

SEEING THROUGH *DISCOURSE, FIGURE*

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In a text from 1990 entitled “*Notes du traducteur*” (“Translator’s Notes”), written in response to a series of short entries by Jacques Derrida, Lyotard asks:

“*S’attendre: réfléchi, transitif? Comment traduire ce dé-jeu.*”

which could be translated as “To wait for one another [or “for oneself,” or “to expect” if “*s’attendre*” is understood as “*s’attendre à*”]: reflexive, transitive? How to translate this un-game [or “foil,” if “*déjeu*” is taken as the substantive of “*déjouer*,” meaning to “thwart,” “elude”].” Lyotard answers his own question:

“*Dans la langue où il s’écrit*” [“In the language in which it is written (or writes itself)”].¹

The complexity of Lyotard’s phrasing, with its words taken at face value (all their possible meanings layered one on top of the other) and neologisms (“*dé-jeu*”) is indicative not only of the often perilous task that awaits any translator of Lyotard’s writing, but also of the ambiguity Lyotard invests in the proper pronoun (“*s’attendre*” as “waiting for each other/oneself”) and thus of the care he takes in foiling [*déjouer*] the grasp of the philosopher, the historian, and the biographer-critic. This evasion is playful, no doubt, but also deadly serious: un-game, *dé-jeu*. The solution Lyotard proposes to translate this elusive strategy is to translate the verb “*s’attendre*” in the language in which it is written, or writes itself—whatever language, presumably, this may be.

Waiting—for one’s thought to catch up with itself, or for someone else’s (e.g. Derrida’s)—seems to have been a strategy Lyotard deployed successfully over the course of his career to thwart [*déjouer*] his own autobiographical impulse—the impulse to leave behind a string of usable concepts that would ensure his legacy. Lyotard’s first “major”² book, *Discourse, Figure*, is a long one, which does everything it can to impede the reader’s eagerness to find a thesis, not only by interweaving dense philosophical passages with excursions on painting, photography, and poetry, but also by complicating the visual appearance of the book itself—its linear sequence of pages, from title page to index. In *Discours, figure* (that is, the Klincksieck edition first published in 1971 and now in its fifth printing), Lyotard multiplied footnotes (many of them half a page long) and included a wide variety of tables, drawings, plates, and figures. Lyotard’s care in misleading [*déjouer*] the philosophically-trained reader’s expectations went so far as apparently to imbed cryptic figures in the text: on page 143 of the French edition, a mysterious cross hovers over (or under) a discussion of Roman Jakobson’s “primary triangle”; another mark, on page 381, cuts across a key footnote in which Lyotard discusses Freud’s definition of “interpretation” as work, or working-through. Neither of these (intentional?) marks survives in the 2011 English edition.³

Another confounding *dé-jeu* Lyotard plays on the historicizing and philosophizing reader is the sequence of the central and arguably most unusual chapter in the book, “*Véduta on a Fragment of the ‘History’ of Desire.*”⁴ The

chapter's opening table of contents mis-enumerates its subheadings

1. *Neutral space and position of discourse*
- 2.1. *Figure and text in illuminated Romanesque manuscripts*
- 2.2 *Text and figure in Romanesque writings*
- 3.2 *The space of the new philosophy*
- 3.1 *Rotation of pictorial space*
4. *Inverse rotation*

as if the “rotation of pictorial space” listed under 3.1 had taken hold of the very textual space (that of the new philosophy) in which it is placed, and had played havoc with the demonstration's pretension to historical and logical progress.

By placing footnotes at the end of the book, as opposed to the French edition which places them at the bottom of each page, the English edition of *Discourse, Figure* has no doubt produced a more legible book, and therefore an object less liable to lose the reader in the ever shifting, overlapping relation between figural and textual spaces. The relegation of footnotes to the back of *Discourse, Figure* represents a significant modification, because it is in the footnotes that one senses, rather than reads, where Lyotard wished his book to go. For example, in note 31 in the chapter entitled “Desire in Discourse,” Lyotard quotes the personal recollection of Max Favalelli, the author of a book on rebuses:

I remember well those dishes at the bottom of which were reproduced quaint rebuses, which were for my parents a prized ally as I rushed each night, and without the slightest encouragement, to finish my soup in order to discover with joy the enigma hidden under the vermicelli or the tapioca, no matter how many times I had deciphered it before. (DF, n. 31, 460-461)

It is this apparently trivial scene that prompts Lyotard to realize, “after the fact,” that “the passion for the rebus during this period [the end of the 19th century] corresponded for the general public to the explorations by Mallarmé, Freud, or Cézanne for the avant-garde. In both cases we find a deconstructive play of linguistic and plastic spaces, as well as a destabilizing of the respective orders governing these spaces, of the scripts.” (DF, n. 31, 461) In the chapter devoted to Paul Klee—“The Line and the Letter”—Lyotard footnotes numerous anecdotes reported by the artist in which childhood plays a decisive role, such as this one:

I often say ... that worlds have come into being and continuously unfold before our eyes—worlds which despite their connection to nature are not visible to everybody, but may in fact only be to children, the mad, and the primitives. I have in mind the realm of the unborn and the already dead which one day might fulfill its promise, but which then again might not—an intermediate world, an interworld. (DF, n. 32, 446-447)

The above footnotes are among many in *Discourse, Figure* that refer to childhood as that which is pre-figured in the experience afforded by art. Although he relates the work of art to Donald Winnicott's transitional object—such as a toy mediating the child's world of phantasy and that of reality—Lyotard warns that any form of mediation (Winnicott's, or Melanie Klein's part object) “smacks of Hegelianism, and rests too comfortably on the omission of the radical heterogeneity of the unconscious process ...” (DF, 359) Lyotard's brand of childhood is far removed from the actual stage of human development, which can only be re-figured by and through adult discourse. The artwork's “playful dimension hinges on this inclusion of (linguistic, gestaltist) ‘seriousness,’ that is, of what is bound—in the element of difference, of unhampered mobility.” (DF, 384)⁵ It is this inclusion of the serious, the discursive, the bound in the free matter of difference that allows the artwork, itself a construct, to return once more to difference. Lyotard calls this play in three acts—from difference to opposition and back to difference—the double reversal, which constitutes the voided, oscillating interworld of the artwork. By resorting to what lies beneath or at an angle to the main thrust of the text—footnotes, figures—Lyotard performs the impossibility of incorporating figures like childhood into the discursive flow of his (or any) thesis.⁶

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After childhood, the other figural topos to undergo a similar discursive *dé-jeu* is politics—a subject equally bound up with Lyotard’s personal history. As John Mowitt writes in his introduction to *Discourse, Figure*, Lyotard finds a way (via Tran Duc Thao’s work on Alexandre Kojève) “to engage Marxism but, in accordance with the logic of negation, by not engaging it.”⁷ This tactic of avoidance leads Lyotard to cast Marx in the chapter “Opposition and Difference” as the theorist of difference, against Hegel’s dialectical mediation and close to Freud, at least when the latter accepts, “if only for a second,” the possibility of a nonhuman sex beyond the polarisation of masculine and feminine. (DF, 135) Politics makes a more figural appearance in *Discourse, Figure*, as a drawing of a flag inscribed with “*Révolution d’octobre*” [“October Revolution”], which Lyotard uses to illustrate the Freudian operations of displacement and condensation. Through a combination of these, the revolutionary flag—referencing a founding moment in the history of Communism—comes to bear a slogan reminiscent of the uprisings of May 1968, or of capitalism itself: “Let’s dream of gold” [*Rêvon d’Ore, Rêvons d’or*]. (DF, 242)⁸ The fluid transition of politics (revolution) into phantasy (gold) acts out what Lyotard did or could not articulate in *Discourse, Figure*—namely the disillusion in the wake of May 1968 and the temptation to re-inscribe desire-driven *dispositifs*, capitalism included, in the folds of the revolution.⁹ In the book’s opening chapter (“The Bias of the Figural”) Lyotard writes that “the present book is itself nothing more than a detour on the way to this critique [of ideology].” (DF, 14) More than three hundred pages later, during which ideology is scarcely mentioned, Lyotard tries to bring it back into the frame: “By now, my patient reader will no doubt have caught a glimpse of where we are headed. (...) The present text will not, however, reach this region itself—that of ideological critique.” (DF, 326) And, in case a hasty reader would want to save time by looking up “ideology” in the index of *Discourse, Figure*, she or he would discover: “ideology, critique of, which is the aim of this book.” (DF, 512)

If *Discourse, Figure* is a book more figurally than textually political, haunted by the spectre of Marx, one would have to look away from it, to other texts by Lyotard from the period or by commentators, to find clearer expressions of the figure’s relation to politics.¹⁰ This thwarting [*dé-jeu*] of the reader’s eye in search of tangible form, of ready-made theses, is precisely the discipline Lyotard advocated for the eye in order for it to catch sight (if indeed it is a question of the optical eye) of the figural, or at least to escape from the unceasing motion of the discursive: “The deconstruction of the field that brings its true unevenness to light requires the trussing up of the eye. Learning how to see is unlearning how to recognise.” (DF, 153) *Discourse, Figure* suggests a different economy of reading, a floating attention amidst the profusion of notes, cross-references, figures and plates. Through this discursive and figural noise, something resists—something like the background of Masaccio’s *The Tribute Money*, or Cézanne’s obdurate staring at Mount Saint-Victoire: “This space is not at all representational any more. Instead, it embodies the deconstruction of the focal zone by the curved area in the periphery of the field of vision.” (DF, 197)

Which raises the question: if beneath its scholarly exegeses of Hegel, Merleau-Ponty, Freud and others, *Discourse, Figure* is merely a sheaf of promises, indices, and allusions to ghosts that would periodically resurface throughout his career under such guises as childhood, the colour blue, the event, the affect-phrase—how, then, to translate the book’s particular *dé-jeu*? How, in other words, to make sense of the book’s delaying tactics [*s’attendre*] in setting the stage for Lyotard’s later work? Why, too, did it take so long for the book to be translated into English, forty years after its original publication? Because at the heart of *Discourse, Figure* lies a doubt that Lyotard could not dispel:

This doubt is simply that the visible, or better yet, the visual, is hardly dependent on an assemblage of desire, at least in its constitution; that it has nothing to do with the intrigues arising from the difference of the sexes; and that this difference only comes “after the fact” to impose its law—that of human language and its turns—upon the enigmatic but frank presence of the *here it is*.¹¹

Discourse, Figure made itself be waited upon [*s’est fait attendre*] because what it articulated came too early (the figural anticipates the differend, the affect-phrase, etc.¹²), or too late (by 1971 the figural revolution was over). The postmodern, among other notions firmly attached to Lyotard’s name, could be successfully ‘rebooted’ after its original theorising, as Kent Still has shown.¹³ The figure, however, inevitably entangled in the vicissitudes of

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language and its turns, always too late or too early to be recognised as “here it is,” could enjoy no such afterlife: all *Discourse, Figure* could do—and it is considerable—is describe its own struggle to dwell in the abstract, floating space between discourse and figure. How to translate the book’s *dé-jeu*? In the language in which it writes itself—that is, each time language tries to arrest its own motion in the act of writing.

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NOTES

1. Jean-François Lyotard “Notes du Traducteur.” *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* 115: 2 (April-June 1990), 286. Derrida’s entries were part of a collective computer-mediated conversation organised by Lyotard and Thierry Chapat in the context of their 1985 exhibition *Les Immatériaux*—see *Epreuves d'écriture*. Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1985. For English translations, see Derrida, “Writing Proofs” and Lyotard, “Translator’s Notes,” translated by Roland-François Lack, in *PLI: Warwick Journal of Philosophy* 6 (Summer 1997), 37-57.
2. The other of his books Lyotard considered “major” are *Economie Libidinale* and *Le différend*. Any account that would rely on these titles as steps in an intellectual trajectory would need, as Geoffrey Bennington points out, to acknowledge “Lyotard’s own narrative analyses ... and their subsequent dissolution ... into a much more complex and differentiated approach, which would induce suspicion about the effects of a narrative account” (*Lyotard: Writing the Event*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988, 3).
3. During the book’s preparation, the editors of University of Minnesota Press and I discussed the inclusion of the first of these two marks, and agreed on its significance, but to no avail. My thanks to Vlad Ionescu for emphasising the importance of these cryptic markings.
4. The “*Veduta*” chapter stands out for being entirely in italics; it is also the chapter that drifts furthest from the book’s main focus, namely the late 19th- and early 20th-century period informed by the Cézannian, Mallarméan and Freudian “revolutions”. (See Jean-François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*. Trans. Antony Hudek and Mary Lydon. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011, 159. Hereafter cited in text as DF.)
5. *Discourse, Figure* came out a year after Sarah Kofman’s *L’Enfance de l’art* (Paris: Payot, 1970), and the interests shared by the two authors has been, I believe, insufficiently noted. For example, Kofman writes: “The notion of ‘play’ does not, however, imply that art is a frivolous activity. Play is opposed not to seriousness, but to reality, when it grants a kind of hallucinatory satisfaction, as in dreams and hallucinatory psychosis” (Sarah Kofman, *The Childhood of Art: An Interpretation of Freud’s Aesthetics*. Trans. Winifred Woodhull. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988, 113).
6. As Mary Lydon aptly writes on the subject of childhood, quoting Lyotard: “‘Whatever does not permit itself to be written, in writing,’ is the quarry of *Discours, figure*” (“*Veduta on Discours, figure*.” *Yale French Studies* 99 [2001], 25-26).
7. John Mowitz, “The Gold-Bug” in *Discourse, Figure*, xv.
8. Phantasies about gold recur in *Discourse, Figure*—see Lyotard’s references to poems by Michel Butor and Gerard Manley Hopkins, 361-374 and 464, note 71, respectively.
9. This is the reinscription he would attempt in *Economie libidinale*, published in 1974. On Lyotard’s *désirévolution*—another condensation—see Sarah Wilson, *The Visual World of French Theory: Figurations*. New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2010, 162.
10. See in particular Brigitte Devisnes’ interview of Lyotard in *VH101* 2 (Summer 1970), 51-60 [included in *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud*, and translated as “On Theory: An Interview” in *Driftworks*. Ed. Roger McKeon. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984, 19-33]; and Jean-François Lyotard, “Psychanalyse et peinture” in *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, corpus 19, 2002, 69 [first published in 1972, then collected in *Des Dispositifs pulsionnels* under the title “Freud selon Cézanne.”]. For a discussion of *Discourse, Figure* as primarily a political book, see Bill Readings, *Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics*. London: Routledge, 1991, 39-40.
11. Jean-François Lyotard, *Que Peindre? Adami, Arakawa, Buren*, v. 1, Paris: La Différence, 1987, 61—English translation by Antony Hudek forthcoming (Spring 2012) in the Leuven University Press series *Jean-François Lyotard: Writings on Contemporary Art and Artists*.
12. On the generalisability of what emerges in *Discourse, Figure* see Peter Dews, “The Letter and The Line: Discourse and its Other in Lyotard.” *Diacritics* 14.3 (Autumn 1984), 49; and Geoffrey Bennington, “Before” in *Afterwards: Essays in Memory of Jean-François Lyotard*. Ed. Robert Harvey. Stony Brook, N.Y.: State University of New York at Stony Brook, 2000, 14.
13. Kent Still, “Lyotard and the Postmodern Condition—Version 2.0”, <http://www.lyotardproject.org/wp-content/uploads/Still-RWL.pdf>