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*Discourse, Figure* by Jean-François Lyotard. Translated by Antony Hudek and Mary Lydon. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011. 516 pp. Cloth \$39.95.

*Discourse, Figure* signifies an event. I mean this in a variety of ways. There has been a recent event: the publication of an English translation of Jean-François Lyotard's first major book. Its translation is an event forty years delayed and signifies the closing of a major gap in the translation of Lyotard's work. Of course, both "signify" and "event" are important words for Lyotard. *Discourse, Figure's* goal is to "signify the other of signification" (2011, 13, emphasis his). The question of the representability of events that concerns Lyotard throughout his career originates in *Discourse, Figure*. I use these two words to guide my review. First I outline the events of the book: its context and its argument. Within its argument, I focus on its central chapter in order to signify the uniqueness of *Discourse, Figure*. Finally, I offer some thoughts on what this event may signify for us now.

*Discourse, Figure* signifies an event in Lyotard's career. It is tempting to think of his oeuvre as discontinuous: the early phenomenological work breaks off in a flurry of political writings and activism; the psychoanalytic work coalesces into *Libidinal Economy*, a positively derivative book that makes a radical break with Marxism; language games yield incredulity toward meta-narratives; and his later preoccupation with Kant becomes a critique of the third critique in both *The Differend* and his work on the sublime.

Situated between his phenomenological work and *Libidinal Economy*, before the break with Marxism yet already politically ambivalent, *Discourse, Figure* signifies schism—from its title to its organization. Its first half deals with phenomenology and the second half with psychoanalysis. Between these is only the trompe-l'oeil of a *veduta*, the section on which I focus in a moment. The temptation to take a discontinuous view of Lyotard's career

now runs up against the temptation to see a continuity in which *Discourse, Figure* looks back at his first book, *Phenomenology*, and forward toward his next, *Libidinal Economy*. To look for such a continuity might be to attempt a narrative of which Lyotard himself would be incredulous. Nevertheless, there can be continuity without mastery: “To link is necessary; how to link is contingent” (Lyotard 1988, 29).

Lyotard only considered three of his books “real” books: *Discourse, Figure, Libidinal Economy*, and *The Differend* (Bennington 1988, 2). He regarded his other books as preparations for these major works. That it took forty years for the first of these “real” books to be translated is as remarkable as it is unfortunate. The translation had originally been undertaken by Mary Lydon, who published translations of two of its chapters in the early eighties. Her “Veduta on *Discours, Figure*,” a version of which was originally meant to serve as the introduction to her translation, opens by calling *Discourse, Figure*, “a notoriously difficult book” (2001, 10).<sup>1</sup> Sadly, Lydon’s untimely death later in 2001 ended her role in the work. The translation, already delayed in 2001, had to wait another ten years. Antony Hudek took on what I can only assume seemed an impossible task.

The length of time Lydon spent translating *Discourse, Figure*, along with her awareness of its delay recalls a third event: the length of time Lyotard spent writing the book and his awareness of that time: “If I had to wait as long as I did to see my own resistance to writing it fall, it was (among other reasons) without a doubt out of fear of being seduced, distracted from this goal, mesmerized by language” (2011, 14). Seventeen years passed between Lyotard’s first book, *Phenomenology*, and his first “real” book, *Discourse, Figure*. During those intervening years he drifted, the collected essays of that period appearing as *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud*. The drifting return to those two figures eventually became *Discourse, Figure*, his attempt to signify the other of signification without being mesmerized by signification.

Lydon’s statement that Lyotard’s book is difficult serves as an understatement. *Discourse, Figure* could be read almost as a novel or epic poem, replete with philosophical, aesthetic, psychoanalytic, religious, and political allusions. His discourse is figurative. His opening salvo, “This book protests: the given is not a text” (2011, 3), aims not just at its immediate interlocutor, Paul Claudel, and his statement that the sensible world is legible. It also takes aim at Jacques Derrida’s text-centered claim that “there is no outside-text” (1976, 158). The book’s lengthy engagements with Hegel, Mallarmé, Merleau-Ponty, Frege, Klee, Cézanné, and Freud, hide sidelong references to Deleuze, Levinas, Derrida, Kandinsky, Nietzsche, and Shakespeare. All of this to say that for

Lyotard, the stakes are high. He grapples with Jacques Lacan by returning ever more rigorously to Freud.<sup>2</sup> He performs Derrida's (anti)method of deconstruction without being mesmerized by language. He follows Deleuze's anti-Hegelian critique of representational difference while subtly chiding Deleuze for his neglect of the visual and his rejection of the psychoanalytic. Lyotard is in a Burkean parlor in which he has spent seventeen years listening.

The first chapter, "The Bias of the Figural," serves as an introduction, and signifies at least two more events: the book's aim and the book's arc, each of which entails its own failure. *Discourse, Figure's* aim, as noted, is the signification of the other of signification. Throughout the first half, phenomenology and structuralist linguistics are relied on, or rather stretched to their limits, in an attempt to represent what Lyotard will ultimately call unrepresentable: "Phenomenology . . . remains a reflection on *knowledge*, and the purpose of such a reflection is to absorb the event, to recuperate the Other into the Same" (2011, 17, emphasis his). The failure of the aim leads us to its arc.

Lyotard tells us that the arc of the book is an event in which the visual comes to play less and less of a role. While its opening pages concern themselves with the very pragmatic distinction between seeing and reading, by the end of this first chapter it is clear that there will be a shift throughout the course of the book. The shift is from phenomenology to psychoanalysis but also away from figure as visibility and toward figure as rhetoric and as unconscious. In a sense, Lyotard must become dissatisfied with the answers phenomenology offers and move on to psychoanalysis.

Why include the first half then? Why not just move on? "I would answer," Lyotard explains, "that this displacement is precisely what constitutes the event for me in this book. By virtue of what order, of what assumed function of the book, of what prestige of discourse, should one attempt to erase it?" (2011, 19). In this sense the book signifies the event of phenomenology's failure to signify the event and Lyotard's move away from it. That failure creates a clear structure, one that parallels its title. After the initial chapter, the book takes shape in two halves: "Signification and Designation," concerned with phenomenology and linguistics, and "The Other Space," devoted to a return to Freud. And in between, Lyotard offers a crucial chapter entitled "*Veduta* on a Fragment of the 'History' of Desire."

The text proceeds through a series of ninety-degree rotations, each of which can be traced and each of which offers a way into Lyotard's complex argument. In the first half of the book, Lyotard begins by distinguishing between the negation of the sensory and the negation of language. The negation of the sensory consists in the distance between the seer and the seen,

a distance that becomes confused with the distinction between subject and object. Language's negation consists not only in the gaps between signifiers but also in the distance between signifier and signified, and, most importantly, in the "no" of psychoanalysis, the "no" that says "yes." For Lyotard, negation provides an elementary link between the seen and the said.

Lyotard's first rotation is thus a move from signification to designation. Saussurian signification consists in a chain of signifiers. Between these signifiers are invariable gaps. The distance between cat and car is no greater or smaller than between cat and epistemology, structurally speaking. Thus Lyotard sees a flatness in signification that does not parallel the variable gaps of designation, the distance between me and my hand and the moon and my office. In Saussure, there is a rotation such that designation becomes confused with signification. The moon becomes another word. Flatness asserts itself over thickness. Lyotard understands this turn as representation.

The title *Discourse, Figure* refers us to the movement from phenomenology to psychoanalysis, another event of the book, one in which Lyotard slowly moves toward taking the side of the figural. But *Discourse, Figure* is a deliberate book, not a spontaneous event, and there is a bit of secondary revision occurring. Freud and Lacan lurk throughout the first half, sometimes explicitly and often implicitly. It is clear that Lyotard has this larger rotation from discourse to figure in mind throughout the early chapters, and this foreshadowing creates depth and tension.

So it is unsurprising that after moving from Saussure to Merleau-Ponty, Lyotard finds Freudian negation underlying structuralist linguistics and phenomenology. Lyotard ends the first half by distinguishing between opposition and difference in a chapter that perhaps owes the most to Gilles Deleuze (Deleuze sat on the habilitation committee to which Lyotard submitted *Discours, Figure*, and Lyotard's concept of difference is decidedly Deleuzian). Opposition corresponds to the negative difference of representation that Deleuze critiques in *Difference and Repetition*. In an important section of book entitled "Nonhuman Sex," Lyotard explains that the castration complex which inaugurates difference does not primarily hinge on the opposition between the two sexes (i.e., women are not castrated men, or rather, women are not not men) but on the difference between human and nonhuman sex. Lateral to distinctions between man/woman, pure/impure, black/white, or good/evil, we find the difference of difference: "Sex is foremost nonhuman, non-opposite, transgressive with regard to oppositions" (2011, 147). The entry into representation is built on the castration complex, which owes to the death drive. It is the "yes" of the

death drive that appears alongside all of these “no”s with which we have been concerned.

This lateral move allows Lyotard to move toward visual phenomena. He outlines theories of curvilinear perspective (to be opposed to linear perspective via the coming *veduta*) as well as of peripheral vision. Linear perspective depends on an immobile focus of the eye that duplicates the false mobility of the eye. By immobilizing the eye and paying attention to the periphery we begin to understand curvilinear perspective and the death drive lurking at the corners of our eyes. These two elements, representation and perspective, frame Lyotard’s *veduta*.

The section on the *veduta* constitutes an abrupt rupture that sutures the book together. He offers a short history of images in the West, focusing on medieval illuminated manuscripts and the paintings of the early Renaissance, specifically those of Masaccio. Lyotard wants to move us from the sacred to the secular, through two types of thickness and through two rotations. It is a complex move, or rather two moves, each of which is worth dwelling on.

Lyotard attempts to demonstrate the imbrication of discourse and figure within medieval illuminated manuscripts. The images may be read and the letters seen just as often as the reverse. Their signification is working opposite to our own. While we might represent the designated (the “real” world), the signifier for the medieval mind always signifies divine discourse. Because there is only one signified, image and text alike are infused with figure. The thickness to which Lyotard has referred throughout occupies—during the medieval period—the space between God and man: true difference.

At the beginning of the fifteenth century, we see a rotation. Masaccio’s perspectival paintings reveal a new thickness, one between designation and signification. Difference is no longer vertical (God-human) but horizontal (human-vase-sheep-human); transcendence is replaced with immanence. It is this rotation that opens up the possibility of nonsacred art, that is, depictions of peasants and everyday objects. Masaccio’s perspective is complex, not yet strictly linear. He employs aerial perspective as well (which offers the illusion of atmospheric depth), but the two types of perspective appear within the same painting without any kind of framing device separating them.

Lyotard compares this to Leonardo’s use of aerial perspective, where it is carefully restricted. Leonardo has already moved to a linear perspective that is based on a rotation from picture plane to viewer: “The distance from the ‘eye-point’ to the screen is transferred onto the latter so as to establish the oblique from which the objects’ foreshortening will be determined” (2011, 197). This second rotation, geometrical foreshortening, may

be directly opposed to Masaccio's perspective. In Masaccio, we see naught but plastic space, ready to be invested with figural, libidinal energy. In Leonardo, each aspect of the painting must be kept separate. In Masaccio, the viewer is immanent to the world of the painting. In Leonardo, she or he is transcendent: "This rotation of meaning is directly opposed to that which I described to convey the importance of the Masaccian revolution: rather than the exteriorization of what was scripted, it is the scripting of exteriority" (2011, 197). These two rotations—first from creator to creation, then from immanence to transcendence—occur in the first few years of the fifteenth century and separate the sacred, mythopoetic world from our current secular, scientific world.

Lytard uses the term "veduta" to refer to a particular kind of painting within a painting. A window is painted on the wall, like the one placed behind Mona Lisa. This window achieves a kind of trompe-l'oeil effect. We see "through" the painting at another level. In a sense, Lyotard's *veduta* offers us a chance to see "through" the history of representation. The first half of the book frames this history. The second half signifies what we might see on the other side of the *veduta*.

In the face of the failure of signification outlined in the first half and the history of its subordination of desire outlined in the *veduta*, Lyotard attempts to signify the other of signification by more psychoanalytic means. Here, in the second half of the book, he performs this work through a rotation from discourse to figure, exploring the unrepresentable in the paintings of Paul Klee and in the dream work that does not think. The dream-work of course cannot think, cannot perform discourse, as it operates under the sign of desire, that is, through the unconscious. Language depends on negation, and the unconscious, Freud reminds us, knows no negation. Lyotard's argument reaches its crescendo in his tripartite model of figurality: figure-image, figure-form, and figure-matrix:

The *figure-image*, that which I see in the hallucination or the dream and which the painting and film offer me, is an object placed at a distance, a theme. It belongs to the order of the visible, as outline. The *figure-form* is present in the visible, and may even be visible, but in general remains unseen. This is Lhote's regulating line, the Gestalt of a configuration, the architecture of a picture, the scenography of a performance, the framing of a photograph—in short, the schema. By definition, the *figure-matrix* is invisible, the object of original repression, instantly laced with

discourse: “originary” phantasy. Nonetheless the figure-matrix is figure, not structure, because it is, from the outset, violation of the discursive order—violence against the transformations authorized by this order. (2011, 268, emphasis his)

The unconscious is not a language at all. These three parts of figurality braid themselves throughout discourse via desire. Desire’s complicity with the figural operates through three transgressions that parallel the three elements of figurality: transgression of the object, transgression of form, and transgression of space. Lyotard argues that these transgressions are manifestations of the death drive and drives his point home by returning to Freud in repeated interpretations of the case study “A Child Is Being Beaten.” These readings allow us to see that the death drive acts as a baffle that moves the spool from *fort* to *da*. It is only against this movement that repetition, repression, regression, occurs. Thanatos provides the “re-” that makes possible the return. Death drives deconstruction.

While we may have expected figurality to be dangerous only to structuralists, we are surprised by the truth (and it is in its surprise that we recognize its truth): figurality is not eros but thanatos. The relationship of figure to discourse cannot be spoken or drawn, for discourse is within figure and vice versa. Rather than painting a *mise-en-scène*, Lyotard stages for us a *mise en abyme*. In the final paragraphs of the book, Lyotard signifies a final rotation: between mother and spouse. *Mousetrap*, the play within the play in *Hamlet*, provides Hamlet an opportunity to meditate on his mother as “mobbled” queen. Lyotard reads “mobbled” through an associational chain that leads to “mobilized.” The mobile mother rotates her relationship from variable gap between mother and son to the invariant gap between lovers: Hamlet’s “Oedipal truth” (Lyotard 2011, 388). In this final scene we may see how Lyotard prefigures *Anti-Oedipus*.

*Discourse, Figure* finds us in the shadow of a recent return to Lyotard in the work of philosophers like Alain Baidou, Ray Brassier, Jacques Rancière, and Bernard Stiegler and that of rhetoricians like Diane Davis, Sidney Dobrin, Thomas Kent, and Victor Vitanza. Lyotard was more comfortable than most poststructuralists to reside at this juncture of rhetoric and philosophy, comfortable to not only study the sophists but to be called one. A further rotation of the book’s title reminds us of the powerful and often disconcerting collisions between philosophical discourse and rhetorical figures. Just as figure reappears in discourse, so rhetoric engages philosophy not from without but from within.



For scholars of visual rhetoric reading Gunther Kress's semiotic models of design, Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theories of the gaze, or W. J. T. Mitchell's ruminations on the differences between image and text, Lyotard offers a valuable counterweight. Images cannot only be read; they must be seen. Images make space for us to reflect on viewing and on our desires. Finally, images cannot be separated from text as discretely as we might like. Text and image are as interwoven as discourse and figure.

I have tried to show *Discourse, Figure's* debt to and influence on Deleuze for similar reasons. Digital humanists have found an ally in Deleuze's theories of control. While Deleuze has much to say to our networked world, he rejects much that is psychoanalytic in Lyotard. Yet, if we are still psychological beings, returning to Lyotard can offer much to the digital humanities, paralleling the user experience design of Nathan Shedroff or Alexander Galloway's systems of protocol.

And this brings us to a final event: my own failure at signifying *Discourse, Figure*. It is a book that must be read and reread, a book that gives up its secrets only after struggle. That it took this long to get to us is perhaps appropriate. In an interview with Gary Olson, Lyotard remarked on its untimeliness: "It was with a sort of pride (or arrogance) on my part to observe that finally a book like *Discourse, figure*—which was completely ignored at the time because it was explicitly against structuralism . . . —has gained acceptance. I was against this way of thinking, and I am pleased that now readers have discovered this book. I was waiting thirty years—no problem" (Lyotard 1995, 409). We waited forty—no problem.

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## NOTES

1. I would recommend Lydon's article to all readers of *Discourse, Figure*. Many of the other introductions and reviews that can be found follow a specific reading: psychoanalytic, political, philosophical. Lydon offers a broader introduction helpful to readers coming from a variety of areas.

2. Lacan defended himself in an introduction to *Ecrits*: "The dream does not think . . .', writes a professor very pertinent in all the proofs he gives of this. The dream is more like a crumpled inscription. But when did I say anything that objects to this?" (qtd. in Bennington 1988, 90).



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