

‘Once more unto the breach’**On Meaning and Structure**

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‘Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more’

(William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, Act III, Scene I)

The sense of art, its meaning, is not a simple entity expressed by the artist for an audience. The artwork, even in its immaterial or performative dimension, has a certain autonomy as it calls for our attention. At the moment of perception, the work looks like it is quasi out of context. At the same time, the work depends on this very context – by negation. The meaning that we experience from the work in such an unfamiliar fashion comes into being precisely by detaching itself from a texture without which meaning would remain unnoticed. The sense of art needs a *con*-text, not as determinant, but wherein meaning can be heard. This is a vital paradox for art to have a voice. The autonomy of art is dependant on its ability to detach itself, for example, from any predictable and recognisable system of signs. We can easily imagine that the world within which artistic meaning emerges is itself made of signs that have been arranged and structured for the sake of communication and understanding. Those structured systems of signs are indeed used for instrumental and practical reasons. When artistic meaning calls for attentiveness, it does so by transpiring from such structures, by creating a ‘breach.’ Such is the very odd relationship that this essay will endeavour to describe. Moreover, instead of dismissing structural analysis, as has too often been the case in so-called poststructuralist thinking, epitomised for example by Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, or Julia Kristeva, the essay will show that any structure-related method of analysis, like any other methods, only becomes limited when untimely used. When applied in a timely and attentive fashion, structural analysis can divulge what are the necessary conditions for the emergence of meaning to be possible at all. Structure thus becomes the place of meaning, in so far as we understand meaning as a breach of structure. And vice versa, meaning as a breach can become the place of structure.

Representation, Signification, Sign

It is, first of all, necessary to clarify the relevant concepts that will be visited in the course of this essay. To a greater or lesser degree, any meaningful artefact evokes or tells us some-thing. Even the most abstract image is not completely free from being recognised or understood as some-thing. In other words, meaningful configurations always include some levels of representation and signification. When an image is thought to re-present something, it simply means that the configuration refers to external elements that were present in the past, or that are projected into the future through imagination, or that are present in a different context, whatever this may be.

Perceiving an image as such creates a distance that begets the desire to see the real or the ideal through what is perceived. Perceptual experience of a representation involves necessarily a three-fold

matrix: image, viewer and designated object. Signification, on the other hand, could be defined as a system, a set of items, such as signs, connected by the mind to elaborate or understand a story. Thus, unlike representation and in the way we define the word, narration as a particular instance of signification, operates within a two-fold framework made of the perceiving subject and the plane of the configuration. The perceiving subject connects together the signified sides of signs to create or understand a story.

In a way, signification as system of interrelated signs, words, figures, or even sounds does not have any ‘opacity’, as Lyotard calls it.¹ Moreover, signification is constructed, induced, or led, sometimes at the expense of sensuous meaning experienced as such. The most obvious example would be Western medieval art whose primary function was often to communicate the story of the Scriptures. Signification is indeed the effect of a system of signs whose signified sides are simply connected to each other. Defined as such, configurations that operate as signification or narration are therefore akin to ‘language’, in the way Ferdinand de Saussure defined it: a sign-system that conveys or formulates ideas.² Representation, for its part, calls for the spectator’s perceptual experience of the designated object through the configuration.

Another fundamental concept in need of clarification is that of ‘sign’, which I will define within the context of Saussure’s semiology, leaving aside, for the purpose of this essay, Charles Sanders Peirce’s work in the field.³ Saussure’s well-known triad of terms – sign, signified and signifier – constitutes the core of his semiology. The structural relationship between the signified (the conveyed ‘concept’) and what conveys it (‘the sound-image’) constitutes the sign, making language ‘a system of signs that express ideas’.⁴ And unlike the symbol, the sign is characterised by a completely arbitrary (or ‘unmotivated’) relationship between signifier and signified.⁵ Narrative mechanisms therefore operate as systems of signs whose signified sides relate to each other regardless of the signifier (or conveyance).

Now, unless we resign ourselves to being abstracting animals, it would be indeed hard to deny that signs also point to something outside of themselves, which is often referred to as ‘reality’ but can also be an ‘ideality’. This other dimension of the sign is ‘designation’. Again, I will leave aside Peirce’s definition of ‘sign’ in relation to ‘object’ and ‘interpretant’ to focus on the specific issue of how to understand the nature of meaning as breach within a set structure of signs whose signified/signifier pairs relate to each other in such or such a way.⁶

¹ See Jean-François Lyotard’s formulation of the relation between signification and system, Lyotard, *Discours, Figure* (1985 [1971]), 73-116.

² See Ferdinand de Saussure *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916).

³ See Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, eds. N. Houser and C. Kloesel (Vol. 1) and the Peirce Edition Project (Vol. 2), (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press).

⁴ Saussure *Cours de linguistique générale*, 16.

⁵ The linguist Émile Benveniste questioned the arbitrary character of the relationship signifier/signified in *Problems in General Linguistics*: what is arbitrary for him is the relationship sign/designated object. (Benveniste 1971, Chap. IV). Similarly, for Peirce, the symbol is a sign whose association with its designated object is ruled by conventions and habits. See Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Writings of Charles S. Peirce: A Chronological Edition* (Bloomington I.N: Indiana University Press, 1982), Vol.2.

⁶ Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, 478: ‘I define a sign as anything which is so determined by something else, called its Object, and so determines an effect upon a person, which effect I call its interpretant, that the later is

The Order of Structure

In representational arts, painted figures for example designate something outside of the painting (i.e., something real or ideal). To read an image as a self-contained system of 'signs' divided into signifier and signified is a theoretical tool that fits, justifies, or even forms the very principle of narration/signification as defined above – but not representation. For poststructuralist Jean-François Lyotard, this is clear evidence of the limits of Saussurian structuralist semiology if we want to understand the 'breaking-off' nature of meaning, which he calls the 'figural'.⁷ Signs are bound to have a designating dimension, which is what enables us to read them as representation. To ignore this conditions our reading of 'signs' and, by extension, our perception of whatever configuration. This sounds like an obvious thing to say. It is, however, essential to bear in mind to understand what led poststructuralist theorists to develop political/psychoanalytical interpretations of specific artistic meaning (Western modernism) in terms of liberation from the oppressing/repressing – in other words control and power. Signs designate a reality/ideality outside of themselves and, as such, their structuring must obey rules and conventions to be able to tell us about such realities/idealities. Meaning that emerges through art that breaks off such a structuring cannot be encapsulated by Saussurian structuralist semiology.

As Lyotard rightly argued, Saussure's structuralist semiology is limiting because it overlooks designation and therefore precludes the possibility of opacity of meaning.⁸ It tries to grasp the nature of meaning by analysing the 'order' of the system of signs and how they are related to each other in narration or signification. This method, by definition and by nature, does not and cannot take into account that 'space' or 'distance' between sign and designated object, and whose ability to break off systemic structures made up of rules and conventions, in other words 'discourse', constitutes the very essence of the 'figural'. Indeed, a method of analysis that ignores the opacity of meaning – the third dimension of the sign, so to speak – will miss out on what precisely breaks off the systemic structure that makes up the function of the sign. To interpret configurations in terms of signification or narration has to do with, as Lyotard puts it, 'the mind constructing the mediation' between the signs and thereby overlooking the 'opacity' of meaning that emerges from the 'distance' or 'space' between sign and designated or represented object.⁹

Interestingly, this 'dissociation' between sign and designation can also be sensed in the way thinkers such as Gottlob Frege differentiated between 'sense' (that comes from the system) and 'reference' (the intended object of representation);¹⁰ or Émile Benveniste who relocated after Saussure

thereby mediately determined by the former.'

⁷ See Lyotard, *Discours, Figure, 'Le parti pris du figural'* [The bias of the figural], 9-24.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 'Signe linguistique', 73-90.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹⁰ See Gottlob Frege, 'Über Sinn und Bedeutung', in *Zeitschrift für Philosophie und philosophische Kritik* (1892), S. 25-50. English translation in *Philosophical Writings* (1960): 'On Sense and Reference', trans. Peter Geach and Max Black (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1960). Frege establishes a straightforward and somehow simplistic distinction between: the use of signs (in his case words) for which 'we presuppose a reference' ('wir setzen eine Bedeutung voraus' (1892, S. 31) and that corresponds to the scientific attitude in search of the truth ('Wahrheit') of the real or designated object through the sign; and the use of signs with no concern for the question of the existence of the reference ('Bedeutung'), i.e. problems of truth, and that only deals with the experience of sense ('Sinn').

the arbitrary character of the linguistic sign (the unmotivated relationship is that of sign/designated, and not signifier/signified).¹¹ For Lyotard, these are symptoms of awareness of the existence of, in his own words, ‘some silent meaning or some opacity, below significations, placed this time in the heart of language itself, in its form’.¹² Of course, such a formulation may sound abstruse if not relocated within the context of Lyotard’s argument. The point is that meaning goes beyond (or below) the way signs relate to each other to constitute a language. They indeed carry an opacity because of that to which they refer outside of themselves, because of the distance or space they create by designating an object of representation. Lyotard’s conception of the opacity of meaning is, needless to say, highly political. Meaning reveals its true nature through the breaking-off capacity of its opacity within the structuring power of language. The true nature of meaning is therefore seen as a moment of freedom that escapes the authority of ‘discourse’.

For art historian Norman Bryson in *Word and Image*, this act of freedom takes place against the ‘work of the discursive’ as seen in most paintings of the *Ancien Régime*, France, whereby the signified is conveyed by a transparent but still existing signifier entirely devoted to some idealised or institutional orders.¹³ For him, the manifestation of the opacity of meaning clearly depends on the importance given to the signifier: when the signifier is ‘subordinate’ the image is never figural. The sign operates within a producing/produced dynamics whereby the signifier is a conveyance in the service of the conveyed signified, which precludes any liberation of the signifier. This conception of meaning as breach, as I call it, is arguably less sophisticated than Lyotard’s. The figural element of a configuration ends up being confined to a degree of ‘non-recognisability’ stemming from ‘the painterly sign’ or ‘the independent existence of the signifier’.¹⁴ This, inexorably, makes the manifestation of the opacity of meaning akin to abstraction. For example, he sees abstraction in the Rococo style and Jean-Honoré Fragonard’s painting (e.g., *Portrait of Denis Diderot*, 1769), in particular with ‘its avoidance of finish and its insistence on being examined on the material plane of its signifiers’.¹⁵

The figural is clearly reduced to a certain ‘physicality’ that surfaces from the liberation of the signifier, i.e., when the configuration, in Bryson’s own words, ‘comes to assert the irreducibility of its own material construction’.¹⁶ Notwithstanding the reductive conceptualisation, Bryson’s interpretation remains equally highly political: liberation takes place when the natural signifier frees itself from the grip of the signified, that is, the authority of discourse and its signifying order. As with Lyotard, meaning as breach is a moment of freedom – paradoxically proving the point of meaning’s dependence on structure in order to breach it.

¹¹ For Benveniste, only the relationship between sign and designated object deserves to be called unmotivated and not the relationship between signifier and signified. These are, according to Saussure, unified in an arbitrary way for giving birth to signification.

¹² Lyotard, *Discours, Figure*, 104.

¹³ See Bryson, ‘Discourse, Figure’, in *Word and Image* (1994), Chap. I, pp. 1-28.

¹⁴ Bryson uses this word when describing Fragonard’s painting *Fête at Saint-Cloud* (1775): ‘The *Fête at Saint-Cloud* as a visual idea is all about dwarfing human beings so that they approach a point of non-recognisability.’ (Ibid., 107).

¹⁵ Ibid., 109-110.

¹⁶ Ibid., 24.

The Opacity of Meaning as Breach

Meaning as breach cannot be apprehended when configurations are read as self contained system of signs divided into signifier and signified in the service of signifying orders of the kinds of narration and signification. Meaning as breach is an opacity that presupposes that we acknowledge the distance or space between sign and designated object.

The opacity contained within any configuration stems from the invisibility of the designated object. A landscape painting, for example, painted according to Albertian rules of perspective is clearly ‘representational’ of a landscape we believe has a reality; at the same time, the real landscape remains invisible when perceived through the visual configuration. The ways the signs relate to each other in the painting, the way their relationships are structured, enable us to recognise a landscape. This is the language made of rules and conventions that the painting uses for us to recognise what is painted.

At the same time the ‘silent meaning’ of the painting lies elsewhere; it lies within the space or distance that separates (or brings together) the sign and the designated object, in other words, the painting and the world of what is painted. Such an opacity obviously belongs to the sensuous world and can only be felt. No structuralist analysis can put a grip on it. The ‘silent meaning’ of the opacity is no signification or narration. Interestingly, the opacity of meaning can reveal itself at various degrees of intensity and intention depending on the historical and cultural contexts. A 17th century Dutch still-life painting has an opacity (e.g., Pieter Claesz, *Still-Life With Crab*, 1644), but one that is not intentionally brought forth as in the case of most Western modernist art (Jean Fautrier, *The Green Three*, 1944). The former is a passive form of opacity of meaning, whereas the latter is active.

Modernist art breaks off rules and conventions of pre-modernist orders of signification and narration. The modernist figure (in the sense of meaningful form) breaks off the order of discourse, its structure and grip on its account of reality or ideality. Balthus’ painting *The Street* (1933) offers a good illustration.

The way the passers-by are set within the configuration of the surrounding street breaks off the signifying order of the painting as a whole. The surrounding street operates at one single level of signification; all signified sides of signs relate to each other to signify a street. The signifier is ‘paint’ while the signified configuration is the ‘painted’ street. The way the passers-by are configured disrupts this order of signification. They appear as if they did not really belong to the street, giving thus the impression that they are bringing forth their ‘opacity’, i.e., the space or distance in-between the sign and the designated object (the real passers-by). The passers-by figures do not quite fit within the signifying structure of the rest of the painting; they break off the order of ‘discourse’ by bringing forth the opacity of meaning. The passers-by do not fully belong to the surrounding street; yet, paradoxically, they are painted as if they miraculously fitted particular features of the surrounding street, which of course is un-seen in real life situations. The ensuing effect is that the painted passers-by appear to bring forth the opacity of meaning; they ‘present’ themselves through the unexpected character of their configuration. They are unexpectedly in meticulous harmony with the surfaces and geometrical lines of the picture. The left hand of the little girl in the foreground matches exactly the curve of the shoe of the builder in white. The length of the handle of her racket corre-

sponds to the width of the builder's left leg. The left contour of the apron of the woman holding a child on the right side of the painting coincides with the line of the edge of the footpath, and so on. The configuration is composed of these impossible coincidences – i.e., the impossibility of finding real passers-by in such a formal harmony with their surroundings.

The breach of meaning stems here from a designated impossibility, akin to Francis Bacon's use of marks of chance that are paradoxically configured with extraordinary accuracy and calculation to bring forth their opacity (e.g., *Study for Head of Lucian Freud*, 1967). Paradoxically, the unexpected nature of Bacon's marks of chance is rendered by an excess of calculation. In a similar vein, Balthus' passers-by do not fully belong to their surroundings, creating thus an effect of opacity or presencing. The painted passers-by 'are' in excess at a moment of formal harmony that no instantaneous realistic photograph could have possibly recorded.

The paradoxical character of these configurations reveals something fundamental about the nature of meaning: structure is the place of meaning as breach; vice versa, meaning as breach is the place of structure. Beyond the straightforward critical dimension one can see in *The Street*, or in Western modernism as a whole as in Lyotard or other poststructuralist theorists, what the painting reveals is the reciprocal self-determining nature of meaning and structure whereby each acts as the place of formation of the other – a concept thoroughly developed in Nishida Kitarô's studies of the 'place' (*basho* 場所) and 'contradictory self-identities' (*mujunteki jiko dôitsu* 矛盾的自己同一).¹⁷

Semiological Disturbance

As already suggested the opacity of meaning can be manifested in a variety of ways, depending on the historical and cultural contexts, whether actively or passively. The opacity of meaning as breach can also emerge through the disturbance of semiological planes. Referring to Roland Barthes' distinction between 'myth' and 'language' may shed light on what is at stake.

In 'Myth Today' Barthes distinguishes between two semiological planes: 'language' and 'myth'.¹⁸ The first plane is that of the 'linguistic system' or 'language-object'; the second plane is that of the 'myth' or 'metalanguage'. The former is a system of signs that operates as signifier for the myth. To take an example, in John Everett Millais's painting *Ophelia* (1852) and on the plane of language-object the paint is the signifier that mediates with extraordinary accuracy, freshness, and fidelity a botanical environment and a young woman lying in a stream with flowers in her right hand. As a sign the configuration constitutes a signifier for the myth to operate: Ophelia dying in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Act IV Scene vii (1988). In despair because of the killing of her father by her lover, Hamlet, she lets herself sink after having picked flowers, slipped and fallen into the water. The poppy

¹⁷ See Nishida Kitaro, *Basho* 場所 [Place], in *Hataraku mono kara miru mono he* (働くものから見るものへ [From the acting to the seeing], *Nishida Kitaro zenshu*, 西田幾多郎全集 [Complete works of Nishida Kitaro, 1927, Vol.4] Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1979). English translation by John W. M. Krummel and Shigenori Nagatomo, *Place & Dialectic 'Basho'*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 49-102. See also *Tetsugaku no kompon mondai – Beshôhôteki sekai* 哲学の根本問題 – 弁証法的世界 [Fundamental problems of philosophy – The dialectical world], in *Nishida Kitaro zenshu*, 1934, Vol.7. English translation by David A. Dilworth (trans.), 1970, Tokyo: Sophia University Press, 107-254.

¹⁸ See Roland Barthes (1993 [1957]) in *Mythologies*: 'Myth Today', 107-159.

is a signifier that symbolises death, the daisies convey innocence, the willow and the nettle signify abandoned love and pain, and so on.

Barthes articulates the distinction between the two planes – ‘language’ and ‘myth’ – as follows:

	1. Signifier	2. Signified
Language:	3. Sign	
MYTH:	I SIGNIFIER	II SIGNIFIED
	III SIGN	

It can be seen that in myth there are two semiological systems, one of which is staggered in relation to the other: a linguistic system, the language (or the modes of representation which are assimilated to it), which I shall call the *language-object*, because it is the language which myth gets hold of in order to build its own system; and myth itself, which I shall call *metalanguage*, because it is a second language, *in which* one speaks about the first.¹⁹

(Barthes 1957, 115)

If we refer back to Balthus’s *The Street* we can describe the manifestation of the opacity of meaning, or meaning as breach, in terms of semiological disturbance between the two planes. The painted passers-by in a way break off the principle of what looks like a potential semiological series. Again, if the configuration as a whole could be analysed on the same semiological plane, it would become no more than the narration or representation of a possible scene from real life. The metalanguage could then be understood, for example, as a social realist message. The configuration, however, does not allow the semiological series to operate. We cannot simultaneously configure the passers-by and the surrounding street as language-objects, and we cannot configure them as if they belonged to the same plane of myth. In *The Street* the two planes clash with each other. (Perhaps the compounds ‘figure-object’ (Plane 1) and ‘metafigure’ (Plane 2) are more appropriate for visual configurations instead of ‘language-object’ and ‘metalanguage’, which are more suitable for linguistics.) The passers-by do not fully belong to the surrounding street; neither are they totally on their own for the very reason they are depicted in a street. They do not appear to fit either Plane 1 or Plane 2: do they convey meaning, or are they conveyed meaning? They are in fact neither signifier nor signified. They are neither figure-object nor metafigure; neither language nor myth. They are figure-in-excess or ‘figure-figure’, for they bring forth the opacity of meaning by creating a semiological disturbance, i.e., meaning as breach.

¹⁹ Bryson, without truly exploring this issue, briefly mentions ‘Diderot’s imaginary paintings’ (Bryson, *Word and Image*, 184) which function as ‘second-order semiological systems’, where a sign in the first system becomes a signified in the second’ (ibid.). As a result the sign ‘has nothing *of itself*’ and becomes henceforth “‘all signified” and “no signifier”” (ibid., 185).

Un-Explained Substitution

Another form of meaning as breach can also be found in ‘metaphors’, which, interestingly for the sake of its anti-discursive nature, Lyotard sees as belonging to the ‘language of dream’. It is not so much the obvious psychoanalytical dimension that is relevant here, but rather the way the semiological relates to the phenomenal nature of meaning.

The manifestation of the opacity of meaning, in Lyotard’s words, is one ‘that hides and that shows, probably metaphorically’.²⁰ Clearly, the opacity of meaning is expressed through withdrawals from and bringing-forth against the order of signification and narration – and metaphor is a device for doing so. A metaphor is not *any* language device. Unlike a metonymy, and even less literal language, a metaphor is, for linguists such as Roman Jakobson, more radically paradigmatic than syntagmatic,²¹ albeit both are ‘figures of equivalence’, as Terence Hawkes explains:

...they characteristically propose a different entity as having ‘equivalent’ status to the one that forms the main subject of the figure. Thus, in the metaphor ‘the car beetled along’, the movement of a beetle is proposed as ‘equivalent’ to that of the car, and in the metonymic phrase ‘The White House considers a new policy’, a specific building is proposed as ‘equivalent’ to the president of the United States. Broadly speaking, metaphor is based on a proposed similarity or analogy between the literal subject (the car’s movement) and its metaphorical substitute (the beetle’s movement), whereas metonymy is based on a proposed contiguous (or ‘sequential’) between the literal subject (the president) and its ‘adjacent’ replacement (where the president lives).

(Hawkes 1988, 77)²²

As is well known, it is on the basis of this distinction between metaphor and metonymy that Jakobson differentiates between, respectively, literary romanticism (or even symbolism) and realism. The former involves a high degree of paradigmatic dimension, whereas the latter is characterised by its syntagmatic relationships between units or figures.²³ For Jacques Lacan, the metaphor is also a matter of ‘substitution’: one word replacing another, or more precisely the substitution of one signifier by another in order to express the same signified. In Hawkes’ example of the car/beetle movement, the metaphorical effect comes from the signifier ‘beetled’ substituting the signifier ‘went’ in order to express the car’s movement. As Lacan puts it, ‘two signifiers one of which has taken the place of the other in the signifying chain’.²⁴ But Lacan, contrary to Jakobson, does not distinguish metaphor from metonymy: ‘What distinguishes these two mechanisms – metaphor and metonymy...? Nothing other than a status imposed on the signifying materials’.²⁵ This is of course only a matter of definition.

²⁰ Lyotard, *Discours, Figure*, 260.

²¹ See Sausure’s explanation of the syntagmatic/associative relation of the sign, which he also defines in terms of horizontal/vertical modes of association (*Course in General Linguistics*, 123-128).

²² See Terence Hawkes on Roman Jakobson, in *Structuralism and Semiotics* (1988), 76-87.

²³ See Roman Jakobson in *Fundamentals of Language* (1956), 91-92.

²⁴ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (1966), 507.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 511. Lacan in fact ascribes this ‘privileged role’ to the language of dream, but mentions that it can also

What is important is the distinction made between different modes of formulation: on the one hand metaphor/paradigm/representation, and on the other hand literality/syntagm/narration. Arguably metonymy could be placed between the former and the latter.

Lyotard even goes further by suggesting that the manifestation of the opacity of meaning (the figural) is more than a simple linguistic substitution, albeit metaphorical. The manifestation of the opacity of meaning is, in his own words, 'a non-signified comparison'.²⁶ In other words, the 'silent meaning' of the manifestation is a non-signified comparison between two or several signifiers. The opacity of meaning remains thus non-explicit and non-signified. It is the sensuous and therefore ineffable dimension of the metaphor that makes up the opacity of meaning. Meaning understood this way does not tell us something; it says things to us. Meaning reveals itself as signifying moment without a signified. It is, indeed, a 'language of dream' that involves associations, substitutions, recognition, and, most importantly, the sensuous, which is echoed in Bryson's discussion of Jean-Antoine Watteau's painting (e.g., *Assembly in a Park*, 1717) in terms of 'sign-strategy' that gives rise to a 'figural effect': meaning is 'experienced *mysteriously*, as moods, or atmospheres'.²⁷ The reason why the spectator is brought into Watteau's 'atmosphere' is because the opacity of meaning begins to show itself instead of hiding behind what is meant to be told or read through the order of discourse.²⁸

Diverging Autonomy

There is, however, a blatant contradiction in Bryson's formulation of the nature of the opacity of meaning, as far as the visual arts are concerned. There is no question that he shares with Lyotard the view that meaning becomes autonomous by freeing itself from the grip of 'discourse', in whatever form. For Bryson, similar to Jakobson, 'realistic' works reflect 'a high predominance of syntagm over paradigm'.²⁹ This predominance precisely is where he locates the figural dimension of the configuration. In syntagmatic relationships words have a 'fixed position in the sequence' and the reader does not relate them to anything other than the preceding or the following word.³⁰ Syntagmatic configurations are therefore autonomous as they do fall under the grip of something outside of themselves. For example, in Masaccio's *Rendering of the Tribute Money* (1424-1428) the syntagmatic mechanism is predominant and as such makes the viewer remain 'within' the image.

Another telling example of 'the primacy of the syntagm'³¹ can be found in traditional still-life painting, although Bryson acknowledges that 'it has not yet attained full figurality – the liberation of the image from all constraints outside of itself' whereby every element of the picture would be

be found in discourse.

²⁶ Lyotard, *Discours, Figure*, 287.

²⁷ Bryson, *Word and Image*, 88.

²⁸ This continuous view on the figure as a two-sided sign conditions the way Bryson distinguishes the discursive from the figural: '...the division of the painterly sign, as with all signs, is the division between the signified and the signifier, which gives rise to the discursive and the figural;...' (Bryson, *Word and Image*, 28).

²⁹ Bryson, *Word and Image*, 20-21.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

syntagmatically linked in an ‘unbreakable contiguity’.³² Traditional still-life painting has not yet unleashed the opacity of meaning, or acquired full visual autonomy, because it ‘is still secondary to an outer reality’.³³ Only by not operating as means for a reality or story outside the picture, can configurations appear to ‘possess a *vraisemblance*’,³⁴ in other words, a complete autonomy. He gives the stained glass windows of Gothic cathedrals as counter-examples: the viewers paradigmatically relate ‘each panel to something outside the sequence’³⁵ – in this case the order of religious discourse.

The contradiction lies in Bryson’s confusion between autonomy and self-contained system of signs regulated by syntagmatic relationships. The alleged autonomous visuality certainly does not fall under the grip of external ideologies or realities; instead it becomes regulated by the systemic order of signification and narration. Instead of being in the service of the order of representation, Bryson’s autonomous visuality becomes regulated by the syntagmatic order that Saussure held dear. The degree of autonomy of visuality, i.e., the opacity of meaning, depends on the ability configurations have to abstract themselves from any designated reality or ideality. In other words, autonomous visuality equates virtuality. Beside overlooking the nature of the signifying order at work that allows ‘unbreakable contiguity’ in signification and narration, we are here a world apart from any conception of the reciprocal self-determining nature of visuality and discourse, or, to bring it back to the central theme of the essay, meaning as breach and structure.

In whatever case, whether within poststructuralism or Bryson’s art history, the language of breach, if I may formulate it thus, is always set against the background of the order of discourse, its systemic structure, or its ideology, be it in the form of signification, narration, or representation. The manifestation of the opacity of meaning is a political force that has the alleged ability to ‘de-construct’ the language of structure or to reveal the autonomy of art. This suggests, in the case of Lyotard’s conception of figural, that the kind of semiological structure that Saussure originally elaborated is vital, for it is a theoretical tool that suits the order of discourse against which, we are told, emerges the opacity of meaning. The structure needs the breach – and the breach needs the structure. The poststructuralists somehow overlooked this self-determining reciprocity for political reasons. The non-explicit sensuous substitution of the metaphor can only take place within the literal order of narration; vice versa, syntagmatic relationships between signs can only meaningfully unfold within the space of designation.

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³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 24.

³⁵ Ibid., 21.

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