

Go Figure! Thinking Difference Differently: Jean-François Lyotard and Jacques Derrida

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Abstract

The article explores the conceptual tensions between Jacques Derrida and Jean François Lyotard regarding the nature and critical function of *différance*. While Derrida develops *différance* and the notion of the *trace* as forces that undermine the metaphysics of presence within linguistic structures, Lyotard introduces the distinction between *discourse* and *figure* to highlight what eludes linguistic rationality. In *Discourse, Figure*, Lyotard argues that Western metaphysics reduces experience to textuality, repressing the sensuous, affective dimension of meaning. *Figure* names this non discursive, aesthetic, bodily dimension that resists conceptualization and disrupts structured discourse. The text also examines three moments when Lyotard explicitly critiques Derrida, especially around the status of the sign, the trace, and Husserl's phenomenology. Despite the absence of an actual polemic, both thinkers intersect—particularly through questions of designation, deixis, and the limits of language. Their implicit dialogue reveals two distinct yet convergent attempts to rethink how difference operates beyond systems of identity.

Keywords: Derrida; Lyotard; *différance*; phenomenology; Saussure; signification; post-structuralism

Resum. *Qui ho diria! Pensar la diferència d'una altra manera: Jean-François Lyotard i Jacques Derrida*

El text analitza les tensions conceptuals entre Jacques Derrida i Jean François Lyotard entorn de la naturalesa i la funció crítica de la *diferència*. Mentre que Derrida desenvolupa la *différance* i la noció de *petjada* com a forces que desestabilitzen la metafísica de la presència dins del llenguatge, Lyotard proposa l'oposició entre *discurs* i *figura* per subratllar allò que escapa a la racionalitat lingüística. A *Discurs, figura*, Lyotard sosté que la metafísica occidental redueix l'experiència a textualitat en reprimir la dimensió sensorial i afectiva del sentit. *Figura* designa precisament aquest àmbit estètic i corporal que resisteix la conceptualització i desestabilitza el discurs estructurat. El text examina, a més, tres crítiques directes de Lyotard a Derrida relacionades amb el signe, la petjada i la fenomenologia de Husserl. Encara que

mai no va haver-hi un debat explícit entre tots dos, les seves obres convergeixen en qüestions com la designació, la dixi i els límits del llenguatge. El seu diàleg implícit revela dues maneres diferents però afins de pensar la diferència més enllà de tota identitat.

Paraules clau: Derrida; Lyotard; *différance*; fenomenologia; Saussure; significació; postestructuralisme

If there is any word associated with Jacques Derrida's work, it would surely be *différance* and the way it is prioritized in the deconstruction of the many structures of identity that form the basis of Western metaphysics. One might go further still and imagine Derrida as the very face—or *figure* in one of the French meanings of the word—of difference as the fundamental critical lever of our times. Of course, such a position risks a kind of flattening of difference, a *concept* of difference itself as just another form of identity, what I like to term the *utopia* of difference. Or of turning Jacques Derrida's very face into a kind of prosopopoeia of our times, perhaps both more and less *woke* than is claimed (see Malabou, 2025). So, the question might then become that of the differences between different kinds of difference, wary on the one hand of constructing different forms of difference as identity, and on the other of losing the critical edge of difference in a field of undifferentiated difference and consequent senselessness.

Or, perhaps, it would be worth looking not so much for a figure of difference as for a difference of figure, perhaps even through a different thinker of difference. And I have in mind here Jean-François Lyotard, and the idea of reconstructing a possible polemic between the two adumbrated in the pages of the latter's 1971 *Discours, figure*, perhaps his most important work but only relatively recently translated into English (Lyotard, 1971, 2011). However, the two philosophers never seem to have engaged each other in such a polemic (despite Jean-Luc Nancy's claim that there was much anticipation at the time of a debate on the matter¹). While neither was any stranger to polemics—witness Derrida's fiery encounters with Foucault and Searle, or Lyotard's with Habermas—a full-fledged debate between the two never occurred. Indeed, even though they both taught for a long period at UC Irvine, Lyotard did so in the fall and Derrida in the spring. As far as I know, they never actually met there.² As for a possible polemic between the two, a rapprochement of sorts did in fact occur in 1980, when Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe went out of their way to invite Lyotard to speak at the Cerisy decade dedicated to

1. Jean-Luc Nancy, incidentally, was also at some point a visiting professor at UC Irvine, though much earlier, in the mid-1970s.
2. And it should not be forgotten that Wolfgang Iser came in the winter quarter, thus achieving the institutional brilliance of using a single faculty line to accommodate three distinguished ongoing visitors. This most directly contributed to the rise in UC Irvine's reputation as a relatively new university campus (started in 1964), very much putting it on the map of critical theory in general, and deconstruction in particular.

Derrida, *Les Fins de l'homme*. Perhaps unexpectedly, Lyotard accepted the invitation, which was reciprocated two years later when Derrida was invited to speak at the Cerisy decade in honor of Lyotard, *Comment juger?*, out of which arose their joint collaboration, together with others, in founding the Collège International de Philosophie (Lacoue-Labarthe & Nancy, 1981; Derrida et al., 1985).

But to return to *Discours, figure*, in many ways a monumental riposte to *De la grammatologie*, we find there the lineaments of a critical polemic on the very meaning and value of difference per se. For starters, the very terms *discourse* and *figure* lean towards Foucault rather than the classical structuralists of textuality (Barthes, *Tel Quel*, or even Derrida, with Lyotard going so far as to deride “the absurd conclusion that there is nothing but text” [83]). Discourse is a formation of power and knowledge, structured as a specific set of relations between “words and things” (to recall the original French title of *The Order of Things*). However—and this marks an important difference between Lyotard and Foucault—it stands in confrontation with a dialectical and critical energy, called *figure*, that counters hegemonic discourse in terms of a Freudian unconscious that resembles nothing so much as the *Umwelt* of phenomenology (Husserl, Merleau-Ponty), whose critical force is activated by aesthetics, on the one hand, and by dreamwork, on the other. Figure thus also functions as ideology critique, enabling a bridge back to Marx, who was always important for Lyotard.

Contrary, then, to the prevailing tendency of the time, Lyotard views textuality—language per se, or what he calls “discourse”—as the very epitome of Western metaphysics, that is, as the reduction of phenomenological depth and actuality to the flatness of written signs. These are understood as a system of oppositions in which, following Saussure, any one sign takes meaning only from its opposition to alternatives, whether syntagmatically, paradigmatically, or even scripturally. Saussure’s famous example proposes the different ways to write the letter “t,” all of which are acceptable insofar as the letter itself is defined only by its distinction from all other letters—by non-confusion or *non-contradiction*—and not by any internal essence³). For Lyotard, writing what would be his dissertation under his mentor Mikel Dufrenne, discourse—or text, or writing—works to exclude *figure*. He takes figure to mean the non-contradictory and manifest compossibility of phenomenological apperception, in which sensory differences are not necessarily mutually exclusive and can have meaning even if whatever sense they may hold remains inchoate or extra-linguistic by definition, or as he likes to say, “by hypothesis.” The alternative to Saussure’s letter “t” might be an abstract painting by Paul Klee or, even better, Jackson Pollock. Modern art can be seen as the rediscovery of figure that was suppressed by neoclassical, post-Renaissance representational

3. “The value of letters is purely negative and differential. The same person can write *t*, for instance, in different ways. The only requirement is that the sign for *t* not be confused with the signs for *l*, *d*, etc.” (Saussure, 1966: 119-120)

art based on its *discursive* application of Euclidean geometry to the canvas. Similarly, Lyotard argues that the Lacanian assertion that the unconscious is structured like a language is also the very work of repression itself, reducing the figural workings of desire in the dreamwork or parapraxis to the non-contradictory rule of linguistic structure via secondary or even tertiary revision. Lyotard then embarks on a capacious, far-flung analysis of the myriad ways the West has sought to repress figure to the advantage of discourse, a process of idealization necessarily undone (or deconstructed, in Lyotard's explicit terms) by the inevitable resurgence of figure in all its non-contradictory, messy materiality. This critical point of view would also guide Lyotard's follow-up work on *Libidinal Economy*.

One can see why, as Derrida was welcomed to America by departments of literature and scholars specifically interested in the interpretation of texts, Lyotard was received by the art world and practicing artists concerned with understanding the role of images. The former's work was soon translated in *Yale French Studies*, *Modern Language Notes*, and *Diacritics*, while the latter was published in *Artforum*, *Art Press International*, and *Wide Angle*.⁴ In the one case, interest was stirred by scholars such as Paul de Man and J. Hillis Miller; and in the other, by practicing artists such as Daniel Buren and Michael Snow.

As Jean-Luc Nancy remarked, there was expected to be much discussion of *Discourse, figure* and its demonstrable challenge to Derrida's work on *Writing and Difference*, or Writing as Difference to recall the pun in the French title of *L'écriture ET la différence*. The basis of such a polemic would have been the three instances when Lyotard directly challenged Derrida in *Discourse, figure*. And I note in passing that one of Lyotard's peculiarities, or even eccentricities, was his affection for Anglo-American footnoting, as opposed to the often vague references typical of his French intellectual contemporaries, invoking Freud, Marx, or whoever "somewhere says." Such imprecisions create untold misery for translators. This is matched by the hypocritical claim by some French intellectuals of the time not to even know of the existence of other thinkers living in the same city and teaching at the same university.⁵ The direct naming of those whose ideas he contests is another place where Derrida converges with Lyotard. Of course, this frankness did not win either of them many friends.

In the first of these three direct references to Derrida, Lyotard is writing at the end of a long footnote contesting Hegel's and Paul Ricoeur's concepts of the symbol as a type of sign whose signification is immanent to the image. He claims Derrida's depiction in "Violence and Metaphysics" of Levinas as "unrigorous," to the extent that it renders him similar to Hegel in terms of a

4. Cf. Derrida (1972a: 74-117; 1972b: 563-99; 1972c: 35-43). The earliest English translation, as far as I can tell, of a text by Derrida is Macksey & Donato (1970: 247-272). Regarding Lyotard, see Buren (1981: 56-64); Lyotard (1978a and 1978b).

5. I note, among others, a particularly disagreeable encounter with Michel Serres, who insisted that he had never heard of Derrida or Foucault, or anyone else among that cohort of French philosophers and intellectuals.

supposed equivalence between eye and ear, or between “theory and sound,” as a “suspension” or “neutralization” of desire. It is hard to tell on the basis of this cryptic, almost throwaway comment, whether Lyotard is objecting to Derrida’s conclusion or to his manner of proceeding. On the one hand, the passage in the Derrida essay relies heavily on long quotations and commentaries from Hegel’s *Aesthetics* with only a few extracts from Levinas. So, one could well conclude that the reading is “unrigorous” to the extent that the case for applying Hegel’s terms to Levinas is not sufficiently made, but rests instead on a kind of guilt by association with Hegel. On the other hand, Lyotard would almost certainly have objected to Derrida’s conclusion as well, since for him Hegel is the epitome of discursive domination and totality, while Levinas, with his analysis of the insuperable face-to-face with the other (or, more precisely, with “Autrui”) is the very advocate of figure and of a listening that opens onto infinity. Derrida, of course, raises the classic conundrum of an anti-Hegelianism that in fact remains in the throes of Hegel by the very dint of its contestatory and therefore dialectical positioning, so that even while opposing Hegel, Levinas is “much closer than he admits” (Derrida, 1978: 99). At the same time, Derrida’s uncharacteristically sloppy analysis presents the opportunity for Lyotard’s critique. Like Homer, even Derrida can nod.

A less academic and more consequential disagreement emerges with Lyotard’s second reference to Derrida, in this case a fairly concise paraphrasing of the main arguments regarding writing and arche-writing in *Writing and Difference* and *Of Grammatology*. Segueing from Peirce to the Logic of Port-Royal and back to Saussure, Lyotard postulates a Western theory of the sign that is “inseparable from a rift through which being and appearing, or meaning and the sensory, are cleaved: in this way, it cannot be reduced to a certain relation between two terms, but is [citing Edmond Ortiqgues] ‘the generating principle of all relations, of all possible forms’” (74). The split of the sign, as the very alibi of Western metaphysics, leads Lyotard to this apparent paraphrase of Derrida: “From this, one can see that the above concept emerges in a metaphysics of presence, thanks to which, precisely, this other signifier—the concealed term—appears in person, the thing itself given; one can see, too, that the West’s madness is to believe the trace effaceable as such, and that what traces showable.” (74).

So far so good. Lyotard goes on to extrapolate: “Regardless of the implications to be derived from this critique, one must acknowledge that the arche-writing called upon to account for the primitive fact of meaning’s withdrawal [*le retrait du sens*], is in no way, strictly speaking, a form of writing—inscription of arbitrary signs on a neutralized space—but, on the contrary, the constitution of a *thick* space where the game of concealing/revealing can be played out. *Difference is not opposition*. The former constitutes the opacity that opens the order of reference; the latter upholds the system of invariances in the plane of the signifier or the signified” (translation modified, emphasis added). But behind this apparent restating of the Derridean deconstruction of phonologism, Lyotard has shifted the terms towards his own framing of the

divide. On the one hand, this is the repressiveness of discourse, predicated upon the rigorous non-contradiction of invariant oppositions that guide the double articulation that determines language and signification in the flatness in which we know and use it. On the other, it is the *thickness* of a *Lebenswelt* characterized by an apocalyptic or an-archic play⁶ of non-exclusivist difference, whose possibilities of concealment and revelation are infinite. Figure, then, appears to be Lyotard's version of what Derrida calls trace, or arche-writing, or difference, and just as the play of the trace both underscores and undermines the identity of the logos, so does figure wreak its own havoc on discourse. But are we really talking about the same thing here?

For Derrida, arche-writing refers to what he specifically calls the “instituted” or “unmotivated” trace, in a transparent reprise of Saussure's formulations regarding what he initially called the “arbitrariness” of the sign. These terms designate the invariance of units, be they letters or words, whose identity, in their mutual opposition, renders possible double articulation and thus the signifying dimension of language understood by Derrida as “writing.” This writing is at once exterior to Saussure's logocentric notion of speech, in the form of the actual inscription he sees as derivative, and as what is most interior to it by way of enabling structure—a double postulate that effectively deconstructs the metaphysics of presence evident in his privileging of speech over writing in the strict sense. Derrida's instituted or unmotivated trace thus opens not only the relation to language per se but also to temporality and to the other, hence the becoming-gerund of difference as *différance* with an ‘a’ (Derrida, 1976: 46).

Phrased this way, one cannot help but wonder about the trace that is non- or not-yet “instituted,” and not yet “unmotivated.” This is where Lyotard steps in to ask whether all this “operate[s] in the same place depending on whether we are dealing with a word or, for example, a color or a line?” (74). Indeed, this is the major question raised in his *Discourse, figure*. While most criticism of Derrida's grammatological period swirled around questions of intentionality and the scope of subjectivity, Lyotard instead focused on asking what constitutes the trace in the first place, and at an an-archic level below arche-writing itself. Interestingly, this is a question inspired not by linguists or philosophers, but by artists: “By depth of a color or line I understand, *as all painters do*, the directed force emanating from a blue or a red, a curved or vertical line, which arouses in one's body an expectation, the rudiments of polarized motion” (emphasis added). But does such affect-based sensation correspond to the differential articulation of arche-writing, to that “primitive fact of the retreat of sense,” that is, the iterative withdrawal and retracing of meaning that defines the relation of signification in whatever we might call language, discourse, or text? Lyotard, in fact, suggests something quite different. In the case of color or lines (which I take to be a shorthand for any kind

6. I write the term this way, with a hyphen, to accentuate the privative sense of anarchy as the non-arche, the origin without an origin, the primacy that is not. Cf. Malabou (2022).

of non-instituted or as-yet unmotivated trace), he concludes that “one can speak of an *immanence of sense* in the sign, of immediate thickness. Not arbitrariness, but immediacy: an untaught montage of the body with the sensory, so that the blue or the vertical line tugs at it in a given spatial direction (*sens spatial*)” (translation modified). But what does all this mean? Are we not at risk of an imaginary phantasm that draws us straight back into the metaphysics of presence, into this so-called “immediacy” of senseless awe? Not exactly, if we parse this carefully.

Viewing a painting, or perhaps a landscape or someone else’s face, is not so much the auto-affective echo chamber of the voice, or the intentionality of some *vouloir-dire*, as in Derrida’s deconstructive reading of Husserl (to which we will turn in a moment). Rather, it is the senses being drawn elsewhere, as if beside themselves in some spatial direction determined by the depth of the work, by the set of traces that our eyes (or ears in the case of a piece of music or a soundscape) are obliged to follow, retracing those paths in the very immanence of their inscription. But, as Lyotard clarifies, that immanence of sense is “nonetheless still a case of transcendence, for one cannot argue that this sense is *given* in the line or the color; on the contrary, it is what is hidden there, and must appear from it (*à partir d’elle*)”:

The visible surface of a layer of cobalt blue is a chromatic value; its hidden “face” is the corporeal repercussion (in terms of tonicity) of this value. The *sense* of blue lies in its power to condition the body as if it had to seek out the area of blue slightly beyond the latter’s space. This corporeal adduction has, as its correlate, the value of the blue’s withdrawal (*retrait*); this value is the hidden side, complementary to the one that presents the color to us. The grasp of meaning in this sense is slow, because the body must allow itself to be inhabited by the chromatic power or settle in this withdrawing area, for the blue’s sense to actualize itself. In the absence of such a settlement, the color will be *recognized* at best, able to function as an element of a communicational code, that is, as a graphic signal. The space in which it is situated in this case is entirely different from the expanse the eye carves out and opens in the picture when the body is allowed to cohabit with the color. Temporality is related to the sign while achrony belongs to the purely recognizable linguistic terms. (pp. 83-84; translation modified)⁷

This new conundrum both looks back to Benjamin’s “aura” and Bataille’s “excess” but also forward to what Jean-Luc Nancy calls “trans-immanence” in

7. While I have no direct evidence to support it, Lyotard’s remark plausibly suggests the work of Barrett Newman, in particular, his many monumentally sized canvas paintings, all or nearly all in blue, such as “Onement V” (1948), “Cathedral” (1951), “Ulysses” (1952), “Onement VI” (1953), the “Canto” series, nos. II, VII, VIII, and IX (1963-64), and “Midnight Blue” (1970). Newman’s work was demonstrably of interest to Lyotard and is overtly addressed in his “Newman: The Instant,” and “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde” (Lyotard, 1991: 78-88, 89-93). Regarding how the phenomenology of color works more generally in Lyotard, see Van Den Abbeele (2022: 51-63).

The Muses, or the “heterogenesis of existence as interruption and discontinuity.”⁸ And it recalls again the Levinasian encounter with the other that is also a relation to the other with no return, an opening to infinity that also hints at Lyotard’s later obsession with the sublime. Art, in short, takes us away from ourselves before we even have any sense of self, casting us into a *Lebenswelt* of difference that is also the theater of the unconscious and the drives. This is what Lyotard calls *figure*. But how does it figure with what Derrida calls *trace*?

The latter, says Derrida, is “the opening of the first exteriority in general, the enigmatic relation of the living to its other and of an inside to an outside” (70), in a formulation that recalls no one more than Levinas, who is himself cited on this same page of *Grammatology* as a primary source for Derrida’s very choice of the word *trace*, along with, subsequently, Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Freud (no Hegel here). Nonetheless, Derrida admits that this choice of word is also something of a “historical calculation” and a way of connecting with the force of these contemporary critical discourses. Elsewhere, however, it appears that *trace* retains a different strategic advantage insofar as it names a kind of writing that underpins and undermines the logocentric definitions of speech that would simultaneously devalue writing as derivative. It is, as such, the very condition of the possibility of *signification*.

No similar justification of the word *figure* appears in Lyotard. Instead, it appears as the term of choice by which to protest that “the given is not a text, it possesses an inherent thickness, or rather a difference, which is not to be read but rather seen” (p. 3). He later says, “What cannot be tamed is art as silence. The position of art is a refutation of the position of discourse. The position of art indicates a function of the figure, which is not signified—a function around and even in discourse. This position indicates that the symbol’s transcendence is the figure, that is, a spatial manifestation that linguistic space cannot incorporate without being shaken, an exteriority it cannot interiorize as *signification*. Art stands in alterity insofar as it is plasticity and desire, curved extension against invariability and reason, diacritical space” (p. 7; trans-

8. Cf. Nancy (1996: 34-35). For a reading of this passage, see Van Den Abbeele (2023: 149-50). An interestingly similar concept of figure to that of Lyotard, and perhaps as a sign of an unacknowledged influence, surfaces in Nancy’s work, as François Raffoul explains in his Translator’s Preface to Jean-Luc Nancy (Nancy, 1997), regarding the “weight of thought” to designate “the fact of being exposed to what thought receives, to what remains inappropriable for it... Nancy names this peculiar exposure of thought to the inappropriability of meaning ‘figure’” (p. xxxii). The specific passage in Nancy that Raffoul has in mind reads as follows: “What we are attempting to grasp in the term *figure* would be an exposition (or the sketching of an *art*) of the inappropriable gravity of meaning. An image, a writing, a gesture, in order to stress or let weigh the heavy or light features of a presence in the endless process of becoming. On this account, a figure would be the entire weight of a thought: its way, not of ‘thinking’ meaning (of elaborating its signification [presumably like Lyotard’s ‘discourse’ -GV]) but of letting it weigh, just as it comes, just as it passes away, heavy or light, and always at the same time heavy and light... The simplicity of existence: its turbulence, its turmoil, its sorrow and its joy, its thickness, its density, its extended thing, its halting, disjointed time, its undiscipline, its stammering, its visceral unconsciousness, and its lucidity, which is just as much attached to the body...” (pp. 82-83).

lation modified). Figure is above all the other of discourse, understood not just as language or text but any system of invariable, oppositional terms that enforce a reasoned conformity. As a negative term in itself, figure engages in an extreme polysemy, or dare I say semantic promiscuity—figure as image, as number, as figure of speech, as Kantian schema, as face, and so on—that enables Lyotard's critique. But that means it also becomes less the name of a concept or an epistemological conundrum than of a textual operator, a kind of critical pun that serves effectively to question the apparent neutrality of discourse as the name for structures of power and knowledge. But what about the very fact of their distinction? Is the relationship between discourse and figure a discursive or a figural one? And to what extent is it captured by Derrida's apparent distinction between the "instituted" and non-instituted trace? While the connection between that institutionalization and the becoming unmotivated of the trace derives readily from Saussure, how should we understand the institution involved here? What exactly does it mean and how does it function? And are those questions completely subsumable to the reading of Rousseau's origin of languages at the other end of *Grammatology*? These questions are not so readily answered in the early phase of Derrida's work, focused as it tends to be on the actual deconstruction of specific texts.

One set of terms that might help us here, insofar as they reappear consistently throughout Lyotard's work, is that of the distinction between signification and designation, used to describe respectively the workings of discourse and figure. And perhaps one way to understand the difference between Lyotard and Derrida is the latter's focus on the deconstruction of *signification*, while the former engages a critical unpacking of *designation*. This is also the subject of Lyotard's third mention of Derrida, this time at the end of another extremely long footnote. It ostensibly discusses Husserl and Frege's disagreement regarding the use of the German terms *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*, typically translated as *sense* and *reference*, but also *sense* and *meaning*, or even meaning and reference.⁹ Lyotard explains how Husserl insisted on treating the two terms as essentially synonymous, while Frege strove to make (or "invent") a logical, analytical distinction between the two: *Sinn* as the signification of a term—what it means for us—as opposed to its designation as objective referent, the difference, cited here by Lyotard, between the *Sinn* of the moon as the image that appears in a telescopic lens (and thus within the epistemological system) and the *Bedeutung* of the moon as the actual body made perceptible by that instrumentation. The latter formulation risks a certain Kantian echo of *das Ding-an-sich*. More helpful is Saul Kripke's reformulation (elsewhere cited by Lyotard) of the problem in terms of the planet Venus as *Bedeutung* and its various appellations (Evening Star, Morning Star, Hesperus,

9. Originally published in the *Zeitschrift für Philosophie und philosophische Kritik* 100 (1892), pp. 25-50, the best English rendering remains Frege (1892 & 1997: 151-71). This same volume also contains useful elements of Frege's ongoing polemic with Edmund Husserl: "Letter to Husserl, 24.5.1891," pp. 149-50; "Review of E. G. Husserl, *Philosophie der Arithmetik* I," (1894), pp. 224-26; "Letters to Husserl," (1906), pp. 290-92.

Phosphorus) as manifestations of *Sinn*, providing different meanings for the same referent (Kripke, 1972: 27-30; 100-105). To return to Frege and Husserl's debates, both were anxious to find a solution to the prevailing philosophical antinomies of the time between logicism, on the one hand, and psychologism, on the other (Hobson, 2018: 184-195). Lyotard claims that each affirms the "objective reality" of signification but in utterly different ways: "[Frege] arrives at it by means of an operation (the commutation test) that allows the intervals separating the terms, and producing the meaning effect [*effet de sens*], to be determined, while [Husserl] posits signification as a virtual 'wanting-to-say' [*vouloir-dire*] that will be actualized and animated by the life of a subject in search of intuition" (419n18). Lyotard interprets this divergence as recalling that between Leibnizian systematization and Cartesian intuitionism, but the Frege-Husserl quarrel also opens that long 20th century divide between the Anglo-American analytic tradition via Russell, Quine, Ryle, Wittgenstein, and Kripke, on the one hand, and the continental phenomenological and existentialist line from Husserl to Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and the all too easily forgotten Tran Duc Thao.¹⁰ Or are the names Frege and Husserl standing in here for two very French philosophers, namely Jean-François Lyotard and Jacques Derrida themselves?

To answer this question, one need not recall, on the one hand, Lyotard's longstanding flirtation with the analytic tradition and immersion in the likes of Frege, Wittgenstein and Kripke throughout his career—manifested most capaciously in his so-called "philosophy of phrases" that provides the conceptual framework for *The Differend*—and on the other hand, Derrida's long-standing commitment to carefully, scrupulously reworking the Husserlian and Heideggerian legacy. No, we only need to read the final part of Lyotard's long footnote to the Frege-Husserl dispute, where he suddenly applies the Fregean critique of Husserl back onto Derrida himself: "Jacques Derrida," writes Lyotard, with reference to the former's "remarkable critique" in *Voice and Phenomenon*, "it seems to me challenges the wrong part of Husserl's analysis of indication. No doubt, as Derrida observes, the idea of 'indicated signification' is inconceivable and contrary to the principle of the ideality of meaning [*idéauté du sens*]. But, as we saw, Husserl himself abandons the idea. Furthermore, it does not suffice to justify bringing the deictic signifier back to the level of any other signifier of the system—which is in fact not far from what Husserl does" (420n18). It is odd that Lyotard criticizes Derrida for incorrectly "challenging" what Husserl in fact already "does." It seems to suggest he misreads the kind of deconstructive analysis that Derrida was in fact

10. Tran Duc Thao's (1954: 108-119) specific influence on Lyotard should not be underestimated, starting from his earliest work in the popular "Que-sais-je?" series, *La phénoménologie*. An excellent reedition of Tran Duc Thao's 1951 *Phénoménologie et matérialisme dialectique*, along with a set of interpretive responses by other philosophers, can be found in Benoist & Espagne (2013). An English translation also exists in Tran Duc Thao (1986). Another, later, work by the same author also merits attention (Tran Duc Thao, 1973).

performing on the Husserlian text, expecting a logical argument in place of a critical unpacking. And in a remarkable use of asyndeton, Lyotard then drops the point and abruptly attacks Derrida as if he were Frege himself castigating Husserl, albeit couched in that antagonistic French tone of *on*: “*One* had better, after Émile Benveniste..., refer its usage [that of the deictic] to an assumed exteriority, in this case that of the speaker herself or himself: without this dimension of designation, any deictic remains inconceivable. In other words, the deictic is not merely a value within the system, but an element that from the inside refers to the outside: the deictic is not conceivable *in* the system but *through* it. This difference is of the greatest importance, and does not imply any return to a ‘metaphysics of presence,’ as Derrida fears... With Frege’s moon and Benveniste’s deictic, thought eludes the Platonic sense of presence” (Ibid.).

Setting aside these grandiloquent but ultimately rather misguided remarks about somehow eluding the metaphysics of presence by this reinterpretation of deixis, something rather more consequential, by way of a theory of language, is raised here. By invoking Benveniste alongside Frege, Lyotard goes beyond the mere semantic distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*, beyond the epistemic status of indication or designation as a peculiar act of language, beyond even the question of deixis itself as something other than discourse within discourse. He evokes the whole gamut of what Benveniste described as the “instances” of discourse, naming all the ways in which the speaker or writer is necessarily and formally implied in language, including indicators of context, of space and time, of verb tense and nominal declensions, even proper nouns. In short, the whole dimension of linguistics called pragmatics, before which nearly all conventional linguists (as Lyotard himself notes [p. 39]), whether structuralist or generative, recoil due to its messiness, unpredictability and, I would add, its arguably greatest resistance to those kinds of predictive programming we call today algorithms or AI.¹¹ Discourse, as Lyotard terms it, is “full of holes” that these deictic instances of designation, rather than signification, see right through. This is what he holistically understands by the counter-term of figure at its strongest and most compelling. Figure, including all the deictics and other “instances” of discourse, both stands within it as an essential element of language, its in-standing or in-stitution, while designating

11. Pragmatics has long held a kind of “Wild West” status among traditional linguists and partisans of generative grammar, many of whom, as I have personally observed, view with suspicion such wandering beyond the bounds of the classically defined subfields of syntax, semantics, phonology, and morphology. Pragmatics, as a field of inquiry, at least in the Anglo-American world, owes its development primarily to philosophers of language, especially Grice (1989); and in a different register Austin (1962) and Searle (1969). The latter was famously engaged in a bitter polemic with Jacques Derrida, culminating in Derrida (1988). French linguists, on the other hand, were far more willing from early on to embrace pragmatics (although that development still came after Lyotard’s remarks) and in response to Émile Benveniste’s crucial contributions to a post-Saussurian structural linguistics: Benveniste (1966-1974); cf. Ducrot (1972); Anscombe & Ducrot (1983); Berrendonner (1982).

what is utterly and indeed constitutionally outside of it, deconstructing it in its very construction.¹²

Interestingly, of the three instances when Lyotard references Derrida in *Discourse, figure*, this last point is the only one to which Derrida, as far as I have been able to tell, actually responds. He does so about a decade later in *Préjugés: Devant la loi*, the first version of which he delivered as an address to the Cerisy decade devoted to Lyotard, two years after the Cerisy decade held in honor of Derrida himself. In this text, Derrida generously calls for Lyotard's "help" insofar as he is an "expert on the paradoxes of the deictic" and the consequent need for him, Derrida, to "take an interminable detour through *Discourse, figure*" (p. 89). Demonstrating his own close reading of Lyotard's major text, Derrida links Lyotard's Fregean/Benvenistian analyses to his earlier critique of Hegel's famous argument about sense certainty near the beginning of *The Phenomenology of the Mind* (Hegel, 1967: 149-60). This is where Lyotard "proposes the word *dia-deictics* to designate a 'kind of mute discourse' 'by gesticulations' including multiple 'here's.'" The passage Derrida is citing reads as follows: "For no *here* can be indicated in itself if it is not situated, placed in relation with other *heres*, and therefore included in a sort of mute, gestural 'discourse' of *dia-deictics* pointing to a 'Before and a Behind, an Above and a Below, a Right and a Left' [Lyotard here citing Hegel]. Thus the gesture becomes a *dialectics* of gestures, the place a *dialectic* of places, and to situate becomes to include laconically the other in the same and mediating it" (pp. 35-36). In lieu of elaborating on the intricacies of this highly original critique of Hegel's discussion, I shall only remark on Derrida's apparent admiration for Lyotard's rejection of the Hegelian solution for the vicissitudes of sense certainty that mean the *now* that was high noon is now the *now* of midnight and the *here* before a tree is then the *here* before a house. Rejecting what he calls the "hollow universality" of the verbal concepts of *the here* and *the now*—a function of Hegel's *logophilia* and the reabsorption of the externality of the senses into interiorized sense—Lyotard argues that deictic designation occurs as singular each time,¹³ This constitutes a negation of discursive signification, leaving discourse, as he says, "riddled with holes." He continues: "But the interesting and mysterious aspect of such words as *I, this, here*, which expect their 'content' to come from their actualization in a discursive act, is specifically that they open language to an experience language cannot take in, since this experience is one of a *hic et nunc*" (p. 37). This negation of discursive signification may bear a certain resemblance to the dialectic's own *Zauberkraft* or "magical power" of the negative, yet the figural negation of deixis and designation works completely differently to the kind of negation that founds discursive signification and the progressive, expansive movement of the dialectic properly understood. As

12. It is tempting to contrast, however obliquely, Lyotard's deconstructive concept of figure with Paul de Man's deconstructive sense of the rhetorical play of figures of speech within and against the strictures of grammar (de Man, 1979).

13. A formulation that anticipates a strong current in the thought of Jean-Luc Nancy, which I discuss elsewhere as the play of "sense and singularity" (op. cit.).

Derrida notes, “against Hegelian mediation, if I understand correctly, the ‘dia-deictic can indeed be a kind of dialectic, but it is not a discourse...’ (pp. 37-39). And things get even more complicated when the gesture of showing is accompanied by the enunciation of a proper name, an enunciation that can be advanced under the most diverse modes and masks, among which there is what one calls a call [*qu’on appelle l’appel*], or apostrophe.” And here, Derrida alludes to that elaborate apostrophizing “call and response” between the two as they called on each other to attend their respective colloquia. Or as Lyotard further clarifies, dia-deictics is a “kind” of dialectics but one whose “result is a *Dasein*, not a *Sinn*” (p. 40). Dia-deictics is thus the full deconstruction of discursive signification as the opening onto a generalized pragmatics, where addressor, addressee, sense, and reference are continually resituated under different phrase regimes, either furthering or contesting or simply deferring their implicit relations with forms of power and practices of knowledge. It is no accident that Derrida’s recourse to Lyotard’s dia-deictics and the politics of figure should appear as the preface to his long essay, *Prejudices: Before the Law*, an eminently political reading of Kafka’s story of that name, the tale of a man who asks to enter the Law only to be blocked at the door by a surly guard who appears to refuse him entry, at least for now. After waiting for days, months, and eventually years for the guard to let him in, but to no avail, he learns right before his own death that the gate was made only for him and no one else could enter. Perhaps the disruption of dia-deictics that leaves discourse full of holes is meant to spur us to something else besides the endless wait for the chain of signification to reach the plenitude of a meaning that will never arrive. Something else, perhaps more like the an-archy of figure, or something unpredictably other than the pre-programmed algorithms of discursive compliance. In a related vein, it would be interesting to track the specter of this dia-deictics as it might have informed Derrida’s subsequent meditations on those curious figures of *différance*, such as signature, event, context, iterability, parerga, spectrality, hospitality, friendship, given time, the sovereign and so forth.

One final word. I imagine some will feel that revisiting this subterranean and ultimately rather amicable (non)polemic between these two giants of French theory, both at one point visiting professors at UC Irvine, is both academically frivolous given our currently troubled times and indulging in a pointless nostalgia for an intellectual past perhaps all too hastily dismissed as out-of-touch and irrelevant today. Perhaps I should conclude with another exchange between Derrida and Lyotard that might just speak to this question. The exchange happened at Cerisy when Derrida observed that when looking at Lyotard, he saw “only the side that breaks with nostalgia [*la face qui tranche avec la nostalgie*]” (Lacoue-Labarthe & Nancy, 1981: 312).¹⁴ He acknowledged a certain Nietzschean radicality while noting Lyotard’s unswerving allegiance to the modernist project of a leftist utopianism—the same charge raised by

14. This remark occurs in the discussion following Lyotard’s “Discussions, ou phrasier ‘après Auschwitz’.”

Fred Jameson, namely that Lyotard was seeking the “new” for its own sake, the very example of postmodernism having forgotten how to think historically.¹⁵ On the other hand, or the other face, or figure, Lyotard perceived Derrida as exhibiting a certain Rousseauist nostalgia, looking backwards at questions of origins that turn out not to be, that are only origins retrospectively, always already after the fact. What one sees, then, in this face-to-face, is a certain ineffable figure or ineffaceable trace of difference between them that is also a point of pure convergence. It is a *trait d'union* or the hyphen of a mark, the grapheme of a gap, between the *Sinn* of signification and the *Bedeutung* of designation, the ungraspable sense of a referent or the irretrievable referent of a sense, the retreat of a retreat, or ... perhaps just a seasonal dissonance, a specifically *chronic* figure of difference, with full respect for UC Irvine's academic calendar: forever fall for Lyotard, eternal spring for Derrida.

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15. Cf. Jameson (1984: vii-xxi); also Jameson (1991: ix), which begins with the forceful assertion that “it is safest to grasp the concept of postmodernism as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place.”

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