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

According to Geoffrey Bennington writing
in 1988, Lyotard ‘sees himself as having written
three “real” books:’ his investigation of forms of
communication termed ‘phrases’ in Le Dif\ërend (1983)
translated in 1988 as The Dif\ërend; the exhausting and
exciting critique of dogmatic Marxism Economie Libidinale
(1974) translated in 1993 as Libidinal Economy, and
Discours, \ëgure (1971) translated in 2011 as Discourse, Figure.\textsuperscript{2}
Discourse, Figure is a hugely ambitious work that considers
the inter-relationship of the visual and textual through
extensive discussion of phenomenology, linguistics
and psychoanalysis in relation to examples from
painting, photography, poetry and print media. Its
form was considered unusual when it was submitted
as a thesis for the Doctorat d’\ëtat – the qualification, now
superseded by the habilitation, that allowed French
academics to supervise research and to take up the
academic post of Maître de conférences – and it still has the
capacity to surprise the reader today. Take, for example,
the anachronic approach of the distinctive ‘Veduta’
section which considers the transformation of pictorial
space in the Renaissance through the work of Sigmund
Freud and Paul Cézanne: written entirely in italics, one
of its subsections refuses to follow numerical order
but rather reverses its placing – 3.2 ‘The space of the
new philosophy’ precedes 3.1 ‘Rotation of pictorial
space’ – thereby enacting the contents of its writing.
What prompts this rotation? Desire: the full title of
the section is ‘Veduta on a Fragment of the “History” of
Desire’.

It is desire which percolates throughout Discourse,
Figure: initially aligned to the figural – that which
disrupts the measured discourse that is based in
signification – it is quickly made apparent that desire is
also at the heart of discourse, of language: ‘only from
within language can one get to and enter the figure’
(7). One of the translators, Mary Lydon, described
the Veduta section as ‘the pivot around which the book
turns’ and now, finally, we can see this pivot in action
in English. It makes it much easier to quote from this
section now – how feeble the convention of italicizing
foreign text seems when the original is itself italicized
– but it is in the context of the book as a whole that
this typographic decision has a visual impact as it
draws attention to the act of seeing the text, which is
integral to Lyotard’s enquiry.\textsuperscript{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 Brancacc\ï 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 —
brie\ëly 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
costuzione 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 signifyable 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.\textsuperscript{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,
course, a simple reinscription of the binary between art and language but rather a response to the challenge: the claim that ‘The position of art is a refutation of the position of discourse’ (7) is answered by the inevitable recognition of the figural at the heart of discourse and the ‘violence [that] belongs to the depth of language’ (8). Why is it necessary to recognize the figural at the heart of language and the workings of desire that interlace both discourse and figure? It is necessary as it disturbs the complacency of art-historical discourse, which neuters philosophical challenges and fails to reconsider the basis of its engagement.

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

To read Discourse, Figure is an intense and at times bewildering experience. My own encounters 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.

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

It seems somehow appropriate that a book which strives to make its own construction self-consciously challenging (although Lyotard wanted more) should have had such a stuttering history of partial translation. About a fifth of the whole has previously appeared in translation, spread over at least six publications by several translators and fields of enquiry, but it was Mary Lydon, Professor of French at the University of Wisconsin, Madison until her untimely death in 2001, who first seriously embarked on the task of a full translation. Whilst only two of the fifteen sections in this publication are translations by Lydon they form a basis for the rest, the remaining thirteen sections conscientiously translated by art historian and Lyotard scholar Antony Hudek who mindfully follows the decisions made by Lydon. Appropriately Hudek has also made the translation of Que peindre? What to Paint? for the Leuven series; first published in France in 1987, it is a collection of essays on Daniel Buren, Valerio Adami and Shūsaku Arakawa, but also a very deliberate attempt by Lyotard to return to themes from Discourse, Figure and to question what he had done in this earlier book. 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.’ 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. 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.
8 Art & Language (Michael Baldwin and Mel Ramsden), ‘Juddering: On Lyotard’s Discourse, Figure’, Radical Philosophy, 116, November/December 2012, 35, 37.
11 Lyotard, Que peindre? / What to Paint?, 239.
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Better Late Than Never. Check with the Royal Factors of Stormwind to learn the whereabouts of an Emma Felstone. There is usually a census officer located in City Hall. Well, I should say possibly - this census I refer to is from five years ago, and I don't have a report of her vacating the city. This doesn't mean that she is still here though. Wait a second this package couldn't be for Ol' Emma, could it? Lyotard's rarely mentions the petits recits by name but a notable place is the final chapter of the Postmodern Condition: "Le petit récit reste la forme par excellence que prend l'invention imaginative et tout d'abord dans la science." ("little narrative remains the quintessential form of imaginative invention, first of all in science."). As his text develops, a petit recit appears to be a local contradiction to some paradigm or grand scheme, which can have major consequences. Such is for instance Gauss' (or Bolyai's) 'recit' that the Fifth postulate in Euclid c