

Discourse in a coma; A Comment on a Comma in the Title of
Jean François Lyotard’s *Discourse, Figure*

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One of the recurrent themes of the Western philosophical canon is the distinction between sensual perceptions and rational knowledge. Since Plato established the dialogue as the form of his philosophical method, discourse – in the twofold sense of an utterance and the toing and froing of an argument – is the name of the technology that is able to extract true knowledge from experience. As the discussion in the *Republic* helps to explain, perceptions are inherently unreliable and deceptive because the senses are prone to errors and illusions. Only the rational discourse has the tools to overcome illusions and to point towards true knowledge. For instance, perception suggests that a figure in the distance is smaller than it really is. Yet, the application of logical reasoning will reveal that the figure only appears small because it obeys the laws of geometrical perspective. Nevertheless, even after the perspectival correction is applied, the figure still appears small and the truth of the matter is revealed not in the perception of the figure but in its rational representation in a discourse.

It is precisely because discourse is the guarantor of truth that it marks both the very possibility of knowledge and the limit beyond which knowledge cannot go. Whatever cannot be rationally represented in a discourse remains outside of knowledge and immune to it. To know the truth about something means to be able to represent it, and the proclivity for representation is an indication of a sound and rational mind. For this reason discourse carries within it the stamp of self-validating certainty: the subject of a discourse is rational because rationality is the technique of the discourse. On the other hand, precisely because the subject has to be validated through representation, whatever belongs to perception remains unknown to the subject¹. Therefore, discourse can be

¹ Clair Colebrook speaks about the paradox of representation with exemplary clarity: “[...] the threshold of representation not only marks modernity off from its darker past (when law was imposed from without); the threshold of representation scars

understood as the distillation of ideas from experience. Experience however is not made of ideas but of a mixture of ideas and perceptions and while ideas can be represented, perceptions can be only sensed.²

In *Discourse, Figure* Lyotard is concerned to correct the one-sidedness of the western philosophical canon by suggesting that despite appearances, irrational forces are raging under the veneer of reason and discourse is unable to fully rid itself from dependence on fallible and unreliable perceptions. Taking up linguistics as the case in point, Lyotard seems to be saying that what is wrong with linguistics is not its tools or methods but that it considers language in terms of discourse:

Linguistics marks the moment when language takes itself as object. So long as it positions itself at the tip of the aim [*visée*], it obscures itself as designated: linguistic discourse is thus a discourse that draws the night over discourse.³

Understood correctly, language is precisely the product of the irresolvable tension between discourse and figure, or between representation and perception. A study of language worthy of its name must take account of this difference as the productive and creative force that holds discourse and figure in suspended animation. For this reason the “,” (comma) in the title of the book is – figurally speaking – the key to the book. Is the comma (“,”) part of the discourse or is it a figure? Can the comma be considered purely as a representation, or is it something other than a symbol? The comma appears to belong to both registers at once: it is a linguistic sign that operates according to

modernity itself, occurring as a limit within the possibility of modernity. [...] modern philosophy situates itself within the representational limits of the subject. Representation is a condition of finitude. Because knowledge is received from without it must be taken up and re-presented. What can be known is therefore determined and delimited by the representational powers of the subject.” Claire Colebrook, *Ethics and Representation: From Kant to Post-structuralism*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 1.

² On this point see Deleuze’s lectures on Spinoza "Lectures by Gilles Deleuze On Spinoza." <http://deleuzelectures.blogspot.co.uk/2007/02/on-spinoza.html> (accessed July 16, 2012).

³ Jean-François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*. Trans. Antony Hudek and Mary Lydon (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 100.

the conventions of syntax and it is also something else entirely, it is a slowing down, a brief pause that introduces a rupture within the discursive continuity.

The comma in *Discourse, Figure* exposes the inescapable paradox that indicates the limits of the discourse by suggesting that rationality can only be maintained through its dependence on the outside of rationality. The comma is a punctuation sign, it indicates a hiatus. The purpose of the discourse is to harness perceptions and to organise them in a way that allows for systemic and structured representation of knowledge. However, the comma introduces a pause, the pause opens a gap and the gap allows for perception to sneak back into the discourse. What is being established by the comma is an opening that offers the possibility of play: it creates an interruption that makes it possible to have a choice. The choice is to continue with one series or with another. Chronologically the comma comes before the *Figure*, but it recovers a figure right inside the discourse. This sensual contraband is not imported into the discourse from outside but is found at the same place where the sign, representation and logos reside. For Lyotard this is a key strategy in dismantling the sovereignty of the logos:

Are we talking about another sort of sign? Not in the slightest, *they are the same* as those with which the semiotician carries out his theory and textual practice. The first thing to avoid, comrades, is to claim that we have taken up a position somewhere else. We're not moving out of anywhere, we're staying right here, we occupy the terrain of signs [...].⁴

Discourse, Figure is a discourse about discourse, but it is not a meta-discourse. There is no such thing as a representation of representation. Lyotard is not suggesting a meta-language with which to speak about “Discourse” because this would be tantamount to falling back into representation. Instead, he locates the sensible, the affective and the figurative in the pause indicated by this mark “,”. The comma is not the ground of the discourse, neither it is an Archimedean point located outside of it, rather it is the differential between logos and perception. Understood from the perspective of the comma, *Discourse* is not an articulation of externally given reality but a relation between

⁴ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*. Trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (London: Continuum, 2004), 49. See also ‘Glossary: The Tensor’, *Ibid.*, xiv-xv.

two forces. It is the continuous variation in this relation, the modulation between logos and affect that accounts for the creation of sense. The comma situates multiplicity, affect and duration right inside the discourse. Association with the comma exposes discourse itself as infinitesimally variable and therefore undecidable. In the same time it also means that there is at least a part of the discourse that might resist being absorbed into representation. Questions such as “is this a true or false statement?” do not apply to the comma as it is neither true or false. Comma is almost ethical rather than aesthetic: it refuses to signify and yet it strives to be of use, to be put to work.

What does it take to rethink the discourse from the perspective of the comma? In coming to address the paradoxical condition of the discourse Lyotard claims that what is required is nothing less than a revolution in language and philosophy. Rather than arguing for the domination of logos over sense or of sense over logos, Lyotard suggests that in order to prevent the triumph of idealism discourse has to be reconfigured as the difference between logos and sense. However, the admittance of difference must not be subsumed by the discourse, as this would re-establish the sovereignty of logos. This is the role of the figural: to guard from the imperialism of the logos. The writing of sense back into thought is accomplished by means of the rediscovery of the figure in the discourse. It is about restoring to the discourse its materiality by showing that a sign cannot fail to be also a figure. The figure within the discourse marks the parallelism of sense and logos. The forgetting of figure in the discourse is a symptom of a way of thinking that claims that the problem of the sign is the problem of representation. If the figure is forgotten it is all too easy to claim that representation is the site of ideological battles without however ever questioning the sovereignty of the logos that lies at the basis of all representation.⁵

⁵ For Louis Althusser representation is the site where ideological wars are being fought: “Ideology is a ‘representation’ of the Imaginary Relationship of Individuals to their Real conditions of Existence.” Louis Althusser, *On Ideology*. (London; New York: Verso, 2008), 36.

One more thing about the figure: it shouldn't be thought of as arbitrary; rather, it is the non-transferable imprint that constitutes the relief and the thickness of the sign. Stripped of the signifying meaning of the sign, the figure is a mark of presence. The figure is a pause, it is the *now*. While the sign answers to the question "What is happening?" the figure simply asks "Is it happening?"⁶ As discourse is inconceivable without pauses, the comma draws attention to its dependence on duration. This is because notions of time and space are conceived from the point of view of the subject who wishes for them to confirm to the measurable and linear logic of the discourse. The most subversive aspect of the pause is that it is both different and inseparable from discourse. But the very notion of difference introduced here knocks reason from its sit of sovereignty and installs undecidability and multiplicity in its place.

By identifying multiplicity, or a folding, within the discourse, Lyotard is able to claim that difference is a quality internal to the sign. According to structuralism difference is expressed as the gap between the discourse (sign) and the object of discourse (referent) – note in passing that this is the Hegelian negation (the sign differs from what it is not). The sign and the referent cannot occupy the same place at the same time. Note also that this external difference presumes temporal and spatial linearity and abides by the exclusion principle (Aristotelian logic). For Lyotard difference is not external to the sign, rather it is what makes the sign as the tension between meaning and duration. Difference here does not mean separateness but the condition of collaboration. Sense is always on the verge of becoming discourse, but discourse always requires something that cannot be explained rationally, yet the Aristotelian-Hegelian formula refuses to acknowledge this debt to the calculus of forces that creates meaning as a relation between parallel entities.

Up to this point it might seem that Lyotard suggests a program for restoring the rights of experience, the sensory spectrum and intuition by

⁶ Jean-François Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-garde." In *The Lyotard Reader*. Ed. Andrew Benjamin trans. Lisa Liebmann, Geoff Bennington and Marian Hobson (Blackwell Oxford, 1984), 208-11

recovering their place within discourse. His ultimate goal is however more far-reaching. Through the device of the comma, the title of the book reveals an irreconcilable paradox: The singularity of the pause is guaranteed by the identity of logos. The pause/figure can exist as a singularity, as difference and as affect on the condition that this singularity is protected by the sovereignty of the discourse. Lyotard is not trying to replace *Discourse* with *Figure*, as doing so would be a reversal – yet another logical procedure. Instead he is demonstrating that *Discourse* has *Figure* embedded it from the start, and ipso facto that discourse is an undecidable game. Difference therefore is not to be thought outside of Discourse but belonging to it, devoured and sustained by it.

According to this understanding of the figure, images are not representations of an externally given formal reality but are themselves material processes or transmissions of energy. The comma opens the discourse to its outside, to the embodiment in experience. The joining together of “discourse” and “figure” is taking place in perception. Matter appears within discourse as non-mater (comma). The comma acts like a doorstep, it prevents the discourse from closing down on itself, from becoming homogenised. Every comma, every pause, is a manifestation of difference because each and every pause is an embodiment of duration. Yet this wild and untamed difference is often suppressed in favour of the homogeneity of the sign. Comma is the invisible rupture in the discourse, the inarticulate phrase, and the affect-pause that prevents the discourse from shutting down, from collapsing into representation. The comma is not the negation of the discourse but the very element without which the discourse falls apart. Lyotard’s strategy in exposing the phenomenological foundation of language is by way of showing that the distance between sign and referent should not be thought of as negation but as a form of expression. Instead of the dialectical relation between the image and the object, Lyotard proposes radical heterogeneity that he names ‘thickness’ and locates in the first instance in the comma.

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