

Looking backwards and moving ahead: Remarks against those who promote the oblivion of history

Forty years after it first appeared, Lyotard's *Discours, figure* at last came out in an English translation in 2011. The delay is astonishing: it is beyond question that the work offers a bracingly rigorous and original challenge to common ideas on aesthetics. The work is sprawling, dense, and demanding. As is typical of French theoretical writing, it offers no concessions to potential readers' differing backgrounds: a strong grasp of many key works of the Western philosophical tradition is a condition for being able to read the work. For me, the most exciting development in avant-garde cinema of the last year (and a few months) has been that this vital work, which is fully on the side of the most radical strain in vanguard art, is beginning to have a significant impact.

Lyotard's work draws on five principal sources—first, phenomenology; second, psychoanalysis; third, a language theory that combines Saussure's structuralism, Bakhtian pragmatics and Searle-Austin speech act theory; fourth, political economy, general economy, and Marxism; and fifth, Kantian transcendental philosophy. *Discours, figure* attempts to forge a framework that accommodates the most profound and radical ideas of each. The effort to reconcile the first three in particular led Lyotard to the principal idea of his aesthetics—that aesthetic experience is formed in the *dissensus* between two irreconcilable regimes. The concept of *discours* synthesizes aspects of Freud's conception of secondary process thinking, of structural linguistics' notion of *langue* (the system of language that is internalized by its speakers), and of Kant's idea of forms experience involving a pleasure-producing harmony between the imagination and reason. The idea of *figure* synthesizes aspects of Freud's conception of primary process thinking, structural linguistics' idea of *parole* (actual instances of language use), and Kant's thoughts on the sublime, as a form of experience that, in transgressing the limits of imagination, involves an element of *Unlust*. In the course of performing this synthesis—a performance that, page by page, startles one in its virtuosity—Lyotard develops a vigorous *défense et illustration* of the avant-garde, which is rooted in the practices of the Situationist International and its Surrealist heritage. Lyotard maintains that the figural is always invested with — traversed and traduced by—an impossible-to-realize desire to recreate the primal unity experienced by the pre-linguistic subject (and in this respect it resembles the impossible real invoked by the surrealist *merveilleux*). It strives (but always fails) to overcome the breach between subject and object—it is driven by the desire for fullness. Lyotard's *Économie libinale* suggests this paradoxically hollow repletion resembles the events enacted on a theatrical stage, which are always set up and controlled by something off-screen—or, stated otherwise, resembles the projections from a *diapositif*, animated by the operations of an illusion that is other-to-itself (illusion is the nature of the desire, which always betrays and yet conceals the urge of that which gives rise to it). It celebrates not the slating of desire, but its dynamism, which strives never to succumb to the stillness of the inorganic. As far as the cinema is concerned, it is an always singular mobility which, because of its singularity, cannot be spoken (its singularity evades codes) nor even thought—it is a pure dynamism, a force that crumbles language and undoes form (and in doing so conveys the transcendence of the other). It addresses the eye and the ear (the aural, as McLuhan's tremendous writings suggest, comes closest to conveying its power) in an exemplary way, for it exposes the pure power of sensing—of experiencing without thought. Its link to the subject is pre-conceptual and it evokes the supersensible. Stupefaction, terror, anger, hate, pleasure—all affective and erotic intensities—are its savage means.

By the end of the 1970's, under discursive pressures resulting from its (then recent) academic institutionalization, the discussion of the avant-garde cinema succumbed to the reactionary pressures resulting from a nostalgia for presence (to adopt a term from Lyotard). It retreated from the avant-garde's vertiginous demand to destabilize every conception of reality and to humiliate it in its claims to authority. It succumbed to principles of "good form" in images and

narrative. The dissensus I alluded to above is one between the irregular fluctuations of desire that arise from unbound energies (these manifest themselves as disordering forces) and the regularities of discourse, which functions like a code that reduces the heterogeneity of desire to a set of invariants. Good form always involves a rhythm established by the recurrence of the nearly-identical and the elimination of excess movement. It requires “the return of sameness, the folding back (according to a sort of neutering regime) of diversity upon an identical unity. In painting, -this may be a plastic rhyme or an equilibrium of colours; in music, the resolution of dissonance in the accord of a prevailing dominant; in architecture, in proportion and Pythagorean harmony. The academic discourse that emerged around the avant-garde cinema in the 1970’s (and to this day dominates its discussion) commented on vanguard work as though even its most radical makers had succumbed to the lure of presence, by writing of the good form and rhyming colours and harmonious dynamics: the only purportedly vanguard work (the undoubtedly meritorious, but hardly avant-garde, work of Peter Hutton and Nathaniel Dorsky) that would be widely screened and discussed would be work that escaped from the condition of the figural sublime—Dorsky’s celebration of quietist devotion, which involves a contemplative stillness (that, we might imagine, resolves the *Unlust* of the terrifying sublime), is a form of nostalgia for presence: its *mysterium* might (at best) be a *fascinans*, but never a *tremendum*. Lyotard, by way of contrast, advocates an “acinéma” that does not trade in fixed identities (not even formal identities, of the sort involved in visual rhymes and repeated figures) and recognizable situations (that is, situations whose doubling existence repeats what we know of the world, to ensure that it can be folded back into the world)—on this, see Lyotard’s article “Acinéma,” (which was first published in 1973, several years later than *Discours, figure*). Acinéma is a cinema of intense agitation. “Cinematography” means writing movement: in learning cinematography in film schools, one acquires a training in discriminating between “good” and “bad” movements: good movements are commodifiable movements, valued in a strict capitalist sense—good movement, Lyotard suggests in his article, is deemed valuable “because it returns to something else . . . it is thus potential return and profit.” Scenes that are “dirty, confused, unsteady, unclear, poorly framed, overexposed” are deleted—it eliminates all impulsive movement (whether representational or abstract) that escapes identification and recognition and will not give itself for reduplication. Against that, Lyotard’s vanguardism advocates a cinema that does not depend on unity and balance, but on a constant movement of rupture. Lyotard’s rethinking of Freud’s dynamic model of energy rejected the privilege that Freud attached to the discharge of energy and the return to the homeostatic condition. Energy (arousal), for Lyotard, is delight, bliss—so he reconceived *jouissance*, taking it not as discharged, not as having as its objective to return us to the calmed state (that foretells the extinction of desire), not as a *retournement*, but, rather, as a pure activity, a *détournement* (cf. sublimation, in the literal sense) that mispends energy purposefully. Acinéma, Lyotard notes, by writing with movements that go beyond the point of no return, spills “the libidinal forces outside the whole, at the expense of the whole (at the price of the ruin and disintegration of this whole).” Borrowing from Artaud’s ideas on the theatre of cruelty, Lyotard suggests that the purpose of the acinéma is to make victims of its spectators/auditors, by generating anxiety, agitation, or emotional turmoil—for it is on the side of intensity, on the side of life against death. Rather than good (unified and reasonable) forms, the dynamics of acinéma, presented to the immobilized viewer/auditor, “give[s] rise to the most intense agitation through its fascinating paralysis.” The excess of movement renders a cinema’s medium opaque: it does not offer us that hope that one can see through it to that harmonious presence for which the conventional cinema, in its reactionary nostalgia, yearns. Thus, again, acinéma is a savage cinema, for in it, the medium asserts itself, brutally, as its images and sounds relay unresolvable intensities. Attending to it, one comes apart, as by a knife, under its divers movements. Without identifying (naming) what is happening on-screen, we sense it viscerally—feeling it in our muscles and our bodies. Lyotard’s theory of the *figure* has a resolute and uncompromising—indeed, even extremist—character that would have been a vitalizing antidote to the effects of the proponents of an academic vanguardism and their embarrassing allies working for the cultural industries (most notably, for festivals of entertainments): all of them, like the organizers of the 2010 Congress of

Avant-garde Media (this use of the term avant-garde can only be taken as ironic) submit to the lure of presence. Because there was no English translation, English-speaking film theory was insulated from the destructive (transformative) ideas of *Discours, figure*. This limited the extent to which its argument entered discussion of radical cinema. One can only wish that an English version of *Discours, figure* might have made a more timely appearance, immediately after its French publication, and before this institutionalization of a pseudo-avant-garde that is terrified of the sublime. Had the work appeared then, it would have connected vanguard work back to the Surrealist effort to discredit every belief in objectivity; it might have sustained the effort to produce the genuinely avant-garde work, and sheltered from the consequences of the reactionary longing (the nostalgia for presence) celebrated by the 2010 Congress. With the publication of the English translation of *Discours, figure*, we can hope for a renewal of the avant-garde cinema—indeed, rumblings I heard in 2012, of whispered excitement about discovering this buried treasure (and the tremendous interest that graduate students of mine showed in a class devoted to this difficult work), give evidence that process has begun.