

DESIRE, ABSENCE AND ART IN DELEUZE AND LYOTARD

Kiff Bamford

In an undated letter, Giles Deleuze writes the following to Jean-François Lyotard:

One thing continues to surprise me, the more it happens that we have shared or close thoughts, the more it happens that an irritating difference comes into sight which even I don't succeed in locating. It is like our relationship: the more I love you, the less I am able to come to grasp it, but what is it?¹

There is a proximity between the work of these two thinkers that remains little considered, it is one that also hides a subtle, but significantly different attitude to desire. The proliferation of interest in Deleuze, particularly since his death, is accompanied by new considerations of desire which echo Lyotard's libidinal writings very strongly—Elizabeth Grosz's 2008 *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* is one example.² Because of the close proximity of Lyotard and Deleuze, it is rewarding to carefully consider the differences among their many similarities (and here I am consciously making no distinction between those writings authored singly by Deleuze and those written collaboratively with Guattari). The manner in which both Lyotard and Deleuze write on art might be described as writing *with* art and artists rather than about them, inasmuch as they give prominence to the ideas, statements and working methods described, and privilege the role of the artist as enacting a different type of thought.³ In *Anti-Oedipus* this attitude is clear: "the artist presents paranoiac machines, miraculating-machines, and celibate machines [...] the work of art is itself a desiring-machine."⁴ It is not that they write in two genres: art criticism and philosophy, but that their writings cross the circumscribed boundaries of these genres to ask questions of each.

The importance of maintaining the difference of the visual is central to both Deleuze and Lyotard and it is because of a sensitivity to the particularities of the visual that their writings strive to work with that difference, rather than reduce it to a written form. Both Deleuze and Lyotard work knowingly with the paradox of writing about art—evoking rather than capturing its force—and it is in wrestling with this dilemma that their approaches can be particularly rewarding. I will discuss two pieces in particular: Deleuze's *Francis Bacon: The Logic of*

Sensation (1981) which is his most extensive work on a single artist, and Lyotard's "It's as if a line..." (1983) on the Italian artist Valerio Adami.⁵ I have chosen to focus on this essay because it highlights aspects of separation and questioning, which encapsulate the differing approaches of Lyotard and Deleuze already apparent in their earlier exchange at the time of the publication of Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* in 1972 and which their shared use of the term 'figural' might belie. It is the aim of this essay to distinguish Lyotard's conception of desire from that of Deleuze and Guattari and to defend his position from their criticisms. This difference becomes particularly evident in their respective discussions of art and it is here, I contend, that Lyotard's approach has a potential which remains little discussed.

LET'S START WITH THE FIGURAL

Start because the figural is always in flux: it is not a concept but rather a force that works through or works over established forms of codified discourse. The figural works through Lyotard's major 1971 work *Discourse, Figure* and is picked up and used by Deleuze ten years later in his *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*.⁶ The figural is at times close to desire itself; its most extreme form—the figure-matrix—is described by Lyotard as being "hand in glove with desire" and as such shares much with the unconscious in its inability to be fixed, coded, translated or seen.⁷ The figure-matrix, like the unconscious as described by Freud, knows no negation and consequently cannot act like a language as Lacan would have it or be grasped except through recognition of its effects, distortions and transformations. *Discourse, Figure* moves through diverse terrain in its attack on structural linguistics, Lacanian psychoanalysis and reductive attempts to analyse art in both its visual and written forms. Yet the speed of its writing is slower than the whirlwinds of Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) or Lyotard's *Libidinal Economy* (1974); *Discourse Figure* engages with its interlocutors in a more traditional manner, referring excessively outside itself in a plethora of footnotes, almost a parody of the scholarly text which both reflects and refuses its initial manifestation as the thesis for his *doctorat d'état*. Lyotard acknowledges the limitations of the book's form in failing to match the demands of its content whilst also describing the process by which its focus moves—from Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology to Freud's psychoanalysis via Frege, Lacan, Klee and Cézanne (among others)—as the most figural aspect of the whole endeavour.⁸ In *Discourse, Figure* the figural is initially equated with the "mobile eye" that exposes the limitations of structuralist linguistics, but Lyotard is not merely wishing to re-inscribe a phenomenological sensibility onto language. Rather, Lyotard intends to draw attention to the figural as that which falls outside signification—to recover the trembling visuality that he recognises in the written, printed or painted letter, the sensory elements of Mallarmé's placings that do not merely signify oppositions within a system but open up discourse to the presence of the figural bound within it. Lyotard considers the figure operating within discourse not as opposed to it, but as given "thickness" through the "energetics" of the eye, a process he equates with the approach to painting by Paul Klee and Jackson Pollock, emphasizing the bodily aspect of each painter's dance. Both Lyotard and Deleuze refer to Klee's working methods as instances of the search for a figuration that attempts to free itself from the restrictive modes of perception and formulaic means of representation. They both quote Klee's aim: "not to render the visible, but to render visible".⁹

However, the figural is a process which cannot be captured and can only be referred to through analogy. "The artwork's 'subject', 'motif', or 'theme' entices us. But the artwork does not fulfill desire; it unfulfills it. Pleasure and death are cleaved in the artwork: its formalism is not the sign of the mind, but of the death drive."¹⁰ Lyotard ends a contemporary account of the work with the declaration "*Sous le discours = la figure; sous les pavés = la plage*": a bitter-sweet reminder of both its revolutionary origins and the essentially political nature of its attack on ideology.¹¹ Lyotard later expressed a wariness about the extent to which *Discourse, Figure* provided answers that were "too convenient" and remained "too close to a conception of the unconscious coming directly from Freud" but its effects are still evident in his later writing, even where the predominance of Kant suggests that this libidinal force had been abandoned.¹² It is to be hoped that the long-overdue English translation of *Discourse, Figure* will aid reconsiderations of his work and the particular sensitivity he shows to the manifestation of desire in art, not as the fulfilment of a wish but through its twisting, turning, "scuttling" intervention.

DELEUZE AND THE FIGURAL

In Deleuze's book on Francis Bacon we find many terms familiar to both Deleuze and Deleuze and Guattari's lexicon—sensation, Bodies without Organs, deterritorialization—but Deleuze also introduces the term 'figural', with specific reference to Lyotard's usage in *Discourse, Figure*: "[Painting] has two possible ways of escaping the figurative: toward pure form, through abstraction; or toward the purely figural, through extraction or isolation. If the painter keeps to the Figure, if he or she opts for the second path, it will be to oppose the 'figural' to the figurative."¹³ Explicitly Deleuze uses the term 'figural' in order to differentiate Bacon's use of the figure from a representational, figurative approach to painting, and his subsequent use of a capitalised 'F' for Figure, in reference to Bacon, brings with it that distinction. However, the figural is more than just a mark of formal distinction and encapsulates that which is central to Bacon's work for Deleuze—his striving for a different figuration that avoids clichéd forms of figurative representation and which works instead with sensations. Deleuze writes of sensation, following Cézanne and Bacon, as impacting directly on the nervous system, bypassing the modes of communication which need cerebral decoding: the "violence of sensation" is an affective sensation coming from matter itself.¹⁴ The approach of Bacon, according to Deleuze, is one which rejects a figuration that is too sensational, in the colloquial sense, and which relies on forms of narrative for its dramatic impact. Deleuze highlights Bacon's own hesitation regarding the famous series of screaming Popes, based on Velázquez's portraits of Pope Innocent X, and his caution with regard to narrative. Bacon's declaration of intent: "I want to paint the scream more than the horror" is repeated twice by Deleuze and again in the preface for the English edition; thus in some way becoming a leitmotif of the book it emphasises the importance, for Deleuze, of not representing mimetically but through sensation: "The violence of sensation is opposed to the violence of the represented (the sensational, the cliché)."¹⁵ Deleuze suggests that Bacon questions presumptions with regard to the representation and likens the process to that of Antonin Artaud—who forces a rethinking of what we understand to be cruelty—similarly, horror is rethought in Bacon's paintings. Therefore, despite Bacon's own misgivings about the overly sensational screaming Popes, Deleuze maintains their centrality as part of the search for a violence which is invisible: "it is rather the way in which the Pope himself sees nothing, and screams *before the invisible*."¹⁶

In this search for the underlying, disruptive forces of sensation we can identify the importance of Lyotard's *Discourse, Figure* to Deleuze, one which outweighs the book's single reference to the term 'figural'. The role of *Discourse, Figure* is highlighted by Ronald Bogue who gives an overview of Lyotard's use of the figural and acknowledges that whilst Deleuze "does not embrace all aspects of Lyotard's concept" he relates the figural to sensation and affect but "without resorting to the theoretical presuppositions of Freudian psychoanalysis or conventional phenomenology".¹⁷ It is to further question the extent of the confusion between Deleuze and Lyotard that we must consider their different responses to Freud—Is this the ungraspable difference to which Deleuze refers in the letter quoted at the start of this present article? Deleuze wrote a short but favourable review of *Discourse, Figure* in *La Quinzaine Littéraire* (May 1972), parts of which are incorporated into *Anti-Oedipus*. There are three sections of *Anti-Oedipus* which discuss *Discourse, Figure*, praising Lyotard's work as "the first generalised critique of the signifier".¹⁸ But, having praised his celebration of the figural element as desire, Deleuze and Guattari question the role he gives to transgression, arguing that it results in deformation rather than transformation:

But what can explain the reader's impression that Lyotard is continually arresting the process, and steering the schizzes toward the shores he has so recently left behind: toward coded or overcoded territories, spaces and structures, to which they bring only 'transgressions', disorders, and deformations that are secondary in spite of everything, instead of forming and transporting further the desiring-machines that are in opposition to the structures, and the intensities that are in opposition to the spaces?¹⁹

The role of disorder and transgression is key to the difference between Lyotard and Deleuze and Guattari, a difference that can be seen in the later writings on painting. As indicated in the quotation, transgression and

deformation are central characteristics of the figural in Lyotard's writing: the figural works within structured systems of representation and it is through deformation that the presence of desire is signalled. In his most concentrated refusal of Lacanian psychoanalysis, the section of *Discourse, Figure* titled "The Dream-work Does Not Think", Lyotard gives an account of the Freudian processes of dream-work to demonstrate their opposition to the rules of discourse and the violence of its transgression: "Desire does not speak; it does violence to the order of utterance".²⁰ It is not an already established order that is then transgressed but a simultaneous, primordial composite: "at once discourse and figure".²¹ Lyotard accepts that transgression cannot operate without a limit whereas in the thinking of Deleuze and Guattari there is no 'beyond'—as James Williams notes—and therefore no limit.²² It is clear that Lyotard recognizes this difference between their work, evident in "Capitalism énergumène," his commentary on *Anti-Oedipus*: "In Deleuze and Guattari's book you will see everywhere their utter contempt for the category of transgression" and in his final remarks concerning the movement of desire which "is not that of transgressing the limit, but rather of pulverizing the field itself into a libidinal surface".²³ The latter gives a foretaste of the libidinal band with which Lyotard opens *Libidinal Economy*: where there is no inside or outside there can be no limit, only a continually shifting surface of intensities. It is easier to identify a similarity of approach to a purely affirmative desire-as-force in the *Libidinal Economy*, to see it as flowing from the same compulsion as *Anti-Oedipus*, but it is wrongheaded to assume that this constitutes an abandonment of the hesitation that Deleuze identified in *Discourse, Figure*. The stopping, stalling, stuttering machines of Lyotard's writings are not the smooth accelerated flows of Deleuze and Guattari: he is "continually arresting the process" in his search for that which is rendered mute. This hesitation is particularly evident in his encounters with art.

BACON AND ADAMI

Lyotard wrote two catalogue essays to accompany exhibitions of work by Valerio Adami, both of which are incorporated into the book *Que Peindre? Adami, Arakawa, Buren*, published in 1987 by *Éditions de la Différence* as part of the same series as Deleuze's *Francis Bacon: Logique de la Sensation*.²⁴ Both publications are double volume editions consisting of one volume of plates, and one of text. It is Lyotard's essay 'It's as if a line...' which I will use here to parallel Deleuze's work on Francis Bacon in order to highlight the role of distance and separation in Lyotard's account which makes it markedly different to that of Deleuze and Guattari. Lyotard's essay was first published to accompany an exhibition of Adami's work at the Galerie Maeght in Paris in 1983 in a lavishly illustrated edition of the in-house magazine *Repères: cahiers d'art contemporain*.²⁵ Previous catalogues for the Galerie Maeght included essays on Adami by Italo Calvino and Jacques Derrida, the latter being incorporated into *The Truth in Painting*. However, whilst Derrida's focus is the framing devices and the margins of Adami's drawings, Lyotard's concern is the drawn line itself and its power. Although Lyotard no longer uses the term "figural" in his essay on Adami, he does refer to discussions which are central to *Discourse, Figure*, particularly the distinction between letter and line and the extent to which their functions overlap yet operate in significantly different ways. Questioning the compartmentalisation of the visual and the textual is a consistent theme throughout *Discourse, Figure*, analysing the means by which systems of representation have reduced pictorial forms to signification. The perspectival system of Alberti's *costruzione legittima*, for example, denies the eye its movement, its peripheral laterality and its plastic sensibility, thereby marginalising or rendering mute the figural frisson present in the co-existence of different spaces—identified by Lyotard in illuminated manuscripts, the work of Masaccio and the paintings of Cézanne. It is in order to recover the figural sensibility—that which is irreducible to a system—which leads to Lyotard's preoccupation with the re-inscription of corporeal resonance into the plastic space of the line, that which disturbs its signifying function:

The line is an unrecognizable trace, so long as it does not refer the eye to a system of connotation where this trace would receive fixed, invariant meaning. It is unrecognizable when it does not fit in an order of relations that would inevitably determine its value. The line is therefore figural when, by her or his artifice, the painter or drawer places it in a configuration in which its value cannot yield to an activity of recognition—for to recognize is to know well. From here on we must proceed with

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caution.²⁶

Lyotard is at pains to uphold this difference in order that the figural aspect of the line is not enclosed by the letter—that the visible aspect of the line is not written out when it is written about: this is at the heart of Lyotard's writings on art.

In the Adami issue of *Repères* the reproductions of drawings, paintings and Lyotard's lines construct a dialogue between demands, expectations and styles—the forcefulness of the line and the forms it suggests are questioned by the disrupted arrangement of space and the staged interlocutors (a frequent device used by Lyotard) which question our assumptions with regard to the function of the line. The stylistic strategy used by Lyotard gives presence to the lines themselves in the work of Adami, described as “inhabited by a desire”, they “make a demand”.²⁷ It is unsurprising that Lyotard moulds his essay around the line because Adami's is an odd line—strong, bold, decisive and beautifully curved, it opens up the picture plane to allow space in, if only the intersecting of planes would conform to the rules of illusion which we have been taught to expect. Even when a clearly delineated form, such as a figure, is cut from the background and its smoothness allows the illusion of a powerful three-dimensionality to emerge in a classical, sculptured manner, it is not permitted to exist without being overrun: either by the background colour (which will claim some part of the body), or by an abandoned line (which leaves part of the form missing), or by a shift in chromatic tone which does not allow the hand and head to co-exist on the same plane.

The following quotation from Lyotard's text indicates the approach he takes: quoting the artist, he uses these comments as prompts to his own discussion:

Adami quotes Diderot: ‘To paint the way they talked in Sparta.’ On April 9, 1981, he drew a Promenade du sceptique [Walk of the Skeptic]: the man, barefoot, walks on his head, the woman holds a magnifying mirror. She is sliced down the middle from top to toe. It would require this laconism in order to comment on the drawing and recover its tenderness. Diderot said that pictures are like great mutes. They disavow beforehand everything we write about them.²⁸

Quoting Adami, who is quoting Diderot, has the effect of distancing Lyotard's own voice which is, consequently, rarely felt in a direct way but is replaced by an internal dialogue in which the drawings and the lines themselves play a significant role. The lines are described as belonging to an already existing continuum of possibilities, reminding us of their anteriority: they are there before Adami and his decision to select some, and silence others. So too, argues Lyotard, the picture is there before the critic, anticipating that which will be written: “the line anticipates commentary and eludes it.”²⁹

In some respects the materiality of the line, and its independence from either artist or commentator, is similar to that described by Deleuze and Guattari in “Percept, affect, and concept” (*What is Philosophy?* 1991), perhaps their clearest statement about the role and functioning of the arts. Here the artistic gesture is described as existing independently of the artist and viewer: “The work of art is a being of sensation and nothing else: it exists in itself.”³⁰ Deleuze and Guattari argue that such a conceptualisation of sensation is possible because humans are themselves only collections of forces, having arisen from the intense flows of forces, not the source of life in a vitalist sense but a changing, unstable chaos without fixed origin from which unanticipated folds can emerge, and are not privileged creators or receivers of sensation.³¹ The questions which have been levelled at Deleuze and Guattari's conceptualisation of flows concern the creation of a privileged space—whether for desire, the flux of forces or indeed for art—are they positing an idealised ‘beyond’ which is a return to transcendence in another guise?³² Deleuze responds to such accusations with a further explanation of desire, explaining that it is not a natural state that is returned to but something which exists when it is “*assembled or machined*. You cannot grasp or conceive of a desire outside a determinate assemblage, on a plane which is not preexistent but which must itself be constructed”.³³ This quotation emphasises the extent to which desire, being mobilised only through “construction” is neither an idealized pre-world, nor a utopian metaphysical goal

that exists in a “beyond”, but rather that desire is immanent: “There is only desire and the social, and nothing else.”³⁴ This argument can also be applied to the way that “sensation” is presented by Deleuze and Guattari; they argue that sensation comes from matter, not as something stable but as a constantly shifting potential that can open up the difference that normalisation has closed. This is not a return to a prior state but an opening of that which is closed to human perception through the activation of a potential futurity contained within the “vibration” of the sensation.³⁵ In *What is Philosophy?* art is a privileged space, but not in the sense that it is usually conceived: for Deleuze and Guattari it is always potentially there—not a transcendent beyond, nor a space separate from the social, but one that has the force to think difference.

Having made the connection between desire and sensation we can bring this discussion back specifically to *Francis Bacon* and the phrase “to paint the scream more than the horror”. The sensation which is heightened in this phrase, and to which Deleuze draws our attention, is the temporal interlude before the unknown: to paint the scream prior to the horror not only in a chronological sense but also prior to our conception of what that sensation might be. Both Deleuze and Lyotard are taking an approach to painting which is unusual, as Mary Lydon, the English translator of “It’s as if a line...”, explains: “Lyotard strives, like Adami, for the inexpressible, as if his sentences were Adami’s line pursued by other means.”³⁶

Lyotard’s essay comprises several voices: “He”, “She”, “The Other”, and finally, in the concluding section, “Me”. This collection of voices is another strategy to complicate the position of Lyotard as the writer and to allow the lines within the pictures to form themselves into words; consequently there emerges a polyphonic chorus. The voice labelled “The Other” appeals to the archaic time of classical mythology, prompted by the subject matter of Adami’s drawings, and to the passages of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*: from man to woman (Tireseas), woman to sound (Echo) or woman to tree (Myrrha), noting that each passage relies on distance and separation. In contrast, the processes of becoming which Deleuze and Guattari describe, have neither beginning nor end. Writing of Bacon’s paintings, Deleuze recognises the process of “becoming-animal” which is not a passage from human to animal but a becoming through the “fact” of a common zone between man and beast, where the body attempts to “escape from itself” and dissipate into an assemblage of forces.³⁷ Deleuze writes that Bacon’s paintings are not of faces but heads, not of flesh but meat, and what this “constitutes is a *zone of indiscernibility or undecidability* between man and animal” where animal traits and animal spirit are actualised.³⁸ According to Deleuze, Bacon sees meat not with horror but as a “fact”. If we take this as an instance of the immanent, affirmative and transformative desire which concerns Deleuze, we can identify a difference in approach when Lyotard writes of the process of passage in “It’s as if a line...”.

Lyotard’s voice, “The Other”, writes that separation is essential to representation and it is that which Narcissus cannot attain: “Without the work of this mourning there will be no representation. Narcissus is not an artist but a representation of impossible art.”³⁹ Impossible because the thread between image and object, word and thing, can never be removed: ‘distanciation’ is a prerequisite of representation and language. It is this which preoccupied Lyotard in *Discourse, Figure* and highlights the double-bind inherent in writings about art: “For one needn’t be immersed in language [*langage*] in order to be able to speak; the “absolute” object, the language-system [*langue*], does not speak.”⁴⁰ It is in this ability to escape that the figural resides, not to be recouped into the strictures of a system such as writing, but to signal that the task of art is unfulfillment: “If desire can be fulfilled in the work of art, then the work of art gives something to hope for. I believe that what is revolutionary is precisely to hope for nothing.”⁴¹

This clearly differentiates Lyotard’s position from those who use psychoanalytic theory, Freud included, to analyse art as if it were a symptom, an exteriorisation of the artist’s phantasy. Lyotard explicitly rejects such reductive readings of art: in *Discourse, Figure* Lyotard recognised Klee’s efforts to avoid the simple production of a phantasy and go beyond a consideration of the work of art as the fulfilment of desire. But how might we understand the role of desire and phantasy at work in the voice of “The Other” whilst restricting ourselves, for the moment at least, to the historical context of the double-edged comments by Deleuze and Guattari on the role of desire in Lyotard’s *Discourse, Figure*: “despite his attempt at linking desire to a fundamental yes,

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Lyotard reintroduces lack and absence into desire”?⁴² In chapter three of *Anti-Oedipus* two passages refer to *Discourse, Figure*, both in sections referring to representation and designation. Here the impact of Lyotard’s work is acknowledged in what Deleuze and Guattari term “territorial representation”: using the eye to see the word, not to read it, thereby disturbing attempts to overcome the heterogeneous representation of words and things, with the resulting effect that “the eye jumps”. In a footnote Deleuze and Guattari refer to the following passage from Lyotard: “Words are not things, but as soon as there is a word, the object designated becomes a sign, which means precisely that it conceals a hidden content within its manifest identity, and that it reserves another face for another viewer focused on it... which perhaps will never be seen.”⁴³

What is not acknowledged by Deleuze and Guattari is the importance that Lyotard attaches to this process of negativity: the extent to which such a process of concealment equates to the source of figural force which will explode as libidinal desire, but which cannot be motivated in the way that Deleuze and Guattari infer, as Lyotard makes clear: “Desire is truly unacceptable. One cannot pretend to accept it, for accepting it is still to reject it. It will become event elsewhere.”⁴⁴ The role of negation in *Discourse, Figure* is key to that which differentiates Lyotard’s approach to desire, perhaps most evident in the section of *Discourse, Figure* titled “The No and the Position of the Object”.

NEGATION IN *DISCOURSE, FIGURE*

There are three main forms of negation discussed by Lyotard in *Discourse, Figure*: the negation on which Saussure bases his system of language as opposition within a closed system of differentiation; the negation by which phenomenology establishes the object through ‘distanciation’ and the psychoanalytic form of negation described by Freud. All three have a significance for Lyotard in that they reveal the dominance of discourse at the expense of the marginalisation of the figure but it is the latter that has a particularly deep-seated correlation with the figural-as-desire through the workings of the unconscious.

In addition to the syntactical negative of the grammarian or logician—*x is not y*—Lyotard draws attention to the role of reference as the absence which is hidden in all discourse but which gives it the ability to function. This referential aspect is introduced by Lyotard as a further critique of Saussure through a discussion of Emile Benveniste’s remarks on the characteristics of the personal pronoun “I”, as that which names and designates but does not signify. Signification occurs only when the personal pronoun is actualised in discourse, when the pronoun is adopted and thereby given a particular meaning and reference. However, as Benveniste explains, it is through the use of “I” that the speaker positions himself in language and is simultaneously positioned by language, a process which is necessary to signify subjectivity. The use of “I” governs all actualisation of language: “The ego is that which speaks”; it opens up discourse to that which is positioned outside of signification but which is fundamental to the operation of discourse: “The negation upholding the relation of designation is the split that, as it opens between discourse and its object, allows us to speak, since we can only say and have nothing else to say than what we are not, and since it is certain that, conversely, what we cannot say, we are.”⁴⁵ It is in this latter negativity, “what we cannot say”, that Freud identifies the work of desire, a negation that plays an important role for Lyotard’s discussion of the figural as desire.

The section of *Discourse, Figure* titled “The No and the Position of the Object” gives an account of the role of spoken negation in analysis through a detailed reading of Freud’s short 1925 essay *Die Verneinung* [“Negation”].⁴⁶ Lyotard highlights the role of negation as signalling the unrepresentable presence of desire in discourse—fuelled by the unconscious. Although, for Freud, the unconscious knows no negation, its presence can be indicated in the conscious realm when uttered as denial. Therefore, the persistence of denial in the discourse of the analysand signals the workings of desire, rendered through negation. As Freud argues, “Negation is a way of taking cognizance of what is repressed; indeed it is already a lifting of the repression, though not, of course, an acceptance of what is repressed.”⁴⁷

Lytard pays particular attention to one example given by Freud: a patient recalling a person in a dream: “it’s *not* my mother” they insist. Freud disregards the negation, as being the work of denial, and concludes “So it *is* his mother”. It is this transgression of the logic of language which constitutes the basis of Lyotard’s analysis as an example of the figural at work. In the statement “it’s *not* my mother” the patient is able to differentiate between the person in the dream and his mother, following grammatical negation, and to use the structuralist system of opposition to distinguish the mother from all other objects; but it is with the analyst’s shift to “it *is* his mother” that the negativity of denial is rendered as an affirmation, thereby introducing a different type of negation. Lyotard explains that desire is at work here, indicated through the transgression of conventional linguistic spacings: the mother must be placed outside designation and signification—because dreaming of her is forbidden by virtue of the incest taboo—and in denying that he has dreamed of his mother the patient reconstitutes her as a “lost object” and renders the repressed desire as positive, through the repetition of denial. The mother is thereby simultaneously constituted on different planes in radically heterogeneous forms: reconstituted as a presence in discourse (as a “lost object”) the repressed is “intellectually” accepted, whilst a destructive desire to negate the “mother” remains “outside”: “it would not even be true to say that the interpreter replaces No with Yes. Rather, she or he goes from the No of syntax to the No of transcendence, the latter being a position ‘outside’, *ekthesis*.”⁴⁸

The “No of transcendence” refers back to Lyotard’s initial discussion of phenomenology and the constitution of objects through the negativity of distance, the process of “distanciation” which, in this case, is necessary to bring the dream into articulated discourse. The acceptance of denial on the level of knowledge leads Freud to speculate on the process by which judgement in the formation of both pleasure-ego and reality-ego might be aligned to the “primary instinctual impulses”. Whilst the pleasure-ego follows an impulse to introject that which is good and eject that which is bad, the reality-ego establishes an understanding of exteriority based not on an object’s quality but its accessibility and the ability to re-find perceptions externally. Both processes of judgement rely on interior and exterior thus prompting Freud to follow an implied correlation between acceptance by the ego and Eros and between expulsion and the destructive drive, as he writes: “The polarity of judgement appears to correspond to the opposition of the two groups of instincts which we have supposed to exist. Affirmation—as a substitute for uniting—belongs to Eros; negation—the successor to expulsion—belongs to the instinct of destruction.”⁴⁹ This correlation presents several problems for Lyotard, who points out that the complex process of negation described in relation to repression is undermined by the reductive correlation of “No” as a symbol of negation linked to the destructive drive, despite being accepted intellectually by the patient.⁵⁰ Lyotard questions the elision of the two forms of judgement without consideration of what drives the shift from pleasure-ego to reality-ego, also rejecting the implication that the former’s ‘spitting out’ is somehow involved with the constitution of reality. Lyotard explains:

What is spat out is what is spat out, and no longer exists for the body of pleasure: it is obliterated. For what has been rejected to *be something nonetheless, the drive to destroy must be supplemented by the opposite power to appresent [apprésenter] absence. Then loss may count as loss, the presence of a lack, and the object may count as reality, something that is even when it is not there. But what exactly is this power to render present, to ‘reproduce as representation’ an absent object? It is, says Freud, the power of linguistic negation.*⁵¹

Here is the key to Lyotard’s argument, that whilst discourse is based on a necessary rupture and distanciation, affirmative desire for the lost object is at the heart of all discourse—“its silent support”.⁵²

The figure of the mute reappears in the Adami essay, as quoted earlier, where Lyotard refers to Diderot’s claim that “pictures are like great mutes. They disavow beforehand everything we write about them”.⁵³ Lyotard’s description of the process of drawing contemplates Adami’s seduction: the possibilities presented by the line necessitate the rejection of many, which are reduced to a visual trace, a process evident in the drawings’ erased surfaces. The erasure of some, their “sacrifice”, gives an added power to those selected. In order to bring “strong configurations” out of the “disorder” Adami counters the potential proliferation of lines and their

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multiple possibilities: “The line is inhabited by a desire, it has a desire’s infinite power.”⁵⁴

The story of Orpheus and Eurydice, used frequently as a metaphor for the inaccessibility of the unconscious and also the subject of one of Adami’s pictures, is used to illustrate the task of the artist—caught between capturing emotion from the “watery underworld” and rendering visible through line.⁵⁵ We are left with the suspension of “affective power” which is memorialised, rather than realised on the page, in the struggle between form and emotion. It is the same struggle which Freud briefly attends to in *Die Verneinung* when he remarks that an intellectual acknowledgement of repression does not constitute its removal: “We can see how in this the intellectual function is separated from the affective process” and which was commented on tellingly by Jean Hyppolite in his “spoken contribution” to Lacan’s seminar, as follows:

This seems very profound to me. If the psychoanalysed person accepts this, he goes back on negation and yet the repression is still there! I conclude from this that one must give what happens here a philosophical name, a name Freud did not pronounce: negation of the negation. Literally, what transpires here is intellectual, but only intellectual, affirmation qua negation of the negation [...] At this point...Freud finds himself in a position to be able to show how the intellectual separates <in action> from the affective, and to give a formulation of a sort of genesis of judgement, that is, in short, a genesis of thought.⁵⁶

It is this polarisation of the intellectual and the affective which Lyotard repudiates. The ungraspable, personified by Eurydice, will not be brought to the surface through articulated presentation—be it Lyotard’s words or the lines on Adami’s page—but their trace is always felt: “If you want to lie with her, Orpheus is told, don’t eye her. He turns round to see her. That look puts her away.”⁵⁷

“It’s as if a line...” reaffirms that the problem which faces Lyotard, as a writer commenting on the visual, is not only a question of doing justice to another medium but is, rather, a problem which is shared by the artist, that of attending to “desire’s infinite power” in the line. When Lyotard writes that “his line arouses the graphite in my ball-point”, it is both a nostalgic call to the writer’s own artistic ambitions and a call to that “childhood of thought” which later concerns him in *The Inhuman*: “This debt to childhood is one which we never pay off. [...] It is the task of writing, thinking, literature, arts, to venture to bear witness to it.”⁵⁸ Although the rhetorical trope of “bearing witness” is aligned to Lyotard’s writings on the sublime, the parallel with the “action” of Orpheus—in turning round to look at the forbidden figure of Eurydice—makes the connections between the different periods of his writing sing, like the song which “rose from the dismembered body of Orpheus”, as Lyotard described in 1969:

Orpheus turns around. His desire to *see the figure overcomes his desire to bring it to the light. Orpheus wants to see in the night, to see night. By trying to see Eurydice, he loses all hope of making her be seen: the figure is that which has no face; it kills the one that looks at it because it fills him with its own night. [...] We must stop looking at the problem of art in terms of creation. And as to the wish to look at the night, a work is never more than the proof of a failure to fulfill it.*⁵⁹

This description of Orpheus’ failure and his subsequent destruction at the hands of the Maenad women is an apposite metaphor precisely because his was not a failure but the accomplishment of the destructive desire to “look at the night”.

For Lyotard, art should disturb, not console, it ought not to be born from the conventions of good form but from the rupture which is embedded in the process of representation. As we have seen, the importance of this rupture is reiterated in *Discourse, Figure* through a questioning of the premise of Freud’s metapsychological works of the 1920s, including *Verneinung*, where the simultaneous constitution of reality, subjectivity and desire are attributed to the original split (of identification) and the function of language in this split.

Lytard argues that it is not simply a process of establishing the “thread of referential distance” necessary to language through the child’s establishment of the mother as lost object, but that the question of desire is more complex, as he explains: “The pulsing between eaten-introjected and spat-expelled does not determine a *relation* with the breast. Instead it marks the pleasure-ego’s rhythm—non-cumulative and non-referred, oscillating between release and tension and governed by the principle.”⁶⁰ This “pulsing” of desire does not fit into the idea of a simultaneous creation of ego and language. What the child of Freud’s “fort-da” scenario proves with his bobbin is that there are two faces to reality, that based on the opposition of absence and presence, which incorporates both systems of signification and designation, but also that which remains hidden—the force which absence is not allowed to show. Discourse based on an opposition does not allow the missing to appear and proof of words and acts are required if they are to be accepted as evidence of a shared ‘reality’.

For Lyotard the repetition of the patient’s denial “it’s *not* my mother” brings with it the scansion of desire “rerouted through the negativity of transcendence, through the play of language” which, bringing us back to the essay on Adami, ensures that there will always be a separation, not only between the line of the artist and the line of the writer who forms his lines into letters, but between these lines and the objects they represent.⁶¹ This is not a melancholic reconciliation to an impossible situation, however, but the affirmation of that which is absent: which reminds us that there is always “something rather than nothing” and that “any reconciliation (spiritualist or materialist) is illusory”.⁶²

Deleuze and Guattari attacked Lyotard for clinging to the negation on which they consider the hegemony of desire as lack to be founded, where repression is ultimately figured as the inescapable debt of guilt in the Oedipus complex. Yet, for Lyotard, the process of separation does not necessarily indicate a utopian beyond—the religious space of Hegel’s spirit [*Geist*] or Merleau-Ponty’s “One” [*Un*]—but a necessary part of activating difference. The line that cannot become letter is what both Lyotard and Deleuze are struggling with in the hope that theirs might simultaneously activate a line of desire that is already there. But Lyotard emphasises the role of “distanciation” in the passage to representation, which does not merely exclude the object of representation but brings into play the force of its absence, which is released as desire in the line itself. What the line of Adami opens (not encloses) through desire is between form and emotion “at the limit of the visible”.⁶³ The process is not that of “distanciation” between subject and object, it does not seek to represent through a phantasmatic lost object, but to reveal an instance of desire. This opening of desire reveals, albeit momentarily, that representation is premised on the establishment of an enclosure, the “theatrical-representative set-up” that removes the mobility of desire and harnesses the circulation of libidinal energies. Yet the fluidity and transformative potential of art objects is the investment which Lyotard makes in his writing, in spite of the ease with which they can be subordinated to the demands of other set-ups.

Walking into such a set-up—a historical survey in the Hayward Gallery, London, titled *Invisible—Art about the Unseen 1957-2012*—I do not expect to find either discomfort or the rupture of which Lyotard writes. I enter a room through a protective curtain; it is empty except for two large cooling systems blowing loudly, their brand name “Symphony” is accompanied by a jocular model name “Sumo XL”. Then I read the wall text:

Teresa Margolles

Aire / Aire 2003

This room appears to be empty, apart from a couple of working cooling systems. The slightly humid air is cooled by water from public mortuaries in Mexico City that was used to wash the bodies of unidentified murder victims prior to autopsy. Teresa Margolles, who holds a Diploma in Forensic Medicine, works with death as her primary material; she focuses not on the dead themselves but on the physical traces left by death, and the attendant evils of violence and poverty, preferring “not to exhibit the physical horror, but the silence”.

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KIFF BAMFORD is Senior Lecturer in Contemporary Art and Graphic Design at Leeds Metropolitan University, and the author of *Lyotard and the 'figural' in Performance, Art and Writing* (Continuum, 2012).

NOTES

1. Gilles Deleuze "Lettre à Jean-François Lyotard", *Europe: revue littéraire mensuelle*, (Mai, 2008, 264). My translation. The context makes it likely that the letter is from the period 1975-6.
2. Elizabeth Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.
3. This article is loosely based on sections from my book 'Lyotard and the *figural* in Performance, Art and Writing', London: Continuum, 2012. Thanks to the publishers for permission to adapt work from this publication.
4. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Hurley, Seem & Lane, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977, 32.
5. Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*. Trans. Daniel W. Smith, London: Continuum, 2005.
6. Jean-François Lyotard "It's as if a line..", trans. Mary Lydon, *Contemporary Literature*, 29:3 (1988, 457-480).
7. Jean-François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*. Trans. Antony Hudek and Mary Lydon, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011
8. Lyotard, *Discourse*, 233.
9. Lyotard, *Discourse*, 13, 19.
10. Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 40.
11. Lyotard, *Discourse*, 387.
12. Jean-François Lyotard, "Entretien, Jean-François Lyotard: 'En finir avec l'illusion de la politique'", *La Quinzaine Littéraire*, 1-15 May 1972, 19.
13. Jean-François Lyotard, *Peregrinations: Law, Form, Event*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988, 10. In Bamford, *Lyotard and the figural*, I argue that Lyotard's conception of the sublime retains a figural force, informed by the physiological emphasis of Burke's writings subsequently eradicated by Kant.
14. Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 2.
15. Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 28.
16. Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 28.
17. Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 27-8.
18. Ronald Bogue, *Deleuze on Music, Painting and the Arts*. London: Routledge, 2003, 112.
19. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 243.
20. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 243.
21. Lyotard, *Discourse*, 233.
22. Lyotard, *Discourse*, 267.
23. See: James Williams, *Lyotard: Towards a Postmodern Philosophy*. London: Polity, 1998, 130.
24. Jean-François Lyotard, "Energumen Capitalism", trans. James Leigh, *Deleuze and Guattari: Critical Assessment of Leading Philosophers, Vol. II*. ed. Gary Genosko. London: Routledge, 2001, 584, 598.
25. Jean-François Lyotard, *Que Peindre? Adami, Arakawa, Buren*, Paris: Éditions de la Différence, 1987.
26. Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: Logique de la Sensation*, Paris: Éditions de la Différence, 1981
27. Jean-François Lyotard "On Dirait qu'une Ligne" *Repères: cahiers d'art contemporain* 6 (1983).
28. Lyotard, *Discourse*, 213.
29. Lyotard, "It's as if a line..", 458-9.
30. Lyotard, "It's as if a line..", 462.
31. Lyotard, "It's as if a line..", 480.
32. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson & Graham Burchell, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, 164.
33. Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 212.
34. See Judith Butler's critique in her *Subjects of desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth Century France*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1999, 205-15. Also Peter Hallward's consideration of Deleuze's work as tending "to proceed broadly in line with a *theophanic* conception of things" in his *Deleuze and the Philosophy of Creation: Out of this World*, London: Verso, 2006, 4.
35. Gilles Deleuze, "What is desire?", trans. Hugh Tomlinson & Barbara Habberjam, *The Deleuze Reader*, ed.

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- Constantin Boundas, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, 136.
34. Deleuze & Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 29.
 35. See Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*, London: Athlone, 1987, Chapter 11. "1837: Of the refrain" on the role of rhythm and vibration, which is similar to Deleuze's use of Henri Maldiney's systolic and diastolic in *Francis Bacon*.
 36. Mary Lydon "Translator's Preface to 'It's as if a line...'", *Contemporary Literature*, 29:3 (1988, 456).
 37. Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 20.
 38. Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 16.
 39. Lyotard, "It's as if a line..", 479.
 40. Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, 8.
 41. Lyotard, 'Notes on the Critical Function of the Work of Art', trans. Susan Hanson, ed. Roger McKeon, *Driftworks*, New York: Semiotexte, 1984, 78.
 42. Deleuze & Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 244.
 43. Deleuze & Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 204. Quoting *Discours, Figure*, 82.
 44. Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, 18.
 45. Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, 118.
 46. Sigmund Freud, "Negation", *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay, London: Vintage, 1989.
 47. Freud, "Negation", 667.
 48. Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, 121.
 49. Freud, "Negation", 669.
 50. Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, 122.
 51. Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, 123.
 52. Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, 118.
 53. Lyotard, "It's as if a line... ", 462.
 54. Lyotard, "It's as if a line... ", 458.
 55. The centrality of this figure to the work of Maurice Blanchot is acknowledged by Lyotard in "The Psychoanalytic approach to Artistic and Literary Expression", Trans. Anon. *Toward the Postmodern: J-F Lyotard*. Eds. Robert Harvey & Mark Roberts, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1993.
 56. The Freud quotation is from "Negation", 667; the extended quotation from: Jean Hyppolite 'A spoken commentary on Freud's "Verneinung"', Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink, New York: Norton, 2006, 883.
 57. Lyotard, 'It's as if a line..', 459-60.
 58. Lyotard, 'It's as if a line..', 462; Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*. Trans. Geoffrey Bennington & Rachel Bowlby, London: Polity, 1991, 7.
 59. Lyotard, 'The Psychoanalytic approach to Artistic and Literary Expression', 5-6.
 60. Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, 125.
 61. Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, 126.
 62. Lyotard, 'It's as if a line..', 480; *Discourse, Figure*, 127.
 63. Lyotard, 'It's as if a line..', 459.