in quattrocento painting, Russian political posters, Shakespeare or Cummings. Yet isn't this range suspicious in itself since it might betray a shallow and undiscriminating approach, a crude conceptual framework, incapable of doing justice to the individual qualities of works and movements?

Lyotard avoids the trap of superficial interpretations inherent to broad surveys by seeking to draw out singular properties and qualities of art-works in relation to his own conceptual innovations. This means that his approach to each work is at the same time extremely flexible, in the sense that his own ideas and vocabulary are shaped by the work, and capable of great inventiveness, in the sense that his interpretation sets each work in critical context yet also defines a novel position for the reception of the work. This explains the scholarly rigour and depth of *Discourse, Figure*, at the level of its notes and references. It also explains its capacity for acutely sensitive ekphrasis, a quality repeated and perhaps intensified throughout Lyotard's career. He was always more than a philosopher *of* art or painting, where the work stands as a frame for ideas and theories. Instead, his writing enters into a productive aesthetic exchange or reverberation where a text comes to supplement the art-work while the work leads and shapes a line of thought. This intensification of the relation of thought to art in Lyotard's work has recently been given a new life through Leuven University Press's new series of volumes Jean-François Lyotard: Écrits sur l'art contemporain et les artistes/Writings on Contemporary Art and Artists.

For an example of Lyotard's critical style and his conceptual innovation within a body of work, rather than over or before it, we can turn to his development of the concept of *surreflexion* ["hyper-reflection"] from his reading of Mallarmé in *Discourse, Figure*. It is interesting to contrast Lyotard's approach to Deleuze's and Badiou's, who both take a formal set of ideas from Mallarmé. Once drawn from his work, these ideas of the dice throw and the event can happily exist in abstraction from their crucible.3 This is not the case for Lyotard's *surreflexion* because this concept is a refinement of one of the central concepts of *Discourse, Figure*, the figural. This in turn offers an important lesson in reading Lyotard's book, since it is always a temptation to focus on some of its key terms (as Deleuze did in relation to the figural in his work on Francis Bacon4). Yet each time this is done, the term dies a little, because each is designed to exist always in modulation with works, events and qualifying concepts such as *surreflexion*.

But what is *surreflexion*? It is a distortion of discourse brought about by the "space of reference."5 According to Lyotard, in standard structuralist versions of the relation of signified to signifier, there is reflection of the designated thing in the signification associated with it. This reflection belies any claimed arbitrary relation between signifier and signified. For instance, in a picture poem the shape of a ship in the outline of the verses becomes a facet of their signification. However, for Lyotard, the blank spaces and patterns surrounding the words of Mallarmé's *Coup de dès* undo this transferral from extended space to space of signification and also disturb the structure of discourse between signifying terms. The space of reference "produces anomalies in discourse" and "thereby renders itself visible." (DF, 72/71) Yet here is the subtlety of Lyotard's reading. It is not referents that thereby become visible. The anomalies in discourse are themselves not discursive. The space of reference is not an inert measurable geometric space. Instead, Mallarmé's work renders visible a *process* rather than a *thing*. This process is a sensual disruption in discourse itself, rather than in the senses or in perception. So even the meaning of "rendering visible" is transformed by Lyotard, a transformation he studied over many years in the work of Cézanne and in dialogue with Merleau-Ponty.

To render visible is not to allow a perception through sight, nor is it to define a sensation of seeing. It is rather to disrupt perception by removing its claim to objects or to things – the perception of a phoneme or a group of letters. It is also to disrupt sensation as the sensing of a feeling by detaching it from well-defined feelings related to given significations – the feeling of sadness. Instead, seeing becomes at one with a material event. This is a sensation of a resistance to objectification allied to the bursting through of an event surpassing perception, sensations and significations. The plunge into an expanse with no limits surrounding Mallarmé's constellations, such that any naming of the stars or guidance by them will always by insufficient, a teetering over an unnameable abyss: "The *Coup de dès* can only be part of the chance-abyss." (DF, 70/69) *Surreflexion* is then the beyond of reflection in the alliance of a negative disruption of reference and signification and of the emergence of sensual desire within a material event. This alliance will return again and again in Lyotard's work, though in his middle period it will be tamed in the concept of the sublime, with its Kantian fear of desire.

MERLEAU-PONTY AND *DISCOURS, FIGURE*

Discours, figure is very much written within a framework laid down by Merleau-Ponty, whose *Phenomenology of Perception*6 is very much a response to Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit*.7 Merleau-Ponty had a radical sense of being-in-world: humans are simply not human unless they are embodied, and truth is immanent to the "flesh" of the world into which humans are completely bound rather than something which is spiritual and transcendent. But there is a "chiasm" in the flesh of the world between the human self and that which is other – not absolutely other, because the flesh is the same, but sufficiently other to create the necessity to know it and interact with it, and also the space in which to do so. This is not a totalized Newtonian chessboard space but one characterized by depth, thickness and opacity, all qualities richly explored by Lyotard in the early parts of *Discourse, Figure*. These qualities emerge because of two aspects of embodied reality: 1) the self moves in relation to the depth of the world and builds up her understanding through combinations of individual perspectival views (of course the world can also move in relation to her), and 2) the world is opaque because at any one point, the self only sees a front and not a back, even if she can move to see a different front and not see a different

back (her experience of her own back is not dissimilar, and it is partly because of this that she knows the world has a back).

Both these aspects of embodied reality are very central to the early phases of *Discourse, Figure*, as are also the notions of the active eye and the word as gesture, again drawn from the work of Merleau-Ponty. But what is important is that this means that there is a natural potential for a kind of thickness in the space of the glance or language, even if this can be lost in classical theories of visual perception or signification in philosophy. This thickness of the glance or language fills the chiasm between the self and the world and is most fully developed in the arts, and Lyotard proposes to explore these arts that fill this chiasm in *Discourse, Figure*. But Lyotard's discussion of the arts is different from that of Merleau-Ponty, not simply because the latter is mainly associated with visual art, while Lyotard also examines desire in language (Merleau-Ponty actually writes very interestingly on language), but because Merleau-Ponty uses proto-modernist and modernist painters such as Cézanne, the cubists and Klee to recover a kind of pre-discursive or pre-propositional mode of seeing that is ignored in classical philosophical theories of perception (although he did die at a relatively young age, and it it perfectly legitimate to argue that he was taking his thought into a different dimension when he did so). Lyotard sets his exploration within the wider framework of the tension in Judeo-Christian culture between the transcendent word and the image, with the figural in art being a kind of recovery of pagan thought, capable of the non-dialectical *coincidentia oppositorum* of the Renaissance neo-Platonists. This is why *Discourse, Figure* is much more than a study of rhetoric or stylistics or simply a work of art/literary theory.

DISCOURSE, FIGURE, POSTSTRUCTURALISM AND RICOEUR

In spite of its many references to structuralist linguistics and poetics, *Discourse, Figure* is definitely a *post*-structuralist work. It is so precisely because of the thickness and "between-world" [or "inter-world"] Lyotard explores within the signifying space, even if he does use structuralism to establish that space in the first place. One can obtain a good idea of what Lyotard did by contrasting his treatment of Quattrocento Italian painting with that of Louis Marin in *Opacité de la peinture8*, a late work by Marin, which came out nearly twenty years after *Discourse, Figure* but which never really goes beyond the Word made Flesh on a very subtly evoked Greimasian signifying surface (which does not mean that it is not a very rich and profound book). There is another writer, though, who deals very beautifully with Desire in Quattrocento Italian painting: Julia Kristeva, in her essay on motherhood according to Giovanni Bellini in *Polylogue9*. Of course, Kristeva was responsible for *Revolution in Poetic Language10*, as seminal a poststructuralist text as *Discourse, Figure* and one that examines poetic language in a way that is close to Lyotard. However, it is important not to see phenomenology, structuralism and poststructuralism as discrete phases that replaced each other: both Lyotard and Kristeva very much construct their poststructuralisms out of a combination of phenomenology, structuralism and Freud. In this context, it is worth mentioning that the work of Ricoeur was also important for Lyotard. Ricoeur's response to Husserl was rather different to that of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, who were primarily drawn to the notion of the lifeworld (Lebenswelt), whereas Ricoeur was more interested in hermeneutics and problems connected with the symbol, religion, narrative, time and Freud. His philosophy of the self also opens out the elements of affect and passivity in Husserl to make them the basis for human moral action via a kind of replication of the self as other.

A way of exploring the difference between structuralism and what Lyotard is doing in *Discourse, Figure* is to look at problems of interpretation in early troubadour poetry. Only a few years after the appearance of the original French edition of Greimas' *Structural Semantics* in 196611, Pierre Bec produced a two-part article which applied the book's methods in a very intelligent and thorough way to the work of Bernart de Ventadorn, a troubadour poet who was active in that capacity in the third quarter of the twelfth century. The article came out in the *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale* in 1968 and 1969 and is called "La Douleur et son univers poétique chez Bernard de Ventadour."12 As its title implies, Bec's study is very much about establishing a kind of particularized semantic tone for Bernart's *oeuvre*. This is done with a great deal of subtlety: the semantic tone is spun from the textual material itself, treating it as a semantic field and building up patterns of cluster and contrast. In comparaison with more traditional critical approaches which rely on correlating authorial intentional, cultural context and/

or reader response with "proof" extracted from the text, Bec's type of exploration seems much less "pasted on" or projected. Nevertheless, he is still treating text as discourse with a homogeneous and identifiable meaning, even if this meaning is immanent to the text and does not represent one which has a transcendental relation to it.

But would this method be of equal use in relation to a famous work by the first of the troubadour poets, Guilhem de Peitieu (1071-1127)? The ambiguity of "Farai un vers de dreyt nien" ("I will make a song of pure nothing") has given rise to a myriad of interpretations. Firstly, there is the problem of whether the poem is a light-weight riddle or parody of medieval philosophical argument or a much more serious attempt to deal with core existential problems of love or non-identity. More recent critics have seen the poem as very serious, but they have sought "solutions" in it to the "dilemmas" it poses, either, say, the physical aspect of love compensating for the uncertainty of its non-essence or imagination for the comparable uncertainty of non-identity. However, this is to treat the poem as discursive, when the extraordinary complexity, variety and cumulative effect of its different kinds of negation, contradiction, paradox, disjunctive chiasmus and quasi-negation by dismissal make it an astonishing exercise in the disruption of discourse. One finds: x is neither A nor B when A or B are all it can be, x is both A and B when A and B are mutually exclusive, A which would define x is not known, chiasmi such as "Anc non la vi et am la fort" ("Never her have I seen and I love her greatly"), statements which are undermined by phrases indicating that it does not matter to the poet and so forth. This "anti-logic" is assisted by the relatively undetermined semantic value of conjunctions or their absence and the tendency towards ellipsis. Of course, these are essential elements in poetic language, both in actual poetry and in spoken language when it has a poetic quality. However, the intuition of the critics to give the poem a complex theme was a very understandable one: it does indeed have an affirmative quality, and it is not that of a boistrous parody or clever riddle, but this affirmative quality is more like an imaginary number than what one would expect from straightforward discourse. An example of an imaginary number is the square root of a negative number, that is a number that can be produced and used but which cannot be expressed as a number because of contradictions in the process used to produce it. The square root of a negative number cannot be expressed as a number because only a negative and positive number when multiplied give a negative, but a number squared can only be two negatives or positives. Yet, the square root of a negative number is often used in applied mathematics. Lyotard's profound use of skepticism, multiple perspective and negation in a search for truth has many affinities with what is going on in "Farai un vers de dreyt nien" and imaginary numbers.

It is worth asking if Bec's study suits Bernart more than it would suit Guilhem's poem because Bernart is moving towards the conventionalization of troubadour love poetry in the thirteenth century and he is not as complex as his great predecessors, one of whom was Guilhem. There is something to this, but Bec's approach does tend to smooth over the very disruptive moments of desire that can be found in Bernart, although his poems usually finish on a more placid note. Structuralism could have a rather Hegelian quality of synthesizing contradictions, which is why Lyotard's thought is so fundamentally different from it. Of course, disruptive, polymorphous and aberrant desire are precisely what the great early troubadour poets are about, no more so than in the quite extraordinary fourth stanza from Jaufre Rudel's "Quan lo rossinhols el folhos" ("When the nightingale in the leafy wood"), in which the poet is riding after his lady, but his horse is slowing down, and he seems to be moving backwards, while she is slipping away. The stanza is a figural event not simply because it involves desire and is very dreamlike and phantasmic but in a much deeper way because it links the stretching of space and the slowing down of time with a paradoxical hastening of desire. This is particularly enhanced by the use of the verb "to go" ("anar") with a rhyming participle or adverb on three occasions : "vau ... corren" ("go ... running"), "an fugen" ("goes fleeing") and "vai ... len" ("goes slowly"). Can desire so radically alter one's sense of internal space and time that it can become the means by which one goes beyond mere calibrated matter and discovers the thickness of universal space and time?

PHANTASM: BLOCKED OR UNLEASHED?

Is *Discourse, Figure* a work of Freudian psychoanalysis? No. Does the book owe a great debt to Freud? Yes. In the closing passages of his work Lyotard makes the stakes clear. The unconscious relates to the figural event through the phantasm. The phantasm disrupts the order of discourse and its various orders of figure, along with the forms of power and hierarchy associated with them. The death drive, Thanatos, operates as desire through the phantasm, rather than the pleasure principle, Eros. The unconscious is therefore a matter of disruption and transformation, rather than a return to and strengthening of identity. All this Lyotard owes to Freud. Psychoanalysis and Freudian movements, however, allow for a return to the pleasure principle and a betrayal of desire, resistance to the death drive and a deep misunderstanding of the phantasm, and hence of the unconscious. This works through a return to the figure in three guises against the phantasm, explained by Lyotard in relation to the psychoanalysis of the art-work.

When the phantasm in the work is associated with an image and figure, these become a scene for readers to exercise their own fantasies on. Instead of a release of the unconscious through a troubling novel phantasm, there is a reassuring mirroring of work and reader in a familiar and standard set of images and environments. The figure as form in the work invites an interpretation where the form is taken as implying a "latent organisation" (DF, 355/356), a signifying plan and purpose. Finally, the matrix figure fixes the author and interpreters into a single line where the matrix becomes the key to the life, the work and its decoding. All of these are the work of the figure and of the pleasure principle against the figural and desire because in each case an entity is confirmed in its identity: the reader is brought to a halt in the pleasure of the replication of the phantasm in the scene (a likeness of phantasms); the work is classified and ossified in the pleasure of discovering its organisation behind the form (a repeated pattern of explanation and construction against their destruction); authors are plumbed and charted as generated by the matrix figure, which also allows for their deciphering and codification (the single key to a life, unknown to it but knowable from the outside once the matrix is revealed).

These criticisms of the application of a crude version of psychoanalysis to art-works are now familiar to us. They were articulated, for instance, in the almost contemporary book to *Discourse, Figure*, Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*.13 The lasting interest in Lyotard's work lies elsewhere, in the separation of the figural from figure and in its definition as a disruptive and creative process associated with untamed phantasm and desire. This process is developed through his reading of Freud. Immediately after his cursory dismissal of psychoanalysis of the figure that elides the figural, Lyotard returns to Freud with the remark that Freud's study of the "artistic function" is the "work of truth" in opposition to a religious function of consolation (DF, 355-6/356-7). The idea of truth as work taken from Freud is very important for Lyotard and it never leaves him, returning, for example, in *Heidegger and "the Jews"*.14 The emphasis is on work rather than truth, which leads to an original and important point. Truth is not a settled relation between mental and physical items or a fixed and formal logical state. Truth is an unstable transformative process, an unmaking and making, rather than anything made or finalised. Truth is not the result of work. Truth is working at things.

We can understand this point in the operation of truth as opposed to the operation of religion. For Lyotard, following Freud, religion functions by consoling us from a bereft state by replacing it with belief. The certainty afforded by religion, for instance in relation to the sanctity of life, or the naturalness of certain loving relations but not of others, replaces mobile and insecure processes of becoming with fixed identities, oppositions and boundaries. This is consoling because such mobility is necessarily unsettling, a moment of loss and waiting, as well as an event of desire and production. Belief blocks desire and thereby gives us the illusion of possession and arrival. Even in religion this is only ever a false image though.

The truth of religion, as opposed to its operation of consolation, is that desire and the free work of the phantasm is still at work beneath its settled figures, for instance, in the relation between the certainty of the existence of a deity and the uncertainty of its arrival on earth, or its message, or judgement, or in the impossibility of its demands and commandments. The polymorphous nature of desire as worked through the unconscious and

the phantasm on an ever-transformed matter is fundamental to any understanding of Lyotard. Against the strictures imposed by religious consolation, belief and boundaries, he champions the polymorphous perversity of desire. Unleash the phantasm: anywhere, anyhow, whoever… Nothing is essential. The body knows of no essential zones. Boundaries are not prior conditions for desire. They are the result of its fixing.

From Lyotard's position, the tying of work to belief forms a false and damaging restriction of desire, as we saw in his analysis of the weak psychoanalysis of art-works. Art itself is unfettered work of truth. This is not in the sense where it is free of formal restrictions. Desire in the work, the figural, has to operate within figures and discourses. It is rather that the function of the figural is not subjected to the controlling rule of a higher function of belief that is posited as external to the work of truth. Importantly, this higher function can be found in crude psychoanalysis, stabilised religion, formal philosophical definitions of truth, general rules and transcendent codes or laws. This explains his extension of the religious operation well beyond its usual boundaries of cult and credo. Any transcendent order follows the religious consoling and distorting operation, no matter how much it protests its freedom from the historical manifestations of specific religions. Lyotard rarely mentions Nietzsche, yet his work echoes Nietzsche's themes on religion, the body, truth and desire.

Why is Nietzsche the great absent figure in Lyotard's work (and not only in *Discourse, Figure*)? It is because Lyotard suspects Nietzsche as an influential political thinker in relation to his work on truth. It is not Nietzsche but Nietzsche's followers that are suspect: "It is that we shall be 'artists' together or not at all. Those who believe themselves to be on the side of the artists already today, those who have taken Nietzsche and truth for themselves in order to laugh at others are not the least adherents [of] discourse. They only continue philosophy as a separate activity and continue to manipulate discourse as mark of knowledge." (DF, 17/11) Lyotard seeks a political togetherness in the work of truth as communal transformation. His great book is then framed by this enquiry with Freud into truth as a political, aesthetic unconscious and fleeting event – necessarily open to all.

THE FIGURAL (OR FIGURAL SPACE)

As might be supposed from its title, a conception of the figural plays a central role in *Discourse, Figure*. Broadly, it is a quality in artistic languages that deforms or deconstructs signification in the propositional sense of meaning and reference and permits a fusion of the self's desire and that towards which it is directed in the world. Lyotard only deals with examples of Western high culture from the Middle Ages onwards: he does not discuss non-Western, folk, middle-brow, popular or commercial culture. This gives a relatively heightened or individual (although not individualistic) quality to what Lyotard means by desire and the figural. He mainly concentrates on painting and poetry (or modernist prose), although there are occasional references to architecture, music or cinema. The historical range of the painting is very wide: from Romanesque illumination through Trecento and Quattrocento Italian art to more modern painters such as Cézanne, Van Gogh, Braque, Klee, Lhote or Pollock. The variation in the (mostly) poetry is more linguistic, with both English-speaking (Shakespeare, Donne, Hopkins, cummings) and French (Corneille, Mallarmé, Breton, Eluard, Butor) figures being included. The point, though, is not that Lyotard has covered an exceptional range of art forms and languages – clearly he has not done this and did not intend to do so – but that his notion of the figural transcends the limitations referred to by Merleau-Ponty when he says that most people assume that all languages behave like their own, something that could equally be said in relation to an individual's chosen art form. He has achieved this on the basis of a very beautifully constructed philosophic conceptualization of the notion at the beginning of *Discourse, Figure*, one that of course proceeds from phenomenology but goes beyond it. (It is worth mentioning that Lyotard also refers to the figural as figural space, and this may give a better sense of what he means by it.) The figural is situated between designation and signification in that it is a residue of designation within signification that disrupts it and produces meaning. But Lyotard has proposed a much more complex overlap and more concrete between-world (Zwischenwelt) than is normal in phenomenological discussions of the pre-discursive and propositionality. One is perhaps coming close to the creative imagination or imaginal world explored by Henry Corbin in Iranian Sufism and the work of Ibn 'Arabî.15 The latter's *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq* constructs a densely textured between-world by "ballasting" an invisible other-wordly object of desire with a visible earthly

one and by filling the spaces between the poems by the repetition of the same group of images in different configurations across the poems. The figural is also an opacity at the origin and core of language, the eye and the glance that provoke the use of language but remain within it, thus splitting it. Here, one is reminded of the fact that while drawing or painting after life or putting something into words, one seems to be feeling by touch in the dark, but when one comes back much later to the finished work, there is a solidity or clarity of which one was completely unaware while one was doing it. The figural is also truth, but here Lyotard means *alētheia*, a pre-Socratic truth which is holistic and not contrasted with the false. *Alētheia* and *eros* are both extensively discussed by Heidegger in *The Essence of Truth*16, but Lyotard gives the lack of differentiation in the former and the force of the latter infinitely more substance by his recourse to and reinterpretation of the Freudian unconscious. The figural is an event: this is because it is a coalescence of the unconscious and expression in such a way that there is not a precise cause and effect. This idea is present in Merleau-Ponty when he says that one needs to put one's thoughts into words in order to develop them and find out what they are, but Lyotard has a much more radical and intense sense of the event. It is worth noting that the concentration on poetry and painting in *Discourse, Figure* means that its sense of the event is more spatial than temporal: for a concise detailing of this distinction, see Whitehead's *The Concept of Nature*, pp. 52-53. The unconscious and expression are explored throughout the rest of the book via the material drawn from structuralist linguistics, studies on pictorial space, poetics and Feudian theory, but the "philosophic anchor" is never lost. This is unusual, as linguistics or art and literary theory often become detached from philosophic concerns. For example, linguistic pragmatics may draw on Peirce, Austin and Grice, but it "dephilosophizes" them; Panofsky became a kind of cultural historian, moving further and further away from his roots in the thought of Cassirer, and Bahktin's ideas on carnival and the novel are not always connected with his more abstract and philosophical writings on language. But it is precisely this combination of the philosophical and the concrete which permits Lyotard to go beyond the alienation of *homo faber* from the product of his labour to how the self can use a rigorous but quasi-mystical labour to overcome her alienation from her own desire.

MORE THAN TRUTH IN PAINTING

Discourse, Figure does not only close with a discussion of truth, it opens with one too. Both sets of remarks on truth expand and clarify the scope and import of Lyotard's work. It could be assumed that, given the aesthetic and artistic focus of his main studies, the book defends a restricted account of truth. Truth would then be a way of determining the essence of art. Art would be a way to a different kind of truth. Neither of these related claims is accurate. This is because Lyotard defends a view of truth where the event associated with the figural has effects in realms outside the aesthetic. Such events are not strictly artistic but rather sensual. Yet even this sensuality fails to account for truth, if truth is restricted to the sensual event. Instead, the sensual event must be seen in its widest and most important effects as political. As such it is radically progressive, in the sense of transformative and liberating. The truth of art is to make established forms of knowledge and forms of discourse crumble. It is to move into the spaces left by these tremors with new communal creative energy.

Lyotard explains this political scope by following Freud to a novel definition of utopia in relation to truth. Utopia in truth does not mean an ideal future state that we can represent. It is not the true destination we should be aiming for and that reveals a hidden or lost essence. Instead truth as utopia is rather something that cannot be aimed for from within a given state of knowledge and current forms of discourse. It is therefore indicated, not by pictures or descriptions, nor by abstractions or ideals, but "by giving the invisible to seeing." (DF, 17/12) This means that the role of the artist is to move beyond established principles and well-formed spaces through two effects: confusion and gift. For Lyotard, still following Freud, the dream and the phantasm are works of confusion. They deconstruct "the internal consistency of a system," thereby creating an opening, a "floating attention," an aberrant truth when measured according to signification and knowledge. This event-like truth belongs to art.

But is this not all sophistry? What are we to make of the contradiction set in the gift of seeing that is neither picture nor representation? How can we speak of truth that is not about consistency in a system or accordance

with facts of knowledge? In order to do justice to Lyotard's ideas it is essential not to be cornered into an oppositional logic by these questions. As Keith Crome has shown, Lyotard often returned to questions of sophistry in order to deny the simple alternative of reason versus unreason (for instance, in *The Differend*).17 Lyotard is not presenting us with a mysterious other to reasonable truth in an aesthetic form somehow outside the grasp of any system. His lesson is quite different. It is rather that systematic truth is not *all* truth.

There are events expressed through the figural, demanding novel ways of feeling and thinking beyond established knowledge and significations. He wants to teach us how it is possible to see, without knowing what we see. He wants us to be open to the feeling that this event is not an independent form of experience, but rather how life renews itself and goes beyond its boundaries in communal events released, for example, by the figural in art.

EXCURSUS ON CARLO CRIVELLI'S *THE VISION OF BEATO GABRIELE FERRETTI* (A "HOW TO" ON LYOTARD'S GIFT …)

Carlo Crivelli is not a painter who is mentioned in *Discourse, Figure*: he is one of those Italian Quattrocento painters who was never fully Albertian but whose works are not necessarily naïve or backward. *The Vision of Beato Gabriele* is from about 1489-90 and was painted for a church in Ancona but is now in the National Gallery in London. The Beato was a learned and deeply pious Franciscan of noble birth who had visions of the Virgin and Child in his cell and in a wood near the friary of which he was a part. It is one of the latter visions that is shown in the work in the National Gallery, albeit in a slightly peculiar way, as the visions took place at night, and there are figures in the landscape background clearly engaged in daytime activities. But this is only one of a number of peculiarities, the most striking of which is that a fictive classical fruit swag at the top of the painting and "in front" of it casts an uniquivocal shadow on the sky depicted "in" the painting. There is a double negation leading to a possible aporia here, which would not have been resolved by the now lost frame. The "real" swag is casting a shadow on the "fictive" sky and therefore indicating its "fictive" nature, but its "reality" is predicated on the same conventions as that of the sky, so it is simultaneously undermining its own "reality." But there is a more fruitful line of argument: there is a strong sense of the self-referential and internally self-reflective in the treatment of pictorial space in Quattrocento Italy, something made especially clear in the frequent indications on *cartellini* in Italian pictures of this time that such and such a painter made or painted *me* ("me fecit, pinxit or pinsit"). Indeed, for *The Vision of Beato Gabriele Ferretti*, Crivelli has inscribed his signature in the depicted earth of the painting in its lower right-hand corner. But this is not just a game: the desire to encounter and the actual encounter with the Virgin and Child in the woods at night in the Marche are not trivial, but they can be diminished by authority and manipulation when a transparent screen reveals the Word made Flesh to the subject who responds to her master's voice (woof! woof!). But the plenitude of Desire, incorporating both the desiring self and that which she desires, can be made Flesh in a signifying space that has thickness and is a between-world (Zwischenwelt). The polysemous has realized the full potential of the polymorphous, and the double "non" can overcome the single "non" inextricably bound up with the "nom" of the father.

This quasi non-space excavated out of contradiction is intrinsically very different from the constructed and enframed space examined in Marin's *Opacité de la peinture*, which is subtly generated but still "genetically" determined and unified by the vanishing point, with figures "spreading" themselves uniformly across it. Marin also explicitly relates this space the Word made Flesh, although this link becomes increasingly rich and complex in the course of the book. Crivelli also uses disruptive visual dynamics in such a way that *The Vision of Beato Gabriele Ferretti* comes very close indeed to the connectivity between simultaneous but normally separate events in space in the passage cited above by Whitehead. This is particularly true of the apparition of the Virgin and Child: its scale and the "logic" of apparitions would place it behind the sky, but the extensive use of real gold as a pigment in its depiction, and its proximity to the fruit swag pull it forward to where it almost seems to hang in front of the painting. Crivelli is exploiting the "dual switch" projection/recession or in front of/seen in the gap between ambiguities in two-dimensional representations of three dimensional space, something which is quite common in his work and is to be found in later painters, such as Gaugin, Popova and Magritte. It is

worth noting that there are real affinities between how thses spatial ambiguities function and the *sophismata*, that is propositions that can be both true and false, which were extensively explored by thirteenth and fourteenth century Western phiosphers, such as Jean Buridan and Richard Kilvington. This kind of space argued and engineered from contradiction and ambiguity has to be worked at each time it is approached: the self never passively receives her Desire. She always has to find it for herself, which means that she has power over it and responsibility for it.

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NOTES

1. Sigmund Freud, " 'A Child is Being Beaten': A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of Sexual Perversion" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII (1917-1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*. Trans. James Strachey. London: Hogarth Press, 1958, 175-204.

2. Arnold H. Modell, *Imagination and the Meaningful Brain*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003.

3. See Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*. Trans. Paul Patton. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994; and Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*. Trans. Oliver Feltham. London and New York: Continuum, 2005.

4. Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*. Trans. Daniel W. Smith. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

5. Jean-François Lyotard, *Discours, figure*. Paris: Klincksieck, 1971, 72. Translated by Antony Hudek and Mary Lydon as *Discourse, Figure*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011, 71. Subsequent citations will be to both editions (French/English), in-text, as follows: DF, 72/71. Translations here are our own.

6. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. Colin Smith. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962.

7. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. A. V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.

8. Louis Marin, *Opacité de la peinture: essais sur la représentation au Quattrocento*. Paris: Éditions de l'École des études en sciences sociales, 2006.

9. Julia Kristeva, *Polylogue*. Paris: Seuil, 1977.

10. Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Trans. Margaret Waller. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984.

11. Algirdas Julien Greimas, *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method*. Trans. Daniele McDowell, Ronald Schleifer, and Alan Velie. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1983.

12. Pierre Bec, "La douleur et son univers poetique chez Bernard de Ventadour." *Cahiers de civilisation medievale* 11 (1968): 545-71, 12 (1969): 25-33.

13. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*. Trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983.

14. Jean-François Lyotard, "Heidegger and 'the jews'." Trans. Andreas Michel and Mark Roberts. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990.

15. See Henry Corbin, *Alone with the Alone: Creative imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabî*. Trans. Ralph Manheim. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998.

16. Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth*. Trans. Ted Sadler. London/New York: Continuum, 2002.

17. See Keith Crome, *Lyotard and Greek Thought: Sophistry*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.