Deleuze’s Bacon

Art & Language and Tom Baldwin

I

Francis Bacon’s public career as a painter began in the 1940s and was more or less established by the 1950s. But it received its first guiding impulse from a convulsion in the British art establishment of the late 1930s. This convulsion was provoked by the increasing prominence of a cosmopolitanized, professionalized abstract art – the relatively powerful instrument of an emerging class, a new cultural bourgeoisie. The prospect that a professionalized abstract art would take hold in Britain was threatening to an older class of literati and dilettanti for whom art was a ‘civilizing’ rather than a ‘professional’ tendency.

It had become apparent that the rising cultural bourgeoisie perceived modernist abstract art as autonomous, driven by the dialectic of its own technicality. The technicality of its action enabled it to assume a practical (and a moral) legitimacy which devalued the authority of the older civilizing class. Cosmopolitan modernism accounted for its practice in terms of coherent ideology. To its opponents, the increasingly specialized vocabularies that accompanied it seemed menacing and aggressive.

In the 1930s the lead in the reactionary fight against this professionalism was taken by Kenneth Clark. A ‘humanistic’ vocabulary of aesthetic grandeur was developed and refined, and recalcitrant abstract artists were effectively marginalized. By the end of World War II, British art had been re-established as a civilizing discourse, predicated on the interesting eccentricities of individuals, that remained in thrall to a patronage of gentlemanly amateurs. Civilization was assisted by many ‘personalities’, artists and literati. Some of these were to be the art arbiters of the future: the wartime personnel of the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts grew up into the Arts Council; some of the loftier minds became voices on the BBC, and so on. In Britain at least art would be, one way or another, in the grand manner. Henry Moore became the great British sculptor and Graham Sutherland the great British painter. The canonical discourse of the authentically human opposed, and seemed to defeat, the outlandish vocabularies used by the foreign-seeming intellectuals of international abstract art. While surrealism recognizable as such was rejected for its unsightly political ramifications, in so far as its mannerisms were adaptable they were domesticated as picturesque detail. Acceptable deformations entailed the reinvocation of a form of romanticism: depoliticized, de-psychologized, British, and all right.

Though some early work of Bacon’s was shown alongside the surrealists in London in the 1930s, he emerged in the 1940s as a rather shady figure at the edge of a bohemian circle consisting of Sutherland, Minton, Craxton, Melville, Vaughan, Lucien Freud and others. One of the perceived tendencies of professionalized modernism was pedagogic. It seemed that its ideological and technical metiers could be taught. By contrast, resistance to socialization or to the distribution of power through teaching was a marked aspect of the bohemian authenticism of the 1940s and 1950s. Tradesmen’s sons and daughters, unless suitably marked and transfigured by an appropriate authenticity, must not be allowed to pollute the rare mountain air. Such sentiments are significant among the enabling ideological conditions of Bacon’s eminence.

Picasso seemed to bestride both modernist professionalism and British figuration. Some – Minton, Sutherland, Craxton – identified the source and clung on. Bacon ‘acknowledges’ the influence of Picasso’s techniques. But of course. What else, who else? Decoding, we might say that Bacon, like the others, borrowed and adapted and diluted the formalistic and expressionist threads of Picasso into an occasionally seamy, but essentially genteel figuration. This figuration, which shunned or sought seriously to restrict the ‘narrative’, compromised the painterly. But abstract art compromised or seemed to compromise a variety of ideological canons. It was therefore to be represented as trivial, empty, as incapable of bearing the weight.
of a necessary aestheticism. A middle, one might say quietly, *British* category emerged as a consequence: the figural. Historically tractable and located, vaguely continuous and discursively passive; neither one thing nor the other; neither ‘illustrative’, nor ‘narrative’, nor ‘abstract’.

Bacon as authentic is the prisoner of a trope, a comical spectacle. In the hands of an authentic the fractious materiality of modern art is a picturesque shadow. The disciplines imposed by vertiginous materials, the blindness of the ironies which, contra Barthes, do not merely constitute a superiority of one voice over another, are denied in the culture of anecdote and nostalgic order.

II

The foregoing is a kind of recollection of an article on Bacon that we wrote for the journal *Artscribe* almost twenty years ago. Its final thought was that it is more constructive and emancipating to make fun of Bacon than to engage in the genre of serious criticism. Gilles Deleuze’s *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* belongs unquestionably to the genre of serious criticism. We might ask if it counts significantly against our recollection. We ask this in changed – or at least aggravated – circumstances: the hegemonic triumph of global capital has had artistic consequences. It has put a management in charge of production, and in doing so has bloated the power of the institution and robbed art of its internal complexity. If the power of the institution is to be resisted, it may be necessary to restore the internal complexity of the artwork. Painting may supply some clues to how this is to be accomplished.

While we argue that Bacon’s early eminence was due to a reactionary tendency in British art, he has re-emerged more recently in an abundance of critical writing and other cultural ‘studies’ addressed to the body. Bacon’s ‘scenes of love, vomiting and excretion’ (16), his zones of indiscernibility between man and animal, are celebrated as *abjection*, and abjection goes to the transgressive. Deleuze himself doesn’t explicitly mention the transgressive. His book will lend support to the tendency, however. ‘Abjection becomes splendor, the horror of life becomes a very pure and very intense life’ (52). This is right out of the old bohemian’s charter. It is perhaps disconcerting to see a theme set running in the civilizing world of Sir Kenneth Clark being taken up for radical honour by Julia Kristeva.

Deleuze argues that ‘Bacon’s is a closed and artificial world’ (43). But we can also read today that ‘interest in the body’s apertures depends on the preoccupation with social exits and entrances’. Kristeva has argued via Bataille for the power of abjection, on the grounds that ‘disturbs identity, system, order; that it does not respect bodies, positions, rules’.2

The modernist art project may well have to face up to the charge that it issued from an over-intellectualized delibidinized laboratory. But it does not follow from this that the hopelessly attention-seeking transgressions of processed art-world abjection have any chance of disturbing, let alone overthrowing, globalized power. Neither the anus nor the mouth nor any of the other holes – including the one you might vomit down – are *ipso facto* transgressive. They fit well enough into those cultural templates that were first formed in the context of ‘civilization’.

III

Deleuze is not naive in his readings of such basics as pictorial space and depth, figure–ground relations, and so on. He has a grip on the unavailability to twentieth-century painting of ‘simple figuration’, and on some of the reasons for that. He says, ‘Painting has to extract the Figure from the figurative’ (8). (The logic of this necessity becomes somewhat tortured in places, as when, ‘the body [in Bacon’s painting] … exerts an effort upon itself in order to become a Figure’ (15).) Later, ‘the Figure is opposed to figuration…’ Even if ‘something is nonetheless figured (for instance a screaming Pope)’, there is a ‘secondary figuration [which] depends on the neutralization of all primary figuration’ (37). We might ask what this neutralization is like. Presumably it doesn’t mean that one no longer sees the screaming Pope. Rather one *experiences* the Pope as a Figure rather than recognizing it as a represented body. A lot is made to hinge on this distinction. Supposedly, ‘Bacon has always tried to eliminate the “sensational”, that is, the primary figuration of that which provokes a violent sensation’ (38). As a disclaimer on Bacon’s part, that has always seemed a bit disingenuous. As Deleuze represents him, Bacon is interested in violence not as narrative or even as a subject of representation, but as ‘itself a Figure’ (39). But this doesn’t quite do away with the question of what it is that forms the set of the figurative themes of Bacon’s pictures.

---

Deleuze has an evasive but possibly interesting preoccupation with ‘the fact’ (3). This appears to be a kind of unarticulated requirement of realism. He gives an odd account of religious figuration (9–10). On the one hand it appears that, if ‘with God, everything is permitted’, then there can be no realism in religious art. On the other, he seems to be saying that it is by religious art that ‘Figures [are] freed from all figuration’, thus offering modern art a precedent – besides recourse to abstraction – for liberation from the invasion of the photographic. (He returns in his seventh chapter to the matter of figurative representation versus abstraction.) It’s not quite clear what is and what is not a fact, or the fact. There’s a suspicion of circularity: that a fact may simply be what gets onto the surface of a Bacon painting.

Deleuze’s invocations of horror and violence (e.g. of the act of painting), and of all the stuff about meat and animals, is by now little more than conventional ‘G2’ culture-speak. ‘The common fact (again) of man and animal’ (21) is not a very profound fact. Meat is another ‘fact’ (23). As with much of the stuff about how figures in Bacon’s paintings relate to their enclosing contours and armatures, the frisson comes largely from a kind of forgetting that what’s being talked about is actually not ‘fact’, but a series of pictures. Nevertheless, ‘Bacon harbours within himself all the violence of Ireland, and the violence of Nazism, the violence of war. He passes through the horror of the crucifixions … or the head of meat, or the bloody suitcase’ (38). What is this but the stipulation of authenticity?

Deleuze has a thoroughly Greenbergian distaste for narrative and for the kinds of rhetorical devices that tend to go with it. But it’s not quite clear how this fits with his apt perception that a typical Bacon painting is ‘composed like a circus ring’ (1) – that is, presumably, is in certain respects deeply theatrical and cornily spectacular. Nor is it clear that the account he gives (in Chapter 2 of Bacon’s development of a ‘different relation to figuration or illustration than the painting of the past has’ would not apply equally well or better to more or less any mid- to late-twentieth-century painter worth bothering with.

Deleuze is constantly finding animation in Bacon’s work. This is not quite the kind of animation by means of which a static painted image is normally thought to acquire psychological vividness – usually through some sense of interaction with (or even alienation from) an imagined spectator. It is animation as in Tom and Jerry or Who Framed Roger Rabbit? We have bodies flattening themselves into mirrors, or flowing in and out of holes – in doors or sinks or hypodermic syringes, or even in the body itself (‘Bacon’s scream is the operation through which the entire body escapes through the mouth’ (16, and again on 28).)

Central to Deleuze’s argument is a strange and antique kind of antithesis between the Figure and ‘abstract form’ that connects to the earlier discussion of flesh and bones in Bacon’s painting. To be concerned with the wild movement of the body as against the sterilizing environment of abstract modernity is a hopelessly adolescent dualism. Deleuze acknowledges this but still seems a bit unsure about it. He describes Bacon as ‘refusing the double way of figurative painting and abstract painting’. Deleuze may use the term ‘figure’ in ways that are almost Greenbergian, but sometimes things get more ambiguous. Just when you think he’s proposing either abstract art (‘pure form’, whatever that is) and the figure as ways out of anecdote, illustration and narrative painting, he announces that the name of the figure is ‘sensation’. This is the neurosis and psycho(pathology) that forms a self-affirming stereotype of the creative individual.

We identify the body on the canvas not because we know it to be a representation of that object, but by virtue of its sustaining this sensation. Deleuze equates Cézanne’s admonition to himself to ‘paint the sensation’ with Bacon’s to ‘record the fact’ (35). He goes on to talk about a ‘difference of level, a plurality of constituting domains’ in the sensation, and also about its ‘material synthetic unity’ – which is not made up by ‘the represented object’ (37). It’s not immediately clear what this means. The issue is an important one for Deleuze’s text, however, since it bears on the question of how and why Bacon’s work may be said both to be complex in one’s experience of it – to operate at different ‘levels’ – and to offer something like compositional unity.

Deleuze does address the question of ‘what are these levels, and what makes up their sensing or sensed unity’ (37). He rejects two possible candidates for unifying agent. The first is the represented object. This is not to be confused with the Figure, which is the authentic source of the sensation. The second candidate is the painter himself, whose potential ambivalence of feeling might be thought to have generated some ambiguity or complexity in representation of the
body that is its object. This is ruled out by Deleuze on the grounds that ‘there are no feelings in Bacon: there are nothing but affects; that is, “sensations” and “instincts” according to the formula of naturalism’ (39). In other words, you can’t trace any complexity of sensation back into the psychology of the author; you must account for it in terms of the conventional language of pictorial representation. This is all very well and nicely Greenbergian (or it would be if Deleuze didn’t go on to talk about the appropriate sensation being the one ‘that fills the flesh at a particular moment of its descent’ (40)), but we do have to remember that it’s Francis Bacon we’re talking about and not, say, Matisse.

Deleuze finally gets round to his own preferred explanation for the complexity of sensation he finds in Bacon’s work. It comes over as a bit limp. His answer is that the figures are actually in motion, or in spasm, as a consequence of ‘the action of invisible forces on the body’ (41). He writes later that ‘the force of bodies in Bacon’ is ‘to put time inside the Figure’ (48). This explanation seems to require a descent from figure to body in order to justify a ‘level of sensation’ that was previously seen as dependent on the extraction of ‘the Figure from the figurative’. We’re back with narrative. As if in recognition of the inadequacy of this hypothesis, Deleuze offers another, which is perhaps less limp than desperate: synaesthesia. ‘The levels of sensation would really be domains of sensation that refer to the different sense organs … independently of the represented object they have in common … each time meat is represented, we touch it, smell it, eat it, weigh it’ (42).

Traversing these different domains, and serving to unify them, is the power of rhythm: ‘This rhythm runs through a painting just as it runs through a piece of music.’ It looks almost as though we’re back with significant form, with the decorative, and with their various correlates. No great harm in that, perhaps. But if this was really the destination you had in mind, would you choose Bacon as your vehicle? As Deleuze goes on, however, it becomes clear that his apparent formalism is of a more exotic cast than Bell’s or Greenberg’s. ‘This ground, this rhythmic unity of the senses, can be discovered only by going beyond the organism … the lived body is still a paltry thing in comparison with a more profound and almost unlivable Power [Puissance]’ (44). You might think that what’s being invoked here is a kind of transcendence, at the level of the Seriously Aesthetic. On the contrary, however, what Deleuze has in mind is Artaud’s ‘body without organs’ (44) – or without determinate organs at least. This is an imagined circumstance in which ‘every sensation implies a difference of level (of order, of domain), and in which a hypothetical ‘complete series’ includes all possible permutations of temporary and transitory organs: ‘What is a mouth at one level becomes an anus at another level’, and so forth (48). ‘This complete series constitutes the hysterical reality of the body.’ It transpires that the cartoon-like body escaping from itself through its own mouth (or through any of its other orifices) is a kind of Ur-hysteric.

IV

Deleuze himself poses the question that naturally arises. ‘What kind of hysteria are we speaking of here? Is it the hysteria of Bacon himself, or of the painting itself, or of painting in general?’ (It seems a long time ago since we posed the question, ‘Who dares to appoint himself art’s psychoanalyst?’ Will a schizo-analyst do any better?) Deleuze posits a ‘special relation’ between painting and hysteria, on the grounds that painting ‘directly attempts to release the presences beneath representation, beyond representation’ (51–2). Painting gives us lines and colours freed from the requirements of ‘organic representation’; in turn, in the presence of painting, the body without determinate organs is made all eyes.

‘The body without organs’ has come in for a certain amount of conceptual abuse. In spite of its name, this body isn’t exactly organless. While the ‘organism’ ‘is defined by determinate organs’, the body without organs ‘is [thus] defined by an indeterminate organ’. It is finally defined ‘by the temporary and provisional presence of determinate organs’ (48). This is a bit messy: does a constantly shifting set of determinate organs constitute an indeterminate organ?

It is at this point that Deleuze returns to the two alternative routes open to painting as he conceives it: to ‘conserve the figurative coordinates of organic representation’, or else to turn toward ‘abstract form’ and invent ‘a properly pictorial cerebrality’ (53). But each of these now appears as a means of avoiding the ‘fundamental hysteria’ which Deleuze has come to identify not simply with Bacon but with the ‘clinical essence’ of art – possibly of each art. Thus, just as painting makes us all eyes, so music makes us all ears, and so on. It is at this point that Proust finally makes his explicit appearance, quoted on the notion of a kind of ‘bodily combat’ in music, ‘in which there subsists not one scrap of inert matter refractory to the mind’.

Deleuze quotes Bacon saying that the smile he painted on a 1955 Pope came from a ‘model’ ‘who was very neurotic and almost hysterical’ (51). Around
Deleuze refers to Proust directly on nine occasions. The most striking reference occurs on page 67. It’s striking because, in spite of what John Russell has to say about Proust and involuntary memory, Deleuze states that ‘Proust’s world seems to have little in common with Bacon’s.’ ‘One still has the impression’, however, ‘that Russell is correct.’ Deleuze is discussing what he refers to as ‘coupled figures’, which, apparently, ‘Bacon never stopped painting’. He writes that there is ‘one Figure common to two bodies, or one “fact” common to two Figures’, more or less recapitulating what Proust has to say about the workings of la mémoire involontaire. In a blatant paraphrase of Proust, Deleuze writes that

It [involuntary memory] coupled together two sensations that existed at different levels of the body, and that seized each other like two wrestlers, the present sensation and the past sensation, in order to make something appear that was irreducible to either of them, irreducible to the past as well as the present: this Figure. (67)

Proust writes, in Time Regained: ‘Always, in resurrection of this sort, the distant location engendered around the common sensation would be meshed for a moment, like a wrestler, with the actual location.’

So it’s clear on Deleuze’s own analysis that the worlds of Bacon and Proust have something in common – a ‘coupling’ of two things (bodies or sensations) engenders the production of a ‘Figure’ (Proust might have called it an ‘essence’, ‘a bit of time in the pure state’). Is that where the affinity ends? Regarding Bacon’s triptychs, Deleuze observes: ‘The previous solution of coupling is of no use here, for the Figures are and remain separated in the triptych’ (69). In other words, since the ‘Figures’ in the triptychs ‘must remain separated and do not resonate’ it’s difficult to see how they can have a ‘common fact’. A Proust-style ‘coupling’ will not work. Perhaps this is why Deleuze says that Bacon’s and Proust’s worlds don’t have much in common. But if this is right, then he has ignored what he himself says about Proust’s work in his own Proust and Signs. Bacon’s ‘Figures’ are, like monads, radically separate. They are, however, brought together on or across the same surface – they are ‘Figures which remain separated, but they are no longer isolated; and the frame or borders of a painting no longer refer to the limitative unity of each, but to the distributive unity of the three’ (85). There is a ‘union that separates’ which is constituted by ‘an immense space–time’ (84, 85). There are a number of distinct similarities between this analysis and that of the structure of Proust’s novel in Proust and Signs. Deleuze suggests that it is mistaken to observe ‘the laws of continuity and unity’ in Proust’s work. Proust’s image of ‘vases clos’ occurs in Time Regained.
The gesture, the simplest action remains enclosed as if within a thousand sealed vessels each one of which would be filled with things of a completely different colour, odour and temperature; quite apart from the fact that these vessels, arranged across the full length of our years, during which we have never ceased to change, even if only our thoughts or our dreams, are placed at quite different heights and give us the sensation of extraordinarily varied atmospheres.7

In Deleuze's analysis, these suspended vessels are not simply the containers of essences hanging at different levels in time. Each of the narrator's love affairs, for example, is merely part of 'an infinity of successive loves' – one of an apparently infinite number of fragments or 'closed parts'.8 As the narrator suggests, the sheer multitude of fragments may serve to give a false 'impression of continuity', an 'illusion of unity'. So far, this would seem to be the kind of illusion that Georges Poulet, for example, entertains. Deleuze, however, rejects the idea that there is a 'direct means of communication' between the fragments of Proust's world. Instead, there is a system of 'transversals', which enable us to jump from one fragment or multiple to the next 'without ever reducing the multiple to the One'.

The important point is that these fragments are both (simultaneously) 'separate' and 'united'. They don't whisper in each other's ears. They shout across large valleys. Proust's closed parts cannot be 'reduced to the One', and Bacon's paintings don't 'tell a story' (69). What is the transversal of Bacon's 'Figures'? Deleuze suggests that the uniting–separating force is 'light', 'an immense space–time [that] unites all things, but only by introducing between them the distances of a Sahara, the centuries of an aeon' (85). So we might argue that time or 'space–time' is the transversal of Bacon's 'Figures'. While Deleuze's argument concerning Bacon's triptychs is reminiscent of what he says about Proust's novel, it also resembles what Poulet observes in Proustian Space. Like Deleuze's, Poulet's analysis hints at a monadic conception of the work. But, for Poulet (unlike Deleuze), as radically fragmented as Proust's work might be, these fragments are connected in so far as they are juxtaposed not only within the perceptive field of an individual consciousness but also across or along the same aesthetic surface or 'space' – 'on the same map'.9 The monadic fragments suggest a differentiated system, but the aesthetic surface implies that this is only a limited form of textual discontinuity. Indeed, it suggests a surface that does not work by gaps – a system that is replete. Deleuze rejects any relatively direct or continuous (undifferentiated) connection between the monadically separate parts: we can skim between the different regions, but we cannot bring them together to form a continuous, analogical system. The fragments are 'connected' in an indirect (i.e. 'transversal' manner), but there are gaps (empty spaces) between them. They are remote islands, but they are not, it would seem, united across the surface of a single map. Poulet's Proust is mixed up with Deleuze's own Proust to make Bacon.

So even – or perhaps especially – when Deleuze insists on the lack of affinity between Bacon and Proust, we can hear echoes, if not of Proust himself, then of Deleuze on Proust (or of Poulet on Proust). Deleuze says that to 'render time sensible in itself is a task common to the painter, the musician, and sometimes the writer' (64). It's difficult not to view this writer as Proust, or, moreover, as Deleuze's Proust. In creating a temporary and provisional presence, Bacon has, according to Deleuze, 'painted time' ('there is a great force of time in Bacon, time itself is being painted' (48)). The body without organs is Bacon's device for inserting 'time into the painting' (48). In Proust and Signs, Deleuze argues that the narrator's 'apprenticeship', during which he must learn to translate signs in order to access 'truth', moves through different levels of signs – 'worldly signs', 'sensuous signs', the 'signs of love', the 'signs of Art'. The subject learns to decipher them, and to discover different kinds of temporality that are associated with them.
The ‘worldly sign’ is a sign of ‘Time that Passes’; the ‘sign of love’ is a sign of ‘Time Wasted’; the ‘sensuous sign’ is a sign of ‘Time Recovered at the Heart of Lost Time’; the ‘sign of Art’ is a sign of an original, absolute Time – ‘a bit of time in the pure state’. Deleuze argues that Proust privileges the ‘signs of Art’ over all other types of sign. This is because they’re the signs of what he refers to in this book on Bacon as ‘the force of eternal time’ (63); what Proust refers to as ‘le Temps’ rather than ‘le temps’.

So works of art give us ‘a bit of time in the pure state’. It should be noted that Proust first uses this phrase in Time Regained in relation to an experience of involuntary memory (a ‘sensuous sign’) rather than in relation to a ‘sign of Art’. For Deleuze, however, ‘sensuous signs’ are inferior to the ‘signs of Art’. This is because while they’re signs of essences – of an original, absolute Time – the other signs ‘refer to or are associated with material things’. In Deleuze’s analysis, the experience of the madeleine, for example, is secondary. This is because the madeleine’s taste is still ‘materially connected to the essence it contains’ – the narrator’s childhood home in Combray.

The ‘sign of Art’ is made of a spiritual matter ‘so ductile and kneaded’ that it refracts the ‘pure light of essence’. The two most obvious examples of such precious and privileged ‘signs of Art’ in Proust’s work are, as Patrick ffrench notes, the ‘little patch of yellow wall’ in Vermeer’s View of Delft and the ‘little phrase’ in Vinteuil’s sonata.

The point is that an encounter with both the ‘signs of Art’ and some ‘sensuous signs’ (those associated with involuntary memory) allows us to experience an ‘essence’ or ‘Time’ which is ‘real without being actual, ideal without being abstract’. In the case of involuntary memory, we’re not dealing with the remembering of a moment that is past but was once present, but with the ‘very being of the past in itself’ – what Bergson called the virtual (in Proust’s words: ‘something which, common both to the past and the present, is much more essential than either of them’). Similarly, the ‘signs of Art’ bring together both past and present, the virtual and the actual, in a ‘small internal circuit’. The important difference between these things is that the ‘signs of Art’ express ‘Time’ (‘render time sensible in itself’) in a far more direct manner. There’s no need for memory or for the contingent materiality of a sensation in order for that expression to be realized. In a sense, ‘abstract form’ and the ‘Figure’ are the new terms in the Bacon book for ‘involuntary memory’ and the ‘signs of Art’ in Proust and Signs. The former (abstract form) is described, possibly for comic effect but certainly with comic effect, as ‘addressed to the head’ and ‘acts through the intermediariy of the brain, which is closer to the bone’ (34), whereas the Figure is ‘the sensible form related to a sensation which acts immediately upon the nervous system, which is of the flesh’ (34, our stress).

Having asserted that Bacon and Proust have little in common, Deleuze goes on (in the next paragraph) to talk about Proust and involuntary memory. That Proust = involuntary memory is revealing. His argument may be that there’s little affiliation between the two since Bacon deals in the ‘signs of Art’ and Proust with ‘sensuous signs’ (involuntary memory). But this is at least disingenuous: Bacon’s ‘Figures’ operate exactly like Proust’s ‘signs of Art’.

Deleuze’s text engulfs Bacon’s ‘closed and artificial world’ in another that is without material and political contingency, this notwithstanding his chapter ‘Every Painter Recapitulates the History of Painting in His or Her Own Way’. Here is Bacon in a purified, one might say sanctified, world – a fictional world in whose mimetic space Deleuze performs his ekphrasis. A world, in short, a bit like Proust’s. In this case, the semi-abstract synthesis is one that has only limited vulnerability to ‘naturalistic’ criticism, but it is similarly restricted in its power to defend itself against criticism that answers to the contingent mess outside.

It turns out that the virtual world that Deleuze creates is deaf to the laughter that we recommended as the best medicine for Bacon. But a voice located somewhere in the contingent mess of the practical, the political and the dialectically technical – a voice off – continues to interrupt.

VI

Bacon used certain theatrical devices to hold his isolated figures on his modernistic coloured grounds: the outline of a box in perspective, what Deleuze calls ‘parallelipeds of glass or ice’, railings around areas, oval or round shapes, armatures and pedestals. Deleuze does admit that these devices are ‘rather rudimentary’ – as they are. Bacon is not, like Cézanne, attempting the dogged pursuit of a unifying pictorial system. Instead, he is desperately looking for something to get him out of one the pitfalls of semi-abstract painting. Figures with paint all over their faces and bodies fall out of their flat modernist backgrounds and have to be stuck back on somehow. You need devices. Bacon’s parallelipeds create a geometry that prevents the figures from seeming to fall out of the
shallow modernist pictorial space onto the floor. The devices are tricksy.

Shallow pictorial spaces are common enough in portraits and in pictures of few or single figures both 'pre- and post-cubism' – and not only 'post-cubism' as Deleuze suggests. Bacon's 'space' is perhaps not so much that of the circus ring as of the chapel, the small theatre or the Punch and Judy show. In this world there are plenty of curtains, confessionals, altar rails and other quasi-liturgical (theatrical) decorations. By popular convention, the air may be heavy with incense and with dodgy sexuality. This is a world that was looked into by Rimbaud, Verlaine, Proust, Gide and the surrealists (in their literature more effectively than their art). By the time Bacon's career got going it was a source of the atmospherics of easy art.

According to Deleuze, painting 'has two possible ways of escaping the figurative: toward pure form, through abstraction, or toward the purely figural, through extraction and isolation ... to break with representation, to disrupt narration, to escape illustration [is to] isolate the figure' (3). To liberate the figure from the figurative is to isolate it against the ground. Now, Deleuze may be talking of bodies as figures or he may be talking more of figure–ground relationships. For the hysteric or the malingerer it's frequently hard to say which is which. But remember, in the curator-fixated world of art and art writing barely a moment has gone by without someone coming up with 'the body' or with 'new gentleness' – or something – as a solution to, or a salve for, the insecurities and scandals of abstraction.

Deleuze sees the parallelepiped theatre as somehow essential to Bacon's 'logic'. The voice off says that this is how Bacon gets to have puppets that he can adorn as he pleases with artistically conventional artifices of expressivity, emotional gravitas, and so on. The puppets that are created by the Punch-and-Judy show décor-cum-space are merely the hooks from which Bacon's style-shopping, his self-regarding anxiety in the face of the modern(ist), are hung. This is a theatre in which well-established artistic conventions can be mistaken for critical or violent or otherwise urgent and significant insertions of the figural. This is not what they really are. They are usually borrowed artistic swatches, patches of artifice that anticipate readymade responses. The little theatre enables the figure to stay in place the easy way. We might say that it is clearly an artifice that is not impinging upon by reality. Bacon sees no need, or can’t be bothered, to find a surprising angle or bit of the world – a table or a window or whatever à la Manet, Degas or Bonnard – but he makes a few smears, a few decorative gestures, and redeems them with the small conventions of 'perspective' to produce theatre and to allude to a grander and more auratic Weltanschauung of religious art (the Renaissance, curtained rooms, confessionals, ecclesiastical power, and so on). This is in fact the Weltanschauung – or rather the panoply – of the conjurer/illusionist. It is kitsch.

VII

In a descriptive passage in 'A Note on Color', Deleuze points out that the three fundamental elements of Bacon's painting are 'armature or structure, the figure and the contour' (144). These are lines that bind colour. So far we are hearing a description of almost any figurative painting. Deleuze then goes on to describe several paintings by Bacon (146–7). His argument seems to be little more than that colour has certain effects – pushing and pulling, flowing and so forth; that coloured pictures can sometimes be flattened by their chromatic effects, and that flat-ish colour is, well, the background somehow – or, rather, that it does not form the figure. In Bacon this is true. It is his broken tones that recall the modelling of a conservative figuration.

The chapter goes on in more or less formalistic vein. And then we return to the idea that the figures are trapped or confined in a quasi-decorative theatre, and that this decorative-cum-atmospheric (theatrical) scheme has a certain logic or autonomy. In its decorative autonomy, it invokes questions of taste. This is dealt with as follows: 'Even the most hideous of rugs ceases to be hideous when one comprehends it figurally' (153). That is, even what might be – we might imagine to be – an ugly rug depicted is not ugly in its depicted form, so long as it has a significant (formal?) role (figural role?) in the painting. This is surely no more than obvious and simultaneously dubious. It does not follow from our guess that there is a real rug that is in fact hideous and that serves as the prototype of the painted rug that is in fact hideous, that a rug-like patch of paint that may itself be hideous will not be hideous in the painting as a whole. How would such a thing be hideous? Or does he mean that 'mentioned' bad taste can be converted into something transcendent by a pictorial use? It's all (again) both obvious and simultaneously dubious. This is a dinner-table topic, familiar not only at the high table, but also in the sub-Platonic chitchat of petty-bourgeois taste.
VIII

For example, a mouth: it will be elongated, stretched from one side of the head to the other. For example, the head: part of it will be cleared away with a brush, broom, sponge or rag. This is what Bacon calls a ‘graph’ or a diagram. It is as if a Sahara, a zone of the Sahara, were suddenly inserted into the head. (100)

‘The diagram’ is a strange term of Bacon’s artspeak shorthand. It is cooked to death by Deleuze. It is what is somehow a ‘given’ – ‘what’s in your head’. Who ever painted (figuratively) nothing much? Bacon perhaps. Or is Deleuze saying nothing much – the art-school obvious about what it is like to do a certain kind of ‘abstract’-ish painting? You don’t think of it and then do it. You chuck paint, rub and dab. Clear things out of the way, distort and change. The diagram is ‘thus the operative set of asignifying and non-representative lines and zones’. This is simply false. They may be a set of marks that aren’t what Bacon finally ‘finds’ figurally, but there’s no reason to say that they are asignifying unless what Bacon finally makes is all they ever could be. In fact they ‘refer’ intentionally or not to many other bits of art. Art’s like that – unless it’s not and art has no art connections. But Deleuze doesn’t live in that postmodern world of art without history, as he repeatedly makes clear.

‘The paintbrush and the easel can express a general subordination of the hand’ (154). The hand presumably subordinated to the eye. The easel painting is worked at and looked at under certain conditions that are associated with the exercise of a certain control. But easels, and so on, do not make that inevitable. ‘Easel painting’ became a term for a certain sort of European art of a particular scale and pictoriality. (There is in Bacon a distinct vestige of that easel-painting tradition, notwithstanding his rather superficial borrowings of ‘attendants’ from the cupboard of American abstract art.) ‘But no painter has ever been satisfied with the paintbrush’ (154). How does Deleuze know? Is the technical necessity to use a palette knife something to do with dissatisfaction with the paintbrush? Deleuze goes on to say that the ‘values of the hand’ come in the form of the digital, the tactile, the manual proper and a stage on the journey to the Proustian-cum-tachiste haptic.

Yet to chuck paint without looking at the canvas, for example, does not make the optical come to bits, even if the viewer is well aware of the ‘fact’. One has used a system to produce an optical or visually recoverable effect. But how can the insubordination of the hand (e.g. as a consequence of poor hand–eye coordination or of avant-garde gesturalism), which presumably results in unintentional marks, dismantle the optical except in making a rather flaccid and Maurice Denis-ish point to the effect that painters usually do their work by hand. (Where do paintings by mouth fit it?) How does this render the painting, as it were, ‘purely’ manual? When Bacon sketches and arts about, is that what he is (was) doing? Messing up, smearing, and so on, are all recognized techniques. When Fantin-Latour scrapes the painted shadows and flower stems in order to have the little smears, smoothings and darkenings ‘reconstruct’ a glass vase and its contents, he is, no doubt, engaged in a relaxed insubordination of the hand. It seems that Deleuze has constructed some rather precious categories, smelling strongly of rue de Seine epochalism, to try to account for the varieties of homeless representation that occur in Bacon’s work. We introduced Fantin-Latour perhaps unwisely. His is not homeless representation, and there’s plenty of his work in Paris. Deleuze’s hermetic discourse invokes the pompous spectacle of post-World War II French abstraction as presided over by Michaux’s mescalin drawings and Mathieu’s aviator outfits.

Bacon saw the possibilities in the semi-abstract. Well, shouldn’t we all? Except that this is the abstract that didn’t worry the upper classes. Deleuze’s analysis is quite sophisticated, but really it’s a fancy way of saying that Bacon thought that abstraction was sort of unamenable to the grand ‘human’ manner. Both Bacon and Deleuze prefer Michaux to Pollock. In this Bacon didn’t understand, and neither does Deleuze, that the dialectical technicality of non-French abstract painting confronts and rejects the grand manner. Bacon nevertheless mined it promiscuously for decorative effects.

To those who attended art school in the early 1960s, there is an eerie ring to Deleuze’s insistence on Bacon’s diagram as the key to understanding the artist technically. In those days the straight conservatives, the real conservatives, dwelt stolidly in the nineteenth century or put their faith in dot-and-carry. As authenticity developed a sort of pedagogy, youngish or trendy-ish ‘teachers’ emerged whose mission-in-smug-self-importance was founded on humiliation: torture the life model and ‘jolt the students out of their complacency’. ‘Make a mark’, ‘make another mark’ (‘smudge it, smear it’, etc.). What does it do to what you (can) see? We were mere inches from ‘significant form’ but this was significant form with psychological extras. The life class was beset by such crap. Students were often confused by the smeary semi-abstract biomorphic figural results. It is possible that Deleuze has
brought this shifty conservativism to its theoretical – we had better say literary – apotheosis.

It’s not that Deleuze is always wrong about painting, rather that he trusts the interpretations that he, qua philosopher, makes of the arch and self-serving artspeak of his subject and of those in his milieu. One tries to unpack, or rather to puncture the vessel – to recover something practical rather than aesthetic, artistic and embedded. One longs for a sceptical voice, a lowering of the tone. Having set the scene theoretically – or in general – Deleuze sort of gets to Bacon and a certain clarity. Bacon paints a figure or a figurative form more or less conventionally. What is called the ‘law of the diagram’ ‘intervenes and scrambles it’. It might be more natural to say that Bacon messes the figure up in an artistic sort of way, with smears and patches that come manually. What can we make of this emphasis on the manual or the diagram? One paints a figure and smears it. In what sense is this smearing and decorating insubordinate to the eye? It’s the eye that says that’s enough, that’s good, and so on. In Bacon, this was a self-replicating style, a theatre of borrowed decorative abstraction – or rather abstraction trivialized so as to adhere semi-abstractly to the figure.

These possibilities of the figural seen in paint are usually far from surprising (which may not matter), but they are also not simply found in insubordinate patches and traits. They are frequently repeated Baconish things, moments of pointless knowingness. And Bacon is not so much worthy of prolonged analysis of his painting habits as trapped in the biomorphic conventions of late and politically unmotivated surrealism, decorated from time to time with a few updatings from recent abstract painting.

Deleuze quotes the song ‘Crosseyed and Painless’ from the Talking Heads album Remain in Light. ‘I’m changing my shape, I feel like an accident’ (158). Do Bacon’s effects look accidental? The painter paints, and various figures – or rather pictorial possibilities – are suggested as he proceeds. How come the accidents so consistently produce such arch theatre, such clever little crowd-pleasers? Deleuze has Bacon thinking of a formula – a trait (brush)stroke formula or colour patch formula – ‘capable of expressing the diagram’. He’s attributing the wrong question to Bacon. He had a formula that ensured that he did paintings that do the job that Bacon always did.

IX

Chapter 17, ‘The Eye and the Hand’, is an attempt to map further the exchanges and tensions between the manual and the visual into Bacon’s work. We first have to accept that there is something in Deleuze’s purified tachisme. One can think of the literal facts about painting in at least two ways: line and colour or brushstroke (or just stroke) and colour patch. Deleuze obliquely acknowledges that a line is, of course, a stroke, but we might want to emphasize the action of the artist in calling it a stroke. So far, so good. Second, Deleuze argues that paintings can, as it were, show ‘action’ that somehow overwhelms or makes what the artist did more important than what the artist sees (or we see). (Soulages, Mathieu?) The haptic relation of hand and eye is one where the eye touches or seems to touch what it sees. Is the haptic relation indeed exemplified in a convexity of objects: the reaching out to the eye of the surfaces of things à la Proust? None of this is clear.

The best we can do to interpret Deleuze constructively is suggest that eye and hand make no distinction between themselves. As art approaches a modern condition of hapticity, the supposed ‘violence’ of (some) painting, for example, would allow for no considered ruling by either organ in the act of painting. But how fruitful is this? It seems to have far more to do with the hopeless and unwittingly funny performance values (dramas) of Mathieu and Michaux and even Soulages, who produced academic, abstract art (academic because figural and gestural and scared of wallpaper), than it does with the wider field of abstract painting. Pollock’s works came ‘out of’ a sort of action, but what they speak of are questions that painting had to answer. They are good, when they are good, because it matters than it does with the wider field of abstract painting.

Pollock’s works came ‘out of’ a sort of action, but what they speak of are questions that painting had to answer. They are good, when they are good, because it matters that we are intrigued as to how they are made, but our grasp of them does not replay a film in which Pollock pirouettes. They tell us that materiality, or literalness, and pictoriality – as meaning or content, including human content – are connected and disconnected in ways that continue to puzzle us. What doesn’t worry us is that there is imposture in Pollock. (As Greenberg said, ‘Pollock was full of shit just like everyone else.’) The safety of the academically-figural-plus-mess-as-provocation has long been abandoned.)

Insisting on the glories of the semi-abstract (the Bacon model range), Deleuze notes approvingly that the ‘diagram’, the chapter of smudges, smears and accidents, pictures or pictorial fragments suggested by the hand (the paint, etc.), does not cover the whole painting – or, as he puts it, ‘it must remain localized in space and time, it must not cover the entire painting’. If it did not remain localized, the results would be ‘sloppy’. Well, it wouldn’t be a Bacon-ish thing – a theatrical figure or a nameless something on a
shallow stage. In short, it wouldn’t be the conserva-
tive exercise that Bacon's painting is. One is struck,
over and over again, by the banal conventionality
not only of the stuff under analysis, but also of the
analysis itself, however apparently sophisticated. We
might say that Deleuze gives it away on the last page.
It’s Michelangelo who ‘inspires’ Bacon to put bodies
in relation with forces. The pictorial fact in its pure
state, distortion for all kinds of emotional effect, the
autonomy of the artwork, and so on, were all born in
mannerism. Of course. What Deleuze cannot account
for, or at least doesn’t enlighten us about, is the
fact that the legacy of mannerism has gone through
many transformations, redescriptions and reinventions.
Bacon merely invokes Michelangelo (or, guess who:
Velázquez, Van Gogh) by producing figures that, to
the susceptible, look like figures by Michelangelo or
hitch a ride on paintings by Velázquez. (It has to be
said that he treated Van Gogh better.)

Deleuze’s way with the ‘diagram’ has many features
that literalize a virtual – that is, fictional – situation
in Proust’s Sodome et Gomorrhe. The Guermantes’
fountain starts as a literal fountain, becomes a sign of
art (a Hubert Robert picture of a fountain) that breaks
up into jagged Cubistic pieces, only to return to its
literal (fictional) form as a thing that wets a snobby
onlooker. Deleuze’s book is about Bacon, but Proust’s
text is folded in its pages. Its author, the apostle of
the rhizomous many, is thus perhaps revealed as an
apostle of the ‘essential’ and ‘the pure’.

X

Elegantly argued and ‘authoritative’ as Deleuze’s
thesis may be, in so far as it touches on Bacon it is an
apology for a particular form of what used to be called
semi-abstract art. It can be acknowledged that the

Notes

2. Both quotations from Warwick Anderson, ‘Excremental


7. Proust, *À la recherche*, vol. 4, pp. 448–9

8. Ibid., p. 152.


10. See Deleuze, *Proust et les signes*, p. 34.


12. Ibid.

13. Deleuze, cited by ffrench in ibid. (See Deleuze, *Proust et les signes*, p. 60.)

14. See ibid., p. 162.


16. Ibid., p. 450.

17. ffrench, “‘Time in the Pure State’”, p. 165.