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Derek R. Ford
DePauw University, derekford@depauw.edu

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A FIGURAL EDUCATION WITH LYOTARD

Derek R. Ford

Introduction

While there was a flurry of articles throughout the 1990s in philosophy of education dedicated to examining, problematizing, and critiquing the thought of Jean-François Lyotard from a variety of standpoints, as of late, notes Robin Edwards (2006), "all is relatively quiet on the postmodern front line" (p. 274). However, this literature, even at its peak, tended to focus on only a select few works written by Lyotard, most notably *The Postmodern Condition* and *The Differend*. The former book in particular has dominated educational discourse on Lyotard, which is not surprising given that it's subtitled "a report on knowledge," and deals fairly explicitly with education. There still remain, however, several key concepts in Lyotard's oeuvre that have import for philosophy of education but remain largely underdeveloped or absent in the field. One of the most interesting of the absent concepts is Lyotard's notion of the figural as articulated in his second book, *Discourse, Figure*—which was also his doctoral dissertation. In this paper, I take the figural as an educational problematic and ask what new educational insights it can generate, particularly in regard to the existing literature.

As such, this article begins with a survey and synthesis of educational literature on Lyotard and the primary work on which most of this literature is based, exploring the relationship between knowledge, performativity, the differend, and "the system." I then examine conceptions of education oriented toward defending radical alterity and disrupting the system developed by Michael Peters (2006), Setphanie Mackler (2003), Bill Readings (1995), and A. T. Nuyen (1996). I claim that, while helpful, these conceptions are limited in that they do not mention *how* educators and students might engage the alterity that the system seeks to repress. This is not a call for some prescriptive pedagogy, but to ask: what are some possible ways in which educators might honor this orientation toward alterity? I believe that it is here that Lyotard's notion of the figural can be productively engaged. The next section of the paper performs a partial and educationally partisan reading of *Discourse*, *Figure*, a book that moves from the discursive to the figural through a deconstructive reading of structural linguistics, phenomenology, the unconscious, and desire. After this reading I move to formulate a figural education, which is composed of three educational processes and modes of engagement: reading, seeing, and blindness. A figural education, I argue, holds each of these practices in an uncertain and unsettling relation and, in so doing, can help educators defend the figural and the differend against the discursive demands of the system.

Lyotard, Education, and the System

One of the concepts developed by Lyotard that most clearly links his work to education is performativity, a development that is brought about largely through the delegitimation of grand narratives and developments in technology and science (see Lyotard, 1984). Under performativity "the role of knowledge becomes that of contributing to the best efficiency and effectiveness of a system, whatever the nature of that system may be, and the worthwhileness or value of the knowledge is evaluated on that basis" (Usher, 2006, p. 281). Performativity thus is

about the optimum functioning of "the system" which, for Lyotard (1997), is "liberal, imperialist capitalism after its triumph over its last two challengers, fascism and communism" (p. 199). While Lyotard identifies this form of capitalism as *the* system, it is not an exhaustive identification, and it could potentially be replaced by a system of another name or ideological bent.

The relationship between knowledge, performativity, and the system is complex and, as Robin Usher demonstrates, contradictory. On the one hand, knowledge is "pulled towards closure and locked in to an economy of the same" while, on the other hand, it is increasingly "marked by an economy of difference, a greater diversity and complexity" (Usher, 2006 p. 281). Usher argues, correctly I think, that "it is precisely in conditions of decentredness that performativity flourishes" (ibid., p. 283).What Usher's reading of Lyotard helps demonstrate is that this reproduction that is central to the legitimation and constant renewal of the system does not have to be of the same and, in fact, it thrives on difference. Take Lyotard's tale of Marie, a French academic who travels to Japan to deliver a lecture at a conference. After the lecture, she asks herself "Have I been 'other' enough?" (Lyotard, 1997, p. 12). During the discussion and answer period, she tells herself, "Answer politely, explain, mark your alterity, don't let yourself be brought back to what is well known, defend your difference" (ibid.). In this internal monologue of Marie's we can glimpse the relationship between the economy of the same and the economy of the different, we can see that both economies "do however have a common feature in that both are *sign* economies" (Usher, 2006, p. 285). This clarifies something for us: performativity thrives on a particular kind of difference, notably, a difference that can and must be brought to signification.

Education is not only where subjects are brought into the system but also where the system is adjusted—and even optimized—by means of *signifiable* differences. The system therefore demands that differences be represented and signified, for only then can they contribute to the maximization of the system's functioning. If, following Bill Readings (1995) we take the university as an example, we find that "the university as an institution can deal with all kinds of knowledges, even oppositional ones, so as to make them circulate to the benefit of the system as a whole" (p. 205). In other words, the key factor for the system is the constant regeneration of subjectivities, desires, and needs that can respond to and drive the needs of the global market. More of the same or more of the different is always better. As Marie quips to herself about the academic marketplace, "Why all this cultural busyness, colloquia, interviews, seminars? Just so we can be sure we're all saying the same thing. About what, then? About alterity" (Lyotard, 1997, p. 6). The system can accommodate oppositional knowledges provided that they are expressed in and through new articles, journals, conferences, and so on.

To be sure, while the system creates and thrives off of both sameness and difference, not any sort of difference is or will be acceptable. Take the concept of multiculturalism as an example of the coinciding of differences: this form "is agreeable to it [the system] but under the condition of an agreement concerning the rules of disagreement. This is what is called consensus" (Lyotard, 1997, p. 199). Once differences are brought into signification and discourse they are subject to dispute, and not all differences can coincide in the system under any rules. As Michael Peters (2006) notes, "consensus can only be established on the basis of acts of exclusion" (p. 311). Peters here is referring to Lyotard's book on the differend, which examines the relationship between difference and the system. At the basis of the book is the phrase regimen. Each phrase regimen consists of rules for linking phrases (sentences) together. Thus, phrase regimens such as "reasoning, knowing, describing, recounting, questioning, showing,

ordering, etc." (Lyotard, 1988, p. xii) have different rules. One phrase regimen cannot be translated into another, but two or more phrase regimens can be linked together according to a genre of discourse, which "supplies a set of possible phrases, each arising from some phrase regimen" (ibid.). A differend is a conflict that arises between two or more parties "where the plaintiff is divested of the means to argue and becomes for that reason a victim" (ibid., p. 9). Strictly speaking, a differend is a conflict that occurs between either phrase regimens or discourses where there are not only different but incommensurable stakes and rules; a wrong for one party is untranslatable into the other party's idiom; consensus is impossible. This incommensurability, however, runs counter to the performative demands of the system. In the face of this incommensurable heterogeneity the system imposes silences. Lyotard (1984) refers to this silencing as terror:

> By terror I mean the efficiency gained by eliminating, or threatening to eliminate, a player from the language game… He is silenced or consents, not because he has been refuted, but because his ability to participate has been threatened… The decision makers' arrogance… consists in the exercise of terror. It says: "Adapt your aspirations to our ends—or else." (pp. 63-64)

Peters (2006) thus writes that Lyotard's work on the differend "provides a basis for rethinking philosophy of education and of making central to it the ethico-political question of other cultures" (p. 313). Such a philosophy of education would work to bear witness to differends, which we might say are differences that cannot be absorbed into the system, or at least not immediately.

The system is driven by the logic of performativity, operating on the dictate to reproduce itself, and so the purpose and content of education under the system are both negotiable only insofar as they can contribute to the system's increased functionability. Educational purpose can be subject to democratic debate, but only on the grounds that the debaters have accepted the conditions of the system. Difference is acceptable and encouraged; it is even necessitated. Marie insists on and defends her difference. But not any kind of difference will do. The differences must be reconcilable with the system. Yet before that can occur, the differences must be brought to signification. Publish your differences or perish. This is a terror that is prior to the terror of silencing; it is the terror of "bring[ing] something you don't understand to 'signify' by means you don't control" (Lyotard, 1997, p. 206).

In this picture, the system can appear indestructible, and there is no shortage of critiques of Lyotard that home in on this *appearance* of futility. What, after all, could guarantee the system's permanence more than the ability to incorporate, adjust to, and feed on difference? Much of the educational literature on Lyotard has focused on precisely this problem. Peters (2006), for example, argues that the appropriate response in the face of the persistent reality of the differend is to cultivate an ability to respect those differences that can't be reconciled—those differences that disrupt the system's performance. Similarly, Stephanie Mackler (2004) writes, "educators should teach students to recognize and respond to the *differend* (p. 371). She offers two caveats: First, "What that response should be is another question altogether;" and second, "Whether it [the response] is necessarily linguistic as Lyotard implies, must be taken up elsewhere" (p. 371). Readings (1995) proposes that "we find a way to make our pedagogical activities, as students and teachers, difficult for the system to swallow, hard to insert within the generalized economy of capitalist exchange" and that we work to listen "to our interlocutors," which "means trying to hear what cannot be said, but which tries to make itself heard" (p. 205). Here, Readings seems to answer Mackler's question as to if the response to the differend will be

linguistic in the negative, for the linguistic can by definition be said. Finally, A. T. Nuyen (1996) suggests that education for Lyotard "is about intensifying the *différend* between reason and imagination" (p. 100). What is unique about Nuyen's contribution is that it explicitly tries to avoid romanticizing the differend: "The Lyotardian vision is not only not anarchistic toward the 'basics' of education, it is also not anarchistic toward social goals" (p. 102), he writes. Instead, education works "to imagine about far-off planets and to think of how things might be in these places" (p. 103). Nuyen, that is, emphasizes that the differend can eventually be expressed, and the role of education is to facilitate new ways of linking phrase-regimens in order to articulate differences. In this way, Nuyen's emphasis is different than that of Peters and Readings, as the latter are primarily interested in *listening to* and *allowing for* the differend, while Nuyen wants to bring it to expression.

In sum, then, the general educational lesson from Lyotard is: Educators who want to cultivate a respect for the differend and disrupt the system's performance must be attentive to the radical differences that the system works to repress. As I read them, however, these educational readings are limited in a few regards, not only because they tend to be based primarily on a few key works of Lyotard's. The primary gap within this literature is that not much, if anything, is written about *how* educators and students might engage that which is repressed for the sake of the functioning of the system. This is not to say that prescriptions and methods are required, for such a reduction to instruction would surely betray the possibility of the event's taking place. Yes, educators seeking a more just world should resist the system and its silencing of radical differences, but what are some possible, singular ways in which educators might honor this orientation? Additionally, there is one problem that is unique to Nuyen's analysis: Nuyen does not address the fact that once the differend has been phrased and expressed, the system will likely be able to accommodate the new rules of discourse. This is not to say that such a process is necessarily negative, for the generation of languages and rules with which to express harms is of the utmost importance. It is rather to say that there is still a rush in Nuyen to valorize expression over difference, the presentable over the unpresentable. I want to suggest that both these issues can be attended to by turning to *Discourse, Figure*, a dense and difficult work, which is also Lyotard's latest to be translated fully into English. While in moving to the figure I am departing from the differend, it is not a long journey: both the figural and the differend are concerned with the incommensurable, the primary difference is that the later has an explicitly ethical motivation (Readings, 1991).

Discourse and its Figure

Discourse, Figure is not a book that takes education as its object, but it is a book that is deeply concerned with things that are central to education, things like, representation, knowledge, intelligibility, and communication. In fact, I would argue that the book can be seen as an intervention into educational thought from the very opening pages, when Lyotard (2011) references the allegory of the cave:

> This book takes the side of the eye, of its siting; shadow is its prey. The half-light that, after Plato, the word threw like a gray pall over the sensory, that it consistently thematized as a lesser being, whose side has been very rarely really taken in truth… this half-light is precisely what interests this book. (p. 5)

In this book and, in many ways, throughout his life, Lyotard will take the side of the shadow; the thickness and opacity of the object, that which cannot be represented.[1] In this sense, then, the book takes as its object the taking of an object. As a result, the book is something of a paradox,

for a book by definition consists of words that represent objects, ordered according to a discourse. A discourse is composed of languages, or what Lyotard (1984; 1988) will later call language games and phrase regimens, and is concerned with intelligibility, or the production of meaning and sense. The object is taken, held at a distance, represented through words, language, and discourse. Yet there is always the object's shadow, the cast half-light in the cave. This is that which the system, for the sake of its continued reproduction and expansion, relegates to the margins and works to silence and suppress. Even with the heterogeneous discourses or phrase-regimens there is an enduring opacity. In order to get at this shadow, Lyotard will perform a deconstructive reading of structuralism and phenomenology, represented by Saussure and Merleau-Ponty, respectively, by way of Freud and with an emphasis on the aesthetic. In this section I perform a partial and educationally partisan reading of the book, focusing in on its primary gestures and educationally relevant themes.

At first blush, we could say that there is an opposition between discourse and figure. As Bill Readings (1991) notes, "discourse is the name given by Lyotard to the process of *representation by concepts*" (p. 3); it is the *textual space* of signification in which the order or system of language is established. The textual space of discourse is exemplified by Saussure and his conception of the linguistic as a structure and system of signs. This space is flat and extends horizontally by differentiation. Each sign is composed of a signifier and a signified, where the signifier is the sound, the sound-pattern (spoken word) or sound-image (written word), and the signified is the concept that the signifier calls forth, a mental construct of a thing. The signifier is unmotivated; there is no innate connection between the signifier and the signified. A sign is differentiated *negatively* from other signs. In other words, the sound-image "chair" evokes in the mind the idea of a chair through a process of differentiation and elimination from all other signs in the linguistic system; there is nothing inherent in the object that determines what the sound-pattern or sound-image that corresponds to it will be.

As we approach the borders of the linguistic system we begin to see where Lyotard departs from Saussure, as the latter conceives of a closed system, but for the former there is something more, something porous, deep, and thick. Lyotard (2011) writes, "One could start (again) by stating that language is not made of signs" (p. 72). To grasp what Lyotard means here we have to make what should be an obvious remark: One has a body that hears, sees, and feels, a body that orients oneself in the world and *participates* in the linguistic system.[2] Thus, for Lyotard signs are not unmotivated. Neither are they in some correspondence to the body, of course, but there is nonetheless a "connatural relation between discourse and its object" (p. 76). Bodies speak and create language and discourse, and bodies are never unmotivated. To argue for the elimination of motivation from discourse, as Saussure does, is to "banish the poetic and preclude describing and comprehending an experience of speech" (p. 77). Yet Lyotard is referring to the relation between the sign and what the sign designates and signifies, not to the signified-signifier relation, the latter of which is an analytic category and epistemological abstraction, not an ontological experience. What he wants us to retain is that there is always something else to language than signs.

This is where the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty comes into play, for it is Merleau-Ponty who places "perception… under the authority of the body, demonstrating that there is structure before signification, that the former supports the latter (ibid., p. 55). For example, the letters "*N*" and "*Z*" both consist of three straight-lines and are distinguished at one level only by the observer's relative position to the surface on which they are inscribed: "does this mode of opposition not call for relationships of textual displacement in the reader's optical field, and

therefore for figural properties?" (ibid., p. 206). Here the figural features of the lines that compose letters begin to be brought forth: a line can be both seen and read. Language is made of *lines*, not (only) signs.

This leads to what Lyotard calls the *plasticity* of the line, or the line's function *qua* line that is outside of and other to discourse; the line as opposed to the letter. The letter operates as graphic, in that its "function consists exclusively in distinguishing, and hence in rendering recognizable, units that obtain their signification from their relationships in a system entirely independent from bodily synergy" (Lyotard, 2011, p. 206). The line, by contrasts, remains plastic and bodily. The plasticity of the line signals a "thickening" and "opacity" of discourse; or the figural operating within discourse, for the line itself "is an unrecognizable trace" (ibid., 213) that can be transformed into the letter, placed graphically in textual space. Yet the letter can also work to free itself from textual space, as takes place in the recent art trend called "calligraffiti," which is the literal joining together of calligraphy and graffiti art. In calligraffiti, the letter exists in a non-representational mode and, as such, the eye is not quick to read it. The pure line, however, cannot be subsumed into a system of representation: "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" (ibid., p. 213). While there are undoubtedly lines that lend themselves more to recognition or unrecognition, part of what determines whether the line will be plastic or graphic depends upon the encounter with the viewer, the mode of engagement and presentation through which the viewer encounters the line.

Figure and its Discourse

So far in the way I have been constructing Lyotard's argument, there is a blurring of the boundary between discourse and figure, yet there is still something of a simple opposition. On one side we have the text, letter, and graphic as representative of the discursive and, on the other side the body, line, and unrecognizability as representative of the figural. The next move is crucial; as Geoffrey Bennington (1986) writes, "Luckily, Lyotard is not content to remain at this critical stage, at which the figure serves as a stick to beat the discursive with, and is in fact concerned with the insistence of each series in the other" (p. 20). There is, after all, in the book's title a comma separating discourse and figure, not by a hyphen or a slash. There is, in other words, a heterogeneity to the discursive space of the letter and the figural space of the line. In fact, the line is the space where the figural begins to "work over" the discursive. Before we proceed, however, we need to delve deeper into the figure. Lyotard distinguishes between three types of figurality: the figure-image, the figure-form, and the figure-matrix. They are differentiated as follows:

> The first term [figure-image] applies to the image of an object with its outline; the second [figure-form], to the form (*Gestalt*) of the visible, which can be brought into relief through analysis even if it was not seen at the outset; the third [figure-matrix], to a still deeper configuration to which analysis could possibly come near, but that can never become object either of vision or signification. (Lyotard, 2011, p. 279)

So far I have touched on the first two forms. Returning to the letter "*N*" for example: the figure-image is the letter "*N*" in its totality as it is graphically inscribed in textual space, the letter "*N*" as it is read on the page. The figure-form consists of the plasticity of the lines of which the letter it is composed; the *N* seen not as a letter but as a series of lines. But what of the figure-matrix, which is what Lyotard is really concerned with? The figure-matrix is wholly unseen and resists

translation into visibility, let alone legibility. It is not *in*visible but *a*visible. We know that the figure-matrix is not just the other to discourse, in which case the latter would be representable the former would be unrepresentable. How, then, to approach this sensible but not visible thing?

To attempt to articulate what the figure-matrix is positively, we have to call upon the unconscious and desire. It is at this junction in the book that phenomenology begins to recede. First, we sense the presence of the figure-matrix (hereafter referred to simply as "figure") in the dream. As Deleuze and Guattari (1983) write,

> Lyotard shows that what is *at work* in dreams is not the signifier but a figural dimension underneath, which gives rise to configurations of images that make use of words, making them flow and cutting them according to flows and points that are not linguistic and do not depend on the signifier or its related elements. (pp. 243-244)

The dream is a space where the figural informs discourse and image and where the figural and discursive are co-present, blocked together; there is no temporality and no negation. Dreams, therefore, "have the logic of 'but also' or 'but and'" (Slaughter, 2004, p. 235). When we wake, the figural is what cannot be recollected, and its presence in the dream makes it difficult to recall the discursive operating in the dream as well. Consider, for example, the moments between being asleep and awake. During this time, we can sometimes retain our dreams and, when they are particularly absurd, funny, sad, or relevant in some way, we desire to share them with our partners or housemates, or maybe to pencil them down. Yet upon bringing the dream to articulation—in our heads, out loud, or on paper—we find that the objects, words, gestures, and events which while we were dreaming seemed so natural become, upon attempts at articulated remembrance so alien and nonsensical that we are stopped in our tracks. They become illegible and unintelligible as we seek to describe them. The discursive in the dream is worked over to such an extent by the figural that it is rendered unrecognizable. Any interpretation of the dream, therefore, will necessarily fracture. Or, rather, interpretation is not discovery but production; "interpretation is not a translation" (Lyotard, 2011, p. 295).

The second place where we can go to articulate the figure positively is desire. For Lyotard (2011), the figure "is hand in glove with desire on at least two counts," it is both at the "margin" and at the "heart of discourse in its 'form'" (p. 233). The figure as desire is co-present in discourse, yet it "does not manipulate an intelligible text in order to disguise it; it does not let the text get in, forestalls it, inhabits it, and we never have anything but a worked-over text, a mixture of the readable and the visible" (ibid., p. 267). Desire is generated by the gap between signification and reference, a gap that becomes progressively widened as signification takes place. This is so because as each reference enters a significatory system it is flattened and altered, yet its shadow resists: "A compulsion of opacity exists that requires that what one speaks of be declared lost" (ibid., p. 102). This existential reality spawns the demand for more and different signification; "Reality and desire are born together at the threshold of language" (ibid., p. 123). One example of this trend is the metaphor, which modern poetry employed in an effort to join language and nature. Yet the metaphor itself, as "a non-signified comparison," is actually "already a breach of the law of communication without equivocation" (ibid., p. 284), because even if the metaphor attempts to reveal or represent something about a referent, it also in the very same movement obscures the referent. The simile operates similarly. We say that x is like y in order to render x more clear, but in that very same move we obscure and render x opaque; in our effort to bring x closer to us we push it further away. As a result, discourse "finds itself endowed with an enigmatic thickness. The signifiers come forward and seem to be hiding something, something that is not their 'signified'" (ibid., p. 284). We can sense the figure operating in

discourse, then, "negatively, through disorder" (ibid., p. 324). What is particularly interesting is that the poet (as well as Lyotard) does not paint her or his poem, but remains within textual space: "The legible is never renounced. Such is the paradox of the figural finding refuse in a text without destroying it" (ibid., p. 305). Keeping in mind Lyotard's critique of Saussure, the former's insistence that the relation between the sign and its object is motivated, the claim is that all language—not only the poetic—operates in this manner. It is the object—the thought, the thing, the dream—that is opaque. It is also, at the same time, the designating language that removes "its immediate meaning and deepens its mystery" (ibid., p. 83). Perhaps one of the most apparent examples of this co-presence of the figural and discursive is when, in an attempt to describe one's love for another, the phrase "there are no words" is uttered and, upon being communicated, somehow understood beyond the literal meaning. To return to the example of the letter "*N*," we can now grasp how the three levels of the figural are co-present to varying degrees. There is the letter "*N*" on the page and intended to be read; there is the plasticity of the lines of the letter "*N*;" and then there is the corporeal, affective desire that gives birth to the "*N*," generating the plastic lines of which it is composed.

A figural education

The discursive and the figural are heterogeneous spaces that comprise, cut across and through the system. Each is inscribed in and struggles to occupy the other. While there is not a simple opposition between them, there is always an antagonism: "The presence of figures (from all the levels) in discourse is not only deconstruction of discourse; it is also the critique of discourse as censorship, as repression of desire" (Lyotard, 2011, p. 323). The figural is unpresentable and tends toward heterogeneity, and discourse works toward the repression of heterogeneity in order to present itself, or to be presented. Yet we cannot get to the figure without discourse; "there is simply no way to go to the other side of discourse. Only from within language can one get to and enter the figure" (ibid., p. 7). Again, what is crucial here—and what will distinguish Lyotard from Derrida—is that language is *not only text or signs.* Language acts upon the world, becoming the world, and this process is an "always incomplete synthesis" (p. 82) that produces the thickness from where thought comes.

At this point, I would like to return explicitly to the two gaps earlier identified in educational literature on Lyotard: 1) that there is no mention of *how* educators and students might engage with the radical difference that the system works to violently repress, and 2) that there is (in Nuyen) a rush to valorize expression over difference by emphasizing the need to present the unpresentable. In order to consider how these problematics might be addressed through a figural education, I want to posit a triadic educational framework consisting of reading, seeing, and blindness. By way of beginning this articulation, I want to examine briefly one moment in *Discourse*, *Figure* when Lyotard mentions education. In this passing remark, Lyotard defines in part what a figural education is *not*. He writes: "It is precisely of this skill that discursive education and teaching deprive us: to remain permeable to the floating presence of the line (of value, of color)" (Lyotard, 2011, p. 212). Discursive education, that is, seeks to minimize the time between when one encounters something and when sense is made of that thing; it means encountering things as they have already entered into signification and discourse, brushing aside their alterity and relegating their shadows to irrelevance. The figural is thus sacrificed at the threshold of textual space, and it is continually repressed as we operate in that space discursively, engaging the letter at the expense of the line and the latter's ambiguity, opacity, and intractable thickness. Another way to formulate this is to say that discursive education is concerned only

with reading. By contrast, a figural education acknowledges and takes reading into account as a component of education, but is not content with remaining at this level of practice. I submit that the three components that constitute figural education are reading, seeing, and blindness.

Reading: The system, with its demands for recognition, representation, and signified difference, is predicated upon the logic of reading. When we read, we encounter the lines of language and recognize them in flat, textual space as signs. Thus, there are "assumptions, interpretations, and habits of *reading* that we contract with the predominant use of discourse" (Lyotard, 2011, p. 212). We learn to do this; we learn the process of reading and we learn reading as a mode of engagement. We do not only read text, but we also read paintings, actions, animals, ourselves, others, our encounters, etc... We read the world. Marie must make her differences legible to others in order to assert and defend them. Her differences must be published! Only then can they be absorbed into the system. They might provide a temporary disruption, but ultimately they will help contribute to the overall efficiency of the system. The demand for legibility thus is closely related to the saving of time that is central to capitalism. The central point here, however, is that through the logic of reading educational objects, such as history, for example, are learned as represented, pre-existing and stable totalities; the meanings of historical events are communicated as pre-established. What are educators to do to resist, or hold at bay the logic of reading?

Seeing: A figural education works in part by forgetting how to read and learning how to see so that we might connect with the figure. This is not limited to an engagement with history, poetry, the arts, and the dream, however; it is not content-specific. We can even work to see the book as visible instead of legible. As Lyotard writes, "*Irreversible thickness stands in the way of the mind's rush toward signification*" (ibid., p. 172). Seeing is one step in drawing out this thickness. One way in which to illustrate what I mean by seeing is to turn to the Situationist practice of *détournement*. Détournement was a socio-spatial practice that entailed introducing *simple* distortions into an object, event, behavior, or convention so as to disrupt their context and flow, calling attention to their otherwise unseen or hidden aspects. A minor example of a détournement provided by Guy Debord and Gil Wolman (1981) is the introduction of images to well-known texts or novels: "Such a detournement gains by being accompanied by illustrations whose relationships to the text are not immediately obvious" (p. 11). Another common détournement involved re-titling works of art. By making these minor alterations, the object was troubled. It is similar with seeing, in which the point is to unsettle and thus to prompt a reconsideration of context and of the connections between the thing and its meaning, thereby opening up new possibilities. When one *sees* an educational object, as opposed to *reading* the object, one can better resist the urge to insert the object into an already-existing phrase-regimen.

Blindness: To further articulate what a figural education might "look" like, I want to draw on a piece of literature on blindness and the classroom by Rod Michalko.[3] Michalko writes about what happens when blindness—*his* blindness—enters the classroom. Because of the way in which the U.S. university and its classroom are organized, in terms of both discourse and built-form, blindness is a disturbance. At the most macro level it unsettles the taut connection between sight and knowledge, whereby one knows by seeing. Playing with this unsettling, Michalko asks his students to point to different things: to him, his desk, and so on. Then, and because he is teaching sociology, he asks the students to point to society: "The students *cannot* point at society; they *cannot* even look at it; they have 'gone blind!' The sense of sight that the students so implicitly and so 'naturally' relied upon as the conjoining of 'seeing and knowing' has failed them" (Michalko, 2001, p. 354). One of the lessons from this exercise is that "sight *needs* to be

achieved" (ibid.). We not only learn to read, we also learn how to see, which means that there is something else to sight. Blindness in this sense is a type of primordial dis-orientation to the world, others, and ourselves. Michalko's educational practice also demonstrates that blindness does not come naturally, but rather requires the pedagogical intervention of the teacher. By becoming blind, we can detach ourselves from the predetermined meaning and content ascribed to educational objects. Another one of Lyotard's concepts that is helpful here is *anamnesis*, roughly translated as "before forgetting." Anamnesis, for Lyotard (2004), "is guided by the unknown" (p. 107); "It explores the meanings of a given 'present', of an expression of the here and now, without immediate concern for (referential) reality" (p. 108). As such, anamnesis takes place when we encounter things or events *without* ready-made conceptual frameworks with which to understand them or preformed *signs* through which to render them legible. Whereas seeing is about unsettling the relations between signs and their designated objects, blindness as anamnesis is about suspending, or temporarily forgetting, these relations.

We can sense the figural by approaching the objects and spaces of education "blindly." In fact, we might understand Lyotard's differentiation between the three levels of figurality as a kind of pedagogical progression applicable to educational objects and spaces, in which there is a rough correspondence between, on the one hand, the figure-image, the figure-form, and the figure-matrix and, on the other hand, reading, seeing, and blindness. We first approach the figure-image, the recognizability of the inscribed graphic letter and its differential relation to other letters and signs. We encounter the letter and read it through its negative differentiation to other letters in the system. We then pull back to the figure-form, concentrating on the shadow and opacity and discourse's edge; the letter becomes unrecognizable, troubled, and unsettled and the line shines forth. Finally, we engage the figure-matrix and become blind to the object; we no longer see it or, rather, we no longer know what it is. Yet this is not the end goal of a figural education; the figural exists always with the discursive. A figural education does not proceed linearly from reading to seeing and then to blindness; these three components rather co-exist in an always uncertain and unsettling relation. In this way, the Lyotardian educational problematic is not concerned only with bringing alterity to signification but also with acknowledging the limits of any such signification. It works to protect the figural from the discursive demands of the system, all the while acknowledging that discourse is the only access point to the figural. Each time we encounter an object or a space it is a singular event, and this singularity—its heterogeneity, irreducibility, and opacity—that the system seeks to repress is what education must attend to, but it cannot do so without effort; processes and modes of engagement need to be learned, unlearned, and relearned. The triadic educational configuration of reading, seeing, and blindness is one way to do so.

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[1] Lyotard (1991) writes: "I do not like this haste. What it hurries, and crushes, is what after the fact I find I have always tried, under diverse headings—work, figural, heterogeneity, dissensus, event, thing—to reserve: the unharmonizable" (p. 4).

[2] While Lyotard is concerned with the visual system, his observations could also be applied to the tactile system of Braille.

[3] I would like to thank Katherine Vroman for helping me establish this particular connection.