

## Figure/Ground: Double Occupations of Discourses and Events

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**Abstract:** In this paper I consider occupation by reoccupying a specific cultural, theoretical and spatial preoccupation – the figure/ground – through several operations, which seek to destabilise its ossified binarity. The first move looks to what Irit Rogoff has referred to as criticality. After criticism and critical analysis, we are in a

“... double occupation in which we are both fully armed with the knowledges of critique, able to analyse and unveil while at the same time sharing and living out the very conditions which we are able to see through.”<sup>1</sup>

The figure/ground's double occupancy designates a construction of difference. It is about ostensibly stable grounds, of locatable locations, i.e., the spaces of critical analysis, of the discursive context of meaning, *and* of punctualised figures, of disruptive singularities.

Drawing on criticality's double occupancy and, with a second move which looks to Jean Francois Lyotard's differentiation between discourse and figure and his concept of the event, this work desires to destabilise and reconfigure the figure/ground's occupation by positing not an alternative diagrammatic metaphor of fluid, relational, and/or contingent space but by eliciting its power to transformatively dislodge and transpose its own constructed 'rule of representation'.

**Key Words:** double occupation, criticality, figure/ground, discourse, performativity, diagram, event



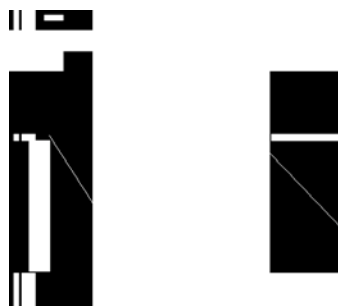
### Occupations

The relationships which make up 'punctualisations' of occupation are multifarious. People strategically exercise power over places. People tactically bring their bodies to bear in spaces, shifting both events and built material. Institutions of various sorts exert power over people through spatial manipulation. Politics and religion – beliefs? – engender occupations of bodies, hearts, minds and land. The body's other – let us call it space – performs enactments of occupation through its sedimented biography. Representations describe as well as transform our ontological, epistemological and methodological schemas.

Occupation is extremely performative: it does things.

These enactments of occupation are rather coarse, and describe categories which seem to have rather clear lines from agents to patients, i.e., recipients of acts. In fact, enactments of occupation are quite complex, and maintain their durability through a multitude of oft-nuanced relationships. How might we render occupation more commensurately with its less-than categorical expression without denying its categorically performative power? Drawing on the theme of *occupations of representation*, this paper focuses on a realignment of the figure/ground diagram in order to begin this description.

With this desire to understand and enact occupations' nuanced complexities it may seem odd if not downright paradoxical to focus on the figure/ground, which might be entitled *the grand narrative of the binary*. However, it is precisely its assumed clarity and persistence which makes the figure/ground a useful object in destabilizing and recasting occupation's certainties. Rather than using something which might echo, or indeed *reflect*, the complexities of occupation as a methodological apparatus for realignment, this tactic uses a clear 'diffractive grating' as its apparatus in order to evoke that complexity.<sup>2</sup> Heeding Deleuze, this tactic sees the figure/ground not so much in terms of what it means, but rather how it functions: how it performs and occupies us and we it.<sup>3</sup> And, despite us having moved through situatedness to all things relational, through representation as enactment to non-representational theory, and through various other postmodern, poststructuralist turns and trajectories, this binary with its roots in a discourse on perception perseveres in much of everyday life as a lived metaphor. The figure/ground, with its roots in Gestalt principles and pervasive in its diagrammatic form in urban analysis and planning, has occupied spatial designers and theorists for many years. Through its unambiguous black and white, the diagram has been used to 'clarify' an understanding of situations, as well as to proclaim intentions and desires for spaces. This paper moves the figure/ground through two related operations to begin to realign, and therefore reoccupy, it. The first is that of criticality, of 'double occupation' as elaborated by Rogoff, which begins to dislodge it from binary's uncompromising grip. Then, Lyotard's discourse and figure are invoked to continue the shift from what was once concerned with either/or, or at best, the formed and unformed, to something which might reveal (and therefore produce) the complexities of occupations through events and discourses. The figure/ground diagram is then briefly contextualised and teased further out of its straight jacket. Finally, the paper will posit some initial forays into enacting this different occupation of the figure/ground.



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### *Double Occupation*

In Irit Rogoff's rendering of criticality, she introduces the condition of *double occupation*. Criticality's double occupation is a state

“... in which we are both fully armed with the knowledges of critique, able to analyse and unveil while at the same time sharing and living out the very conditions which we are able to see through. As such we live out a duality that requires at the same time both an analytical mode and a demand to produce new subjectivities.”<sup>4</sup>

This double occupancy concerns itself neither with contradiction nor opposition but with a condition of potentially irreconcilable difference. Understanding the figure/ground diagram as double occupation rather than as a black/white binary questions the identity of something as not-something else, i.e., one thing occupying the other through its opposition. Seen as criticality, the figure/ground indexes this double occupancy, occupying both new ‘subjectivities’ of the singular, of the event, of being-in-the-thick-of-things, as well as the discourses of knowledge. In the double occupancy of the figure/ground, we are in two places and times at once.

Reconstituting the figure/ground through double occupation engages us in alternative designations and analyses to consider how and what the black and the white occupy. Whereas previously we may have seen the black to denote a particular condition, say private, and the white ‘therefore’ public (e.g., in an urbanist’s interpretations of the Nolli plan of Rome), through criticality we might consider the black to mark moments of domesticity and spaces, objects, and events of personal identities, and the white to designate conditions and critique of surveillance and state scrutiny. Through the notion of double occupation, we declassify the figure/ground as related through the concept of colour, re-marking the black and white through alternative constructions of what might play the role of a complement. This operation recollects Algirdas Greimas’ semiotic square which expands “known” entities into intervals and implications to understand fields of meaning, uncovering relationships and hidden dimensions. In the workings of the square an initial, typically ‘unmarked’ (semiotically speaking) term unfolds an other (marked) term which begins to evolve our own (often hidden, ideological) perspectives. Though the square might be seen to occupy ‘one half’ of criticality’s double occupation, i.e., as an analytic tool used to unveil (i.e., critique), it as well performs us to incorporate into it singular, non-discursive events, which can destabilise established dualities. As Chandler notes, “... the marked form [...] is an extraordinary deviational ‘special case’ which is something other than the standard or default form of the unmarked term. *Unmarked- marked* may thus be read as *norm-deviation*.”<sup>5</sup> In an example given by Greimas the unmarked term ‘marriage’ might elicit neither ‘divorce’ nor ‘single’, but ‘incest’.



### Lyotard's Discourse/Figure

In a second move towards our reoccupation of the figure/ground (and it of us), we look to further transform the binarity and opposition so entrenched in the diagram. Jean Francois

Liotard, in his book *Discours, figure*, uses vision as one way into the figure/discourse difference. He reconfigures the opposition and indeed subjugation of *peripheral* to *focal* vision into a difference in which one does not efface the other through its own ontology, its own 'world view'. The constantly moving eye seeks to bring the peripheral into focus on figures on grounds; it "...allows the space of vision to be organised into recognisable objects, ... repress[ing] the possibility of difference".<sup>6</sup> However, there is a gap, Lyotard says, which

"... is the ungraspable distance between the periphery of the visual field and its focus. This gap gives much more than the recto and verso, it gives the qualitative discontinuity of the two spaces in their simultaneity, [...] [...] the periphery is not merely blurred, it is other, and any attempt to *grasp* it loses it. [...] It is not a question of the opposition of two terms, but of a difference [...] which implies their irreversible inequality at the same time as their juxtaposition."<sup>7</sup>

It is this gap, this 'ungraspable distance' that 'gives the qualitative discontinuity of the two spaces in their simultaneity' which so clearly echoes the creative tension within the double occupancy of figure/ground. In Lyotard's rendering, the tension between the two is increased, and the potency of the concept of criticality is expressed, through two readings of what is figure and what is ground. Whilst the figure is typically that upon which we focus (i.e., the focal) against a peripheral ground, in criticality, it is singularity which occupies the position of the peripheral with respect to our critical discourses, which tend to be in the unmarked position of the norm 'in focus'. At the same time, Lyotard delineates his figure and discourse in a converse rendering, which imbues both with performative, 'occupational', power:

"The figural is an unspeakable other necessarily *at work* within and against *discourse*, disrupting the rule of representation. It is not opposed to discourse, but is the point at which the oppositions by which discourse works are opened to a radical heterogeneity or *singularity*."<sup>8</sup>

And

"Discourse ... organizes the objects of knowledge as a system of concepts ... Meanings are defined in terms of their position in the discursive network [...] Discourse thus imposes a spatial arrangement upon objects"<sup>9</sup>

"[...] discourse apprehends things solely in terms of the representability by or within its system, as *meanings* or significations that discourse may *speak*."<sup>10</sup>

Related to criticality's 'singular subjectivities' is the Lyotardian notion of the event. The figure, as event, is

"... the fact or case that something happens, after which nothing will ever be the same again. The event disrupts any pre-existing referential frame within which it might be represented or understood. The eventhood of the event is the radical *singularity* of happening, the 'it happens' as distinct from the sense of 'what is happening'."<sup>11</sup>

"The event is an absolute performative: it happens."<sup>12</sup>

Lyotard's figures, his events, are radically disruptive and destabilising performative acts; they are singularities which are more about invention than cognition. In the other place and time of the double occupation, his *discourse* functions to put knowledge in its place, it occupies objects and arranges them; it is – differentiated from the event which might be seen as a-representational (rather than non-representational) – all about being 'about' represented

things. The figure/ground, as configured through both events and 'placed' knowledge, is both performative *and* the performance.



**press: Rewind**

**Gestalt**

The figure/ground has been integral to Gestalt psychology and understanding perception and has become embedded in our perceptual apparatus through the performativity of that discourse. The shift from the 'stimulus-response' schema to one of 'center and margin', from passive reception to an active creation of a field of relationships, changed the way we perceive perception, and therefore, perceive. Through the Gestalt notion of figure-ground we are always selecting, determining out of a mass of incoming information what is important to us, our figures against grounds of other stuff which is 'governed by our expectations'.

It is important to state for this discussion that, as Edgar Rubin (famous for the Rubin vase or the vase/two-faces figure/ground) notes, the figure and the ground "are not formed in the same way".<sup>13</sup> So whilst figures and grounds are inexorably intertwined, one present to make the other through our performative form making and expectations, a line of difference, rather than opposition, separates them. To push this point a bit further, and to maintain the multiple readings outlined above, we can shift from a binary relationship of formed/unformed to embrace that of the formed/formless, a relationship which underscores difference, and expresses the potential deviation of the 'marked' term. This difference eschews the figure/ground's categorical manoeuvres of the either/or and occupies it with an alternate performative script, one which calls on us to evolve criticality's 'analytical mode' as well as 'to produce new subjectivities'.



**Drawing«»Diagram**

Reoccupation of the figure/ground with a different script – or indeed a script of difference – is not easy in light of its entrenchment in the black and white drawing, an enactment which bespeaks the either/or. The use of the figure/ground drawing is prevalent in architecture offices, planning departments and spatial design courses in universities. It is used in

architectural and urban design production and produce, i.e., both in the phase which is often referred to as analysis as well as that referred to as design, but also in the representations of designs as 'finished' products. It has a long history, going back at least to one of its most famous incarnations, the plan of Rome by Giovan Battista Nolli (1748) but probably before to Leonardo Da Vinci's plan for Cesare Borgia (the model for Machiavelli's *The Prince*) for the town of Imola near Bologna (1502). More recently, Colin Rowe and his colleagues drew upon the Bauhaus fascination with Gestalt compositional principals, and developed ideas concerning the figure/ground relationship in their work with students. At both the University of Texas and in his Urban Design Studio at Cornell University between the mid-50's and late 80's, Rowe and his colleagues used the figure/ground as an analytical and design tool to develop ideas and propositions of the city.

In the spatial design domain, the figure/ground drawing is used to speak comparatively about urban morphologies, and more specifically about relations of scale between built objects, between mass and void, or of the relationship between public and private spaces. In architectural education, the figure/ground is still used as a representation which continues to subjugate one to the other in typical binary fashion, i.e., what is not ground is figure, what is not figure is ground.

The figure/ground drawing, already disrupted through criticality's double occupation and Lyotard's difference of discourse and event, needs to be further stretched to continue its reoccupation. First of all, one could quite easily view the figure/ground drawing with its embodiment of the binary condition as having quite a limited palette of 'methods'. Its embodiment as a key gestalt concept opens it up to the critique that

“... while Gestalt theory foregrounds perceptual frames, it discourages thinking about cultural frames. The social, linguistic, and institutional contexts of design recede behind the dominant figure of form.”<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, one could critique the figure/ground with regard to its power to *other* many things. John Law speaks about 'method assemblages' which we use to 'make and know realities' as

“... enactments of relations that make some things (representations, objects, apprehensions) present 'in-here', whilst making others absent 'out-there'. The 'out-there' comes in two forms: as manifest absence (for instance as what is represented); or, and more problematically, as a hinterland of indefinite, necessary, but hidden Otherness.”<sup>15</sup>

But it is precisely in its *occupation of this 'otherness'* that a potential richness – an array of possible operations for both projecting and creating relationships of events, sites, people, materials, technologies, issues, and judgements – can unfold.

Secondly, understood only as a *drawing* which “represent[s] or identif[ies] a static truth condition”<sup>16</sup> (e.g., public/private) denies us an opportunity to occupy it as a *diagram* which has “performative rather than representational power”.<sup>17</sup> So as a diagram, the figure/ground “... does not function to represent, even something real, but rather constructs a real that is yet to come, a new type of reality.”<sup>18</sup> “[It] is the possibility of fact, not the fact itself.”<sup>19</sup> In this sense, the figure/ground diagram is a *working* drawing.

Others have moved away from the 'straight' rendering of the figure/ground to describe spatial conditions differently. In his essay "From Object to Field", Stan Allen lists a variety of compositional operations within what he terms 'field conditions'. These operations are metaphors for architectural space making and include patchworks, striations, loose grids, felt, peripheral compositions, mosaics, blocks, collisions, linked assemblies, and moiré patterns. For Allen, these embody "a shift in emphasis: from abstract formal description towards a close attention to the operations of making. Questions of meaning are secondary".<sup>20</sup> Allen remarks that the "... field is a material condition, not a discursive practice".<sup>21</sup> In his take on the figure/field relationship, the figure is to be thought of "not as a demarcated object but as an effect emerging from the field itself – as moments of intensity".<sup>22</sup> Though it is helpful to consider the field as material, and entitling figures as moments of intensity relates to the discussion here of singularities, by valorising the material and relegating the discursive to elsewhere, he does not accede to criticality's perhaps messier double occupancy. And, though Allen is occupied by new illustrations and metaphors of conditions which may be helpful in expanding our understanding of particular spatialities, he does not significantly "displace the rule of representation"<sup>23</sup>, in this case, the figure/ground.

The 'rule of representation' is embodied in the tremendous influence that practitioners and teachers, including Colin Rowe and his colleagues and students at Texas and Cornell, had on schools of architecture (and, therefore, on the ways architects practice) through their use of the figure/ground drawing. Those who employ it maintain that it is useful because it is 'neutral method' which 'removes extraneous factors' and reinforces the interdependency of the figure and the ground through its implicit potential to be reversed. This aspect of interdependency refers to the 'in terms of' in binary, oppositional thinking, and reflects neither the double occupancy of criticality nor the 'qualitative discontinuity' of difference.

However, occupying the figure/ground of double occupation and difference moves us away from an easy reading of black and white spatial conditions whilst maintaining that very black and white to help us understand that occupation of both invention and cognition, of events which are indescribable in moments of making and of discourses which 'places' meaning. Rather than positing a different diagram, figure or model which might embody a different way of seeing an existing condition (a representationalist way) this occupation retains the familiarity of the black/white figure/ground to diffract different potential conditions which enact that black/white's durability *differently*. We shift the emphasis from viewpoints (or epistemologies) to views (ontologies).



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**The working figure/ground**

Realigning and occupying the figure/ground through the 'gratings' of double occupation and *discours/figure* discloses potent, transformational discourses of power *and* forms tangles of equally performative singular events.



And: the figure/ground diagram occupies us, enjoining us to *work* it. Recently I have begun diagramming the figure/ground to displace its own representational rules by lifting it out of its static, chronological, and locatable siting and establishing its immanent discontinuous and opportunistic spaces and kairic time. Beginning with a short bit of code<sup>24</sup> (using an open source language called Processing), the computer begins 'in the middle' and continuously draws changing black/white figure/ground diagrams over themselves (see still images throughout this paper). But unlike a palimpsest with its evidence of layers of meaning, each new figure/ground has neither knowledge nor memory of its previous condition nor of what will come after. The ground is the eidetic memory, i.e., a memory which collects at the back of the eye, and continuously shifts to accommodate the next image. The images are not about time per se but rather about frames, which could remain for fractions of a second or for many years. Each iteration is an event, which will never be repeated: singularities disrupting shifting grounds. Unsure about where this going, this diagramming *is* helping me think about and do the criticality that is this newly occupied figure/ground.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Rogoff, I. (2006). What is a Theorist?

<sup>2</sup> This differentiation between reflection and diffraction runs as an undercurrent throughout this paper, and is grist for further explication of the figure/ground. It picks up on work done by Haraway (see 'The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others') and Barad (see 'Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning').

<sup>3</sup> See especially his work Francis Bacon: The logic of sensation.

<sup>4</sup> Rogoff, I. (2006) What is a Theorist? (unpaginated)

<sup>5</sup> Chandler (2002) Semiotics: The Basics. p112.

<sup>6</sup> Bennington (1988). Lyotard: Writing the event. p73

<sup>7</sup> quoted in Bennington (1988). Lyotard: Writing the event. p73, 74

<sup>8</sup> Readings (1991) Introducing Lyotard: Art and politics. p xxxi

<sup>9</sup> Readings (1991) Introducing Lyotard: Art and politics. p3

<sup>10</sup> Readings (1991) Introducing Lyotard: Art and politics. p xxxi

<sup>11</sup> Readings (1991) Introducing Lyotard: Art and politics. p xxxi

<sup>12</sup> Lyotard. (1993) Political Writings. p.24

<sup>13</sup> Iser. (2006) How to do theory. p44



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- <sup>14</sup> Lupton, E., & Miller, J. A. (1993). The abcs of [triangle, square, circle]: The bauhaus and design theory. p30
- <sup>15</sup> Law, J. (2004). After method: Mess in social science research. p14
- <sup>16</sup> Somol, R. E. (1999). Dummy Text. p10
- <sup>17</sup> Somol, R. E. (1999). Dummy Text. p8
- <sup>18</sup> Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1988). A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia. p142
- <sup>19</sup> Deleuze, G. (2003). Francis Bacon: The logic of sensation. p71
- <sup>20</sup> Allen, S. (1997). 'From object to field'. p27
- <sup>21</sup> Allen, S. (1997). 'From object to field'. p27
- <sup>22</sup> Allen, S. (1997). 'From object to field'. p28
- <sup>23</sup> Readings (1991) Introducing Lyotard: Art and politics. p xxxi
- <sup>24</sup> I would like to acknowledge the tremendous support and assistance of JJ Brophy (Canterbury School of Architecture, University for the Creative Arts) with the authorship of the code.

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