

Better Lyotard than never, I figure

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Discourse, Figure by Jean-François Lyotard, translated by Antony Hudek and Mary Lydon, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011, 544 pp., 21 b.& w. illus., £30.00 hbk

There is an image by Penny Slinger, a photo-collage showing an ear placed inside an open mouth; the earlobe overlaps the lower lip, highlighting a single pearl earring.¹ It is charged with eroticism: I trace my tongue around its contours and come to rest on the tiny smooth sphere, which challenges me then to speak. This is not an illustration but a provocation, one which comes to mind as I read the opening challenges laid down by Jean-François Lyotard in *Discourse, Figure*: ‘One does not read or understand a picture. Sitting at the table one identifies and recognizes linguistic units; standing in representation one seeks out plastic events. Libidinal events.’ (4)

You can search for the Penny Slinger image now, on your laptop, but it will not be a single image: it is already crowded with others – and even when it is facing you it is framed by a digital distance that lessens its confrontational impact. You are reading it now and have missed the lip smacking ‘mmmm’ which makes the eye jump. I have a colleague who talks to students in such guttural terms – ‘look at this ... mmm ... tschm tschm tschmm, don’t you want to taste it?’ she entices, embarrassing them into eating with their eyes. Why does she use her mouth for other-than-speech? It is to open up the body to that phenomenological experience of sensation which makes the eye dance, the colour sing; and yet we know such aesthetic indulgences have no radical potential, no social import, no political impact. Don’t we?

Forty years since its publication in French, Lyotard’s major book *Discours, figure* (1971) is finally available in English translation. This is an event to be celebrated on several fronts, though where its impact will be felt most significantly is yet to be determined. This translation of one of the major texts of Lyotard’s writing fills a significant gap in the Anglophone study of the philosopher and ought to change our perceptions of his contribution as a thinker, associated not only

1 with the postmodern and a reconfigured sublime but
 2 one thoroughly engaged with the problem of writing,
 3 language and its interconnection with art, and, in
 4 particular, the visual.

5 According to Geoffrey Bennington writing
 6 in 1988, Lyotard ‘sees himself as having written
 7 three “real” books’: his investigation of forms of
 8 communication termed ‘phrases’ in *Le Différend* (1983)
 9 translated in 1988 as *The Differend*; the exhausting and
 10 exciting critique of dogmatic Marxism *Économie Libidinale*
 11 (1974) translated in 1993 as *Libidinal Economy*, and
 12 *Discours, figure* (1971) translated in 2011 as *Discourse, Figure*.²
 13 *Discourse, Figure* is a hugely ambitious work that considers
 14 the inter-relationship of the visual and textual through
 15 extensive discussion of phenomenology, linguistics
 16 and psychoanalysis in relation to examples from
 17 painting, photography, poetry and print media. Its
 18 form was considered unusual when it was submitted
 19 as a thesis for the *Doctorat d’État* – the qualification, now
 20 superseded by the *habilitation*, that allowed French
 21 academics to supervise research and to take up the
 22 academic post of *Maître de conférences* – and it still has the
 23 capacity to surprise the reader today. Take, for example,
 24 the anachronistic approach of the distinctive ‘*Veduta*’
 25 section which considers the transformation of pictorial
 26 space in the Renaissance through the work of Sigmund
 27 Freud and Paul Cézanne: written entirely in italics, one
 28 of its subsections refuses to follow numerical order
 29 but rather reverses its placing – 3.2 ‘The space of the
 30 new philosophy’ precedes 3.1 ‘Rotation of pictorial
 31 space’ – thereby enacting the contents of its writing.
 32 What prompts this rotation? Desire: the full title of
 33 the section is ‘*Veduta on a Fragment of the “History” of*
 34 *Desire*’.

35 It is desire which percolates throughout *Discourse,*
 36 *Figure*: initially aligned to the figural – that which
 37 disrupts the measured discourse that is based in
 38 signification – it is quickly made apparent that desire is
 39 also at the heart of discourse, of language: ‘only from
 40 within language can one get to and enter the figure’
 41 (7). One of the translators, Mary Lydon, described
 42 the *Veduta* section as ‘the pivot around which the book
 43 turns’ and now, finally, we can see this pivot in action
 44 in English. It makes it much easier to quote from this
 45 section now – how feeble the convention of italicizing
 46 foreign text seems when the original is itself italicized
 47 – but it is in the context of the book as a whole that
 48 this typographic decision has a visual impact as it
 49 draws attention to the act of *seeing* the text, which is
 50 integral to Lyotard’s enquiry.³ The comma between the

discourse and figure of the title is the point where a line
 quivers on the edge of legibility and a mark on the wall
 tips between gesture and coded signification. With
 Pierre Francastel (and Cézanne) as his guide, Lyotard
 enters the Brancacci Chapel of the Church of Santa
 Maria del Carmine to identify in Masaccio’s frescoes
 a momentary opening up between different forms of
 scripted representation, suggesting that ‘*the repressed of*
medieval civilisation – that is, difference as attribute of the figural –
briefly emerges’ (187) before it is closed down once more
 by the regimented construction of space exemplified
 for Lyotard in the example of Leon Battista Alberti’s
costruzione legittima. The ‘space of oscillation’ in which the
 figures of Adam and Eve hover are not yet foreclosed by
 the silencing of ‘*what is not signifiable in discourse*’ (186, 194).

How to open up once more this space of Freudian
 desire that fuels Lyotard’s investigation: to break open
 the conventions of codified looking and thinking? Yes,
 huge topics. Yes, familiar aims. Yet this is why this is an
 important book to read now. Because these challenges,
 however familiar, remain urgent and will continue to
 be so – *Discourse, Figure* has returned not as some panacea
 to address the present shortcomings of art history but to
 provoke us once more to wake from the complacency
 and easy acceptance of convention. It is this that makes
 it an intensely political book.

What are the implications of *Discourse, Figure* for art
 history? It is not a conventional art-historical study,
 neither is it a work of art theory: it does not present
 a model to follow or suggested system of analysis;
 rather it is a series of provocations and uncomfortable
 reminders about the role of art and by implication
 the paradox inherent in writing about that which is
 fuelled by the power of the figural. Inevitably, the
 art historian’s relationship is with words – whether
 spoken or written – as much as (if not more than)
 with the visual, auditory, spatial or indeed textual
 world of its subject; consequently, perhaps, the
 contemporary influence of ‘French thought’ has been
 largely dominated by linguistic analyses – whether
 psychoanalytic or philosophical – which have allowed
 for the possibility of a self-reflexive analysis of the form
 of its presentation as text. However, as Gavin Parkinson
 observed in his overview of unorthodox responses to
 art history, the self-conscious experimentation with
 the written form is very marginal to this discourse.⁴
 The provocation of *Discourse, Figure* opens up further
 the conceits of the discipline in order to recognize
 the perpetual failure of discourse to respond again to
 that which draws us in. However, Lyotard’s is not, of

1 course, a simple reinscription of the binary between
 2 art and language but rather a response to the challenge:
 3 the claim that ‘The position of art is a refutation of the
 4 position of discourse’ (7) is answered by the inevitable
 5 recognition of the figural at the heart of discourse and
 6 the ‘violence [that] belongs to the depth of language’
 7 (8). Why is it necessary to recognize the figural at
 8 the heart of language and the workings of desire that
 9 interlace both discourse and figure? It is necessary as it
 10 disturbs the complacency of art-historical discourse,
 11 which neuters philosophical challenges and fails to
 12 reconsider the basis of its engagement.

13 Lyotard should resist an easy co-option by the
 14 conventions of art-historical method: he is not a friend
 15 of art history – a section of his recently published work
 16 on Karel Appel titled ‘Long indictment against the
 17 history of art’ makes this very clear – yet the ubiquity
 18 of particular essays, ‘Answering the Question: What is
 19 Postmodernism?’ perhaps the prime culprit since its
 20 addition as an appendix to the English translation of *The*
 21 *Postmodern Condition*, has managed to compartmentalize
 22 his contribution and ignore the consequences of
 23 imposing predetermined categorizations.⁵ The latter
 24 is responsible for the assumptions that Lyotard wrote
 25 only about abstraction, that Lyotard’s use of the sublime
 26 links him irrevocably with a romantic tradition and
 27 that his writings on Immanuel Kant somehow place
 28 him within the tradition of Greenbergian formalism.
 29 *Discourse, Figure* will not immediately dispel these myths
 30 as the range of artistic references is largely, by Lyotard’s
 31 own admission, drawn from canonical figures from
 32 1880–1930 including Cézanne, Paul Klee, André Lhote,
 33 Stéphane Mallarmé and El Lissitzky, with a more
 34 contemporary analysis of two printed pieces by his
 35 friend Michel Butor. The publication does, however,
 36 coincide with a project from the University of Leuven
 37 to publish a five-volume series of Lyotard’s *Writings on*
 38 *Contemporary Art and Artists* in parallel French/English,
 39 including extensive texts on Marcel Duchamp, Daniel
 40 Buren and lesser known essays on Joseph Kosuth and
 41 Ruth Francken. This series demonstrates Lyotard’s long
 42 involvement with contemporary art and, in the volume
 43 on Karel Appel in particular, the difficulty of writing
 44 on art as a philosopher – continually castigating
 45 himself for falling into easy traps and failing to adhere
 46 to the singularity of the work about which he is asked
 47 to respond.

48 To read *Discourse, Figure* is an intense and at times
 49 bewildering experience. My own encounters
 50 with the French text have long been fraught by my

linguistic inadequacies, resulting in a multi-layered
 relationship to the phrases which still echo poetically
 almost independent of their meaning; yet the present
 translation makes it clear that it was not only an issue
 of language that ignited this plurality of references
 but something in the construction of the book
 itself. As translator Antony Hudek has remarked, the
 proliferation of footnotes which accompany every page
 in the French – sometimes dominating the main body
 of the text – has been relegated to a more traditional
 place at the end of the text in this translation, as a
 concession to the reader; yet there is little that can be
 done to the overall structure of the book to lessen its
 deliberate difficulty.⁶

Unlike Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s *A*
Thousand Plateaus, which encourages a non-sequential
 reading through the presentation of self-contained but
 interrelated sections, *Discourse, Figure* seeks to disorientate
 the reader through the expected narrative. The
 introductory section warns the reader of the false sense
 of expectation which sets up Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s
 phenomenology and the celebration of the visual as
 the initial theoretical framework, only to be undone
 by desire, prompting a Freudian-informed re-writing
 of figure as a trilogy of manifestations (figure-image;
 figure-form; figure-matrix), only one of which is
 clearly visible. Despite this warning it still comes as
 a shock to recognize that this ‘defence of the eye’ is
 concerned principally with that which is hidden from
 discourse and can only be felt through its effect – hence
 the extended discussion of Freud’s dream-work and
 perhaps the best-known section of the book, Lyotard’s
 refutation of Jacques Lacan: ‘The Dream-Work Does
 Not Think’. The prominence of Lacan as a foil to
 Lyotard’s re-consideration of Freud is emphasized
 in the introduction by John Mowitt who similarly
 draws attention to the importance of *Discourse, Figure*
 as a contemporary response to the changing approaches
 to not only Freud but also Karl Marx – and in so doing
 warns those who make easy assumptions about the
 connections between the preoccupations of Lyotard
 and Jacques Derrida, recalling the latter’s observation
 that Lyotard had abandoned Marx: ‘Lyotard sacrificed it
 to the postmodern.’⁷ (xi)

In a brilliant use of anecdote Mowitt recalls how
 Mary Lydon responded to this claim by muttering
 under her breath: ‘oh, la, la’ which, given the
 context and intonation, might ‘simply be rendered as
 “bullshit”’(xii). I muttered similar responses when
 reading the review of *Discourse, Figure* by *Art & Language*,

1 recently published in *Radical Philosophy*: putting aside
 2 their repeated misdating of its publication as 1972
 3 (is it an overly reverential editor who corrects the
 4 date of publication – 1971 – in the footnotes, but
 5 not the body of the text) it stands as testament to
 6 the jaundiced, judgemental attitude to Lyotard still
 7 common in the English-speaking world. Despite
 8 admitting ‘no academic connection to, and indeed
 9 with very little detailed knowledge of, the landscape of
 10 French philosophy’ (God forbid) they see fit to dismiss
 11 attempts by those who do so: ‘Its deconstructions speak
 12 to yet more and more cultural theory that aspires to
 13 writerliness and fails.’⁸ Where Art & Language fail most
 14 unfortunately in their reading of *Discourse, Figure* is in the
 15 misapprehension of the task Lyotard was concerned
 16 with in the construction of a book which ‘does not
 17 seek to build a unitary theory, not even a distant
 18 objective. Rather it is like a dislocated body whereupon
 19 speech impresses fragments that in principle can be
 20 rearranged in various configurations ...’ (13); they see
 21 only that ‘There are bits in the machine that are out of
 22 whack. Lyotard hasn’t bothered to fit them together.’⁹
 23 It is, perhaps, rather an inability on the part of Art &
 24 Language to conceive of the possibility that someone
 25 might wish to question the smooth running of the
 26 machine in a manner which doesn’t conform to their
 27 own analytic approach: this is a shame as there is a
 28 proximity they feel but fail to follow.

29 It seems somehow appropriate that a book which
 30 strives to make its own construction self-consciously
 31 challenging (although Lyotard wanted more) should
 32 have had such a stuttering history of partial translation.
 33 About a fifth of the whole has previously appeared
 34 in translation, spread over at least six publications by
 35 several translators and fields of enquiry, but it was
 36 Mary Lydon, Professor of French at the University
 37 of Wisconsin, Madison until her untimely death in
 38 2001, who first seriously embarked on the task of a full
 39 translation. Whilst only two of the fifteen sections in
 40 this publication are translations by Lydon they form
 41 a basis for the rest, the remaining thirteen sections
 42 conscientiously translated by art historian and Lyotard
 43 scholar Antony Hudek who mindfully follows the
 44 decisions made by Lydon. Appropriately Hudek has
 45 also made the translation of *Que peindre? What to Paint?*
 46 for the Leuven series; first published in France in 1987,
 47 it is a collection of essays on Daniel Buren, Valerio
 48 Adami and Shūsaku Arakawa, but also a very deliberate
 49 attempt by Lyotard to return to themes from *Discourse,*
 50 *Figure* and to question what he had done in this earlier

book.¹⁰ It is an important indicator of the manner in
 which Lyotard works that *What to Paint?* does not simply
 revisit *Discourse, Figure*, but has to undergo a thorough
 rethinking of its process: ‘I would not be able to work
 through the anamnesis of the visible without carrying
 out the anamnesis of *Discourse, Figure*.’¹¹ In my own
 book, *Lyotard and the figural in Performance, Art and Writing*,
 it is the ‘manner’ of Lyotard’s approach that informs
 an extension of the figural to new territories – in
 particular performance art, about which Lyotard was
 almost silent.¹² How others will link onto *Discourse, Figure*
 remains yet to be determined.

Notes

- 1 For the title of this review, see Dalia Judovitz ‘Epilogue’ in Jean-François Lyotard, *Les Transformateurs Duchamp/Duchamp’s TRANS/formers*, Leuven, 2010, 254. Judovitz quotes Lyotard’s anecdote of his students’ joke about his timekeeping: “mieux Lyotard que jamais”.
- 2 Geoffrey Bennington, *Lyotard: Writing the Event*, Manchester, 1988, 2.
- 3 Mary Lydon, ‘Veduta on “Discours, figure”’, *Yale French Studies*, 99, 2001, 17.
- 4 Gavin Parkinson, ‘(Blind summit) art writing, narrative, middle voice’, *Art History*, 34: 2, April 2011, 268–87.
- 5 Jean-François Lyotard, *Karel Appel: A Gesture of Colour*, Leuven, 2009, 87–97; Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Manchester, 1984.
- 6 Antony Hudek, ‘Seeing through *Discourse, Figure*’, *Parrhesia: a Journal of Critical Philosophy*, 12, 2011, 52–6.
- 7 See also Claire Pagès, ‘Les Marx de Lyotard’, *Cités: philosophie, politique, histoire*, 45, 2001, 69–85.
- 8 Art & Language (Michael Baldwin and Mel Ramsden), ‘Juddering: On Lyotard’s *Discourse, Figure*’, *Radical Philosophy*, 176, November/December 2012, 35, 37.
- 9 Art & Language, ‘Juddering’, 36.
- 10 Jean-François Lyotard, *Que peindre? Adami, Arakawa, Buren / What to Paint?* Adami, Arakawa, Buren (original French edition 1987), translated by Antony Hudek, Leuven, 2012.
- 11 Lyotard, *Que peindre? / What to Paint?*, 239.
- 12 Kiff Bamford, *Lyotard and the figural in Performance, Art and Writing*, London, 2012.

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Kiff Bamford. Discourse, Figure by Jean-Francois Lyotard, translated by Antony Hudek and Mary Lydon, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011, 544 pp., 21 b.& w. illus., 30.00 hbk. There is an image by Penny Slinger, a photo-collage showing an ear placed inside an open mouth; the earlobe overlaps the lower lip, highlighting a single pearl earring.¹ It is charged with eroticism: I trace my tongue around its contours and come to rest on the tiny smooth sphere, which challenges me then to speak. This is not an illustration but a provocation, one