



Discourse is on the side of conceptual knowledge, totalisation, consciousness and order. The figural is on the side of sensation, the unconscious, disorder and destabilisation. First the two are set against each other, before this opposition is "deconstructed" (while Derrida is present, Lyotard has his own sense of this term). The figural interrupts discourse while discourse tries to subordinate the figural. The figural eludes language, yet that is our only tool to get at it, as it constantly dis-figures discourse, in alignment with desire.

Lyotard works through the linguistic theories of Frege, Saussure, Benveniste, Jakobson, Hegel and those of a generative grammar stripe (Chomsky, Thorne, etc), pushing each of them on the question of language's relationship to reality and its subsumption under signs. For Lyotard, one must acknowledge the distance between the linguistic sign and the thing being referred to or designated. This is a question of negation. Not only is there negation between the sign units themselves (à la structuralism's claim of language as a system of equally spaced, differentially ordered sign units), but a fundamental negation or distance between the sign and the thing represented: the negation proper to vision. Emphasising the axis of designation puts Lyotard at odds with those content to play with signifiers and signifieds on the axis of signification.

In fact painting and its developments are of high importance for Lyotard, so much so that the central section of the book, entirely italicised, is devoted to it. "*Veduta* on a Fragment of the 'History' of Desire" is the strange intermediate space around which the book is organised, illuminating and reflecting, or even advancing and setting up, the arguments advanced throughout the rest of the book.

The second major section of the book is where psychoanalysis comes to figure most prominently. After leaving the fixed surface of the text and the transformations of visible space, we enter the unconscious in search of the figural. While not always mentioned explicitly throughout the book, Lacan is lurking behind every corner as the foe who motivates much of it. Lacan was at the height of his popularity during the '60s, as was structuralism, famously claiming that "the unconscious is structured like a language". Of course, Lyotard disagrees totally with this position, and returns to Freud's texts in turn to provide an alternative.

Freud said of dreams that they are the "royal road to the unconscious", which leads Lyotard to [The Interpretation of Dreams](#) to find the necessary ideas to emphasise an energetics of the unconscious. Two distinctions are centrally important here: that between the dream-work (what they do) and the dream-thoughts (what they are about); and that between the primary and secondary processes. Dreams are like a workshop, working over its materials through condensation, displacement, conditions of representability and secondary reversal. The first two of these are the more well-known workings of the unconscious, famously tied to the linguistic/rhetorical categories of metaphor and metonymy by Lacan. Lyotard however, refuses to wed them to language, as they are the characteristic aspects of the primary processes. It is the primary processes, the movement of the libido which can be invested anywhere, the non-rational part of the unconscious, which is at stake. By claiming the unconscious to be structured like a language, Lacan effectively subordinates the nature of the primary processes to that of the secondary processes, which is the rational, linguistic and binding part of psychic activity. Lyotard wants to stress that the secondary processes emerge from the primary processes and attempt to order or regulate them, as again the dyad order/disorder is all-important. We can begin to see how Lyotard's energetics of the libido pre-figures [Libidinal Economy](#).

Lyotard claims there to be three elements of the figural:

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 [*tracé révélateur*]. The *figure-form* is present in the visible, and may even be visible, but in general remains unseen. This is Lhote's regulating line [*tracé régulateur*], 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 originary repression, instantly laced with discourse: "originary" phantasy.

This triad of image, form and matrix constitutes the "rows" of the figural, while the triad of signifier, signified and designated constitute the set discourse, along the axes of signification and designation. To see how these relate is to understand how the figural inhabits discourse.

Where are we then lead to? Towards the death drive which asserts itself in these disruptive operations of difference: "Now we understand that the principle of figurality that is also the principle of unbinding (the baffle) is the death drive: 'the absolute of anti-synthesis': Utopia." It is the artwork, in Lyotard's estimation, that unfulfills desire, leaving open and mobile the space of the primary processes, "preserving its voidness". The deep figure of desire is not bound and repeated, as a conscious re-presentation of an unconscious presentation, wherein the latter is subordinated to the former. Rather, it is the processes that are re-presented, the operations of the unconscious themselves. Such is the nature of the double reversal in its critical aspect.

By adopting Freud's distinction between primary and secondary psychic processes in *Discourse* and *Dérive*, Lyotard found a means to articulate his burgeoning philosophy of the event. The primary flow of psychic energy, *i.e.*, desire or libido, is an inarticulate process simultaneously creative and destructive, erupting in singular ways which Lyotard names "intensities." Secondary process belongs to (which is to say that it engenders and is engendered by) a meaningful, articulate, legible reality that nihilates (in the sense of only partially grasping or accounting for) primary flows or intensities in capturing and productively channelling them. Taken together, this describes Freud's death drive: chaos and order dissimulated in each other, serving impossible teleologies. But the Lyotard of *Discourse* and *Dérive* posits primary process well beyond the organic body; what results is a metaphysics of desire, similar to the Spinozism or Nietzscheism of his contemporary Deleuze. Such a metaphysical rendering of Freud's later metapsychology seeks to articulate the singular in its relation to a nihilating philosophical transcendence. It is however at once both metaphysical and concretely political. Defence of the metaphysical singular reflects and is reflected in Lyotard's anti-authoritarian and pro-minoritarian politics, which becomes increasingly rigorous from the time of his anticolonial writings. Already in 1964, as a nominally Marxist member of *Pouvoir ouvrier*, Lyotard is experimenting with Freudian concepts.

It must be driven home however that during the libidinal phase of his thinking Lyotard did not mark a strict disjunction between primary and secondary process. Nor did he wish, as one might expect, to claim to go over to the

side of primary process, *tout court*. As he puts it in *Discourse, Figure*: "One cannot cross over to the side of the primary processes: this is merely a secondary illusion.... Desire has its rejection embedded within itself.... Desire is truly unacceptable. One cannot pretend to accept it, for accepting it is still to reject it. It will become event elsewhere." (18) Really there is only desire; primary and secondary processes are impossible aspects of desire. But impossibility is itself already a function of this distinction; paradoxically, Freud's oft-repeated and oft-quoted remark that there is no such thing as an unconscious "no" suggests that any exclusive disjunction—even the disjunction between primary and secondary process—already presupposes secondary process. We can already detect here that in turning to Freud's later metapsychology, Lyotard will mark any and all political *critique*, assuming a "subversive region" to ground itself, as already and essentially nihilistic and therefore recuperable as well as compromised by what it fights. Lyotard's mature libidinal politics will become, by the time of 1974's *Économie libidinale*, an ungrounded politics of naked will. He is simply too clever to blunder into the Habermasian trap of "performative contradiction," but what he sacrifices in eluding this trap is any claim to philosophical coherence or normative ground.

The particular way in which the Lyotard of *Discourse, Figure* puts Freud's later metapsychology into play should be noted. Irrespective of their logical impossibility, in a manner of speaking desire as event (primary) and/or as structure (secondary) runs together or co-presents impossibles—in terms of secondary elaboration—as if they were compossible. The compressions, distortions and inversions of dreams immediately come to mind, and the aforementioned chapter in *Discourse, Figure* entitled "The Dreamwork does not Think" indeed explores Freud's mapping of these processes in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. But Lyotard extends the analysis to conscious figural representation. Think of a particularly heavy, gloppy brushstroke on a canvas. It might betray the existence of the paint and canvas partially constituting the painting, disrupting thereby the purely figurative space of the painting's aesthetic economy with the suggestion of a textured, material, tactile space "below." The painting would thereby betray two compossible-impossible spaces, neither of which would be "truer" than the other, strictly speaking, since both together constitute the painting.

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

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

This can be explained as follows. There is "modern politics," in the sense of contesting the state of a field of discourse, communication, or representation: in Freudian terms, politics in the sense of contesting an actual state of reality, usually in the name of a counterfactual state of reality that is claimed to be more just or in some other way superior.

But reality in the Freudian sense, as we saw, is only the barest skeleton of the given. If this account of reality is compelling, one can question how much all such modern political moves and strategies, as matters of communication between persons and interests, *i.e.*, representations, actually link up to or "express" the underlying primary process, the lived experiences, and, to use a problematic term, deeper natures of individual political actors. For Lyotard, in addition to politics in the reformist and revolutionary senses of contestation of the given state of reality, conceived in representational terms, there is politics, more precisely *a-politics* [18], as the *contestation of the very field of representation itself*. In the Freudian terms employed here, this would be politics as *the contestation of reality as such*. The *a-politics* of Lyotard's position is therefore not the taking or dissolving of power, a given *state* of reality, by reformist or revolutionary means.

Empirically, political activism of the type espoused by the libidinal Lyotard (in the ballpark of punk, Situationism, etc.) was recuperable by capitalism. The brief efflorescence of desire which rejected both parliamentary politics and Leftist revolutionary frameworks was accommodated by more permissive and flexible political structures and more perversely gratifying commodity markets. Granting capital's ability to accommodate insurrectionary desire, there is apparently nothing revolutionary in a politics—even an "a-politics"—which rejects revolution. The ethical/political cul-de-sac to which *Discourse, Figure* leads in *Économie libidinale* is expressed, of course, as the latter's accelerationist philosophy of capital.

This, then, is the dilemma that hangs over *Discourse, Figure*, forty years on. The stakes of representation and the figural are ultimately political, which means that fine art and representation per se are intrinsically political. But where politics more broadly construed conceives of itself in much less aesthetic and much more ethical terms—witness Idle No More's calls for justice, rather than simple self-expression and power—the libidinal politician waivers between latecomer to the event and cynical betrayer of a political language that has not yet abandoned the claims of a moral absolute.

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

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

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

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

[5] Lyotard, *Pourquoi philosopher?* (Paris: PUF, 2012).

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