

Francis Bacon and Gilles Deleuze: A Question of Sensation

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Introduction

In Gilles Deleuze's book *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* the question of sensation is dealt with as a proper philosophical problem. Deleuze saw something particular that needed to be examined further. He saw different levels, or rather areas, of Bacon's paintings that corresponded to the amalgamation of sensation as a directional force upon the spectator. To elaborate on sensation I will use Bacon's *Pope Innocentius* as a nodal point for four notions that Deleuze discusses; 'The Figure', 'The Ring', 'The Diagram' and 'The Head'. These notions will allow me to discuss the philosophical interpretation made by Deleuze and pave way for what I will argue is one of the key points in Bacon's art – **the organic cavity (mouth, ear, nose, anus) as a localization of illness and an escape out of the body.**

I. The Figure – Story or Abstraction?

We see a Figure sitting, on a chair, within a limited space. The Figure has a head, a torso, arms but no visible legs. It seems as if he is almost dissolving in front of us by a vertical force streaming upwards. Pieces of his clothes and face are smudged and could be seen as pieces 'lifting' from his body or as a curtain he is sitting behind which obscures the spectators view. Is Bacon telling us a story (specific narrative) or is the Figure just a spatial object which makes up one part of the whole composition?

The phrase "painting has neither a model to represent nor a story to narrate" put forward by Deleuze on the Figure might seem puzzling (6). Indeed, painting usually seems to narrate something or at least have some connection of narration when figures appear on the canvas. Especially in classical painting where the subject-matter of a

painting was usually mythological or religious. The figures(s) on the canvas either had a relationship (message) towards the spectator or a relation with other figures appearing alongside it. Bacon also pointed out that “he is trying to avoid the figurative (Deleuze, 6).” It begs the question of how to escape the figurative. Deleuze sees two options; the first is to strive for pure form, i.e. abstraction or, secondly, to strive for the purely figural (Deleuze, 6). If one opts for abstraction the Figure will no longer be a Figure in the sense that it could be mistaken for a narrative. It would simply be an abstract entity of something that once was a Figure (from a model or from an image in the mind of the painter). The opposite effect of abstraction would be seen in the purely figural. By extracting the role of the Figure, giving it an isolated place of its own it is thus enhanced in its own right as part of the painting with a spatial relation to the other areas in the painting but without a direct correlation with them. Bacon clearly chooses the second alternative. What we see is a Figure in its own right without any clear narrative thus rendering the painting into the category of abstraction but only an abstraction *away from* the narrative. This makes Bacon’s Figure fit into neither a narration nor an object alongside the rest of the composition but rather as something that fills the space, with a certain isolation, that gives the painting a sensation of ‘direct vagueness’.

II. The Ring – Delineation of the Figure

What then is the other space that occupies the canvas besides the Figure? This question concerns what Deleuze calls the “ring” or “the round area”. We have already mentioned that in order for the Figure to be painted in the manner of the figural it needs to be isolated. In Pope Innocentius the Figure is *isolated* via the yellow circular

pattern surrounding his chair. If we would imagine that the circular pattern would not be there we would have solely a vertical action in the painting and the Figure would seem to ‘float’ in the left-center on the canvas. Indeed we can already get a sensation of this if one looks at the white dress of the Figure which seems to be floating above or outside of the ring. Moreover, the ring not only isolates the Figure but also adds a horizontal plane to the whole canvas and thus balances the composition while simultaneously giving the sensation of the Figure being positioned in the center. Even his chair, which is painted in the same yellow, seems to be a part of the ring by a vertical detour. Deleuze describes this area as a *lieux* in the sense that it resembles a circus-ring or an amphitheater (5).

If the Figure would not be part of a certain *lieux* it would look static – which in turn would enhance, instead of diminish, the narrative character of the Figure. The following passage highlights this phenomena; “[t]he body image is never static; there are always tendencies which threaten to disrupt or dissolve it. If we close our eyes and remain as motionless as possible, our bodies seem to slip away, to fade into nothingness [...] construction of the boundaries of the body image is based upon obstruction encountered from those objects which “object” to being included within it” (Lipman, 69). This is the function of the ring as a *lieux*, it positions the Figure within a context that enables it to breath, not being sure if it is inside, outside, above or under the ring and at the same time the ring exerts the effect upon the Figure as something that obstructs its presence, i.e. the ring is not a part of the figure and the “objection” it makes towards it is what makes the Figure filled with motion.

III. Diagram – The Occupied Canvas

How can the Figure and the ring appear on the canvas in the way it has been done in Pope Innocentius? It is clear that when one looks at the painting we do not see two isolated areas (the figure and the ring) but that they blend together and create a unified composition. In order to get there the painter needs to take use of different ‘diagrams’. Deleuze speaks of the digital and analog diagram in relation to two prominent styles that was practiced during Bacon’s working period; expressionism and abstract expressionism. But first one needs to know *why* a diagram is necessary in the first place.

Before modern art began to find its shape by the end of the 19th century artists had taken use of preparatory sketches. The sketches would provide comfort for the artist facing his canvas and easel. When later painters (modernist artists) started to paint they found that they could paint directly on the canvas, without any preparatory sketches. As time went by, approximately by the middle of the 20th century, artists even abandoned the easel in favor of the ground (Deleuze, 87). Yet preparation is always a given for the painter to ‘break-through’ on the canvas. Deleuze writes that “[w]e do not listen closely enough to what painters have to say. They say that the painter is *already* in the canvas, where he or she encounters all the figurative and probabilistic givens that occupy and pre-occupy the canvas (81).” Hence there is a preparatory act that consists of clearing out the *already* occupied space that the painter has projected upon the canvas. The canvas is never a virgin canvas but always tainted by an infinity of possibilities that needs to be ‘wiped out’ – a primordial chaos that precedes the ordered creation. It is in this sense that we see all the wipes, brushes and strokes that appear in Bacon’s paintings, these are the preparatory steps in order to free the space from any givens and enable a pure canvas where, eventually, the Figure and its surroundings can emerge.

So, how can these diagrams appear? In order to *see* the diagram that Bacon is committed to, Deleuze goes through the two orders of diagrams mentioned. The first being the ‘digital’ diagram used by abstract painters. Here the diagram ‘leaps over the chaos’ and forms a ‘minimalistic’ representation that is a purely cerebral sensation (84). By using lines and forms purely, without any confused states, the abstract painter comes close to a system of sensation analogous to the computer. It is an input of digits (outlines, contour...) and out comes a field that can be ‘decoded’ by the viewer. In other words the abstract painter puts the eye above the hand (thinking above feeling). The space created is one of pure ‘spirituality’ where the corporeal is no longer granted entrance to its mysteries (85). The other side of the spectrum is the diagram of the abstract expressionist – in these paintings the canvas is filled with paint, lines, strokes, thick textures – it is incomprehensible for the eye but gives repercussions throughout the body. It is an analog diagram. The canvas is given as a sacrifice to the chaos of the painter and creates a ‘catastrophe’. Nothing in the painting is made clear, outlined, and all we can see (get the sensation of) is the work of the *hand*.

Taking these two examples and looking at Bacon it is clear to see that he admits to neither. In *Pope Innocentius* we do not see a purely optical space which can only be understood by the cerebral neither do we see a ‘catastrophe’ of paint without any contours. Moreover, what we do see very clearly is the Figure in the middle of the painting. He is smudged, dissolved, yet very defined. For Bacon the diagram is only used as a ‘utility’ that gives way for the ‘suggestive’ in the painting (83). Hence the act of pre-painting (blotches, scratches, sponges...) is the make-way for the Figure to appear more clear and distinct.

An analogy can be made with sonority in music – Bacon’s diagram becomes in painting that which in music constitutes the sonority. The following passage crystallizes this movement; “[a] child in the dark, gripped with fear, comforts himself by singing under his breath. He walks and halts on his song. Lost, he takes shelter, or orients himself with his little song as best he can. The song is like a rough sketch of calming and stabilizing, calm and stable, center in the heart of chaos. Perhaps the child skips as he sings, hastens or slows his pace. But the song is already itself a skip: it jumps from chaos to the beginning of order in chaos and is in danger of breaking apart at any moment (Deleuze and Guattari, 343).” The child is the painter who in fear of the ‘occupied’ canvas needs to calm himself with the comfort of the diagram. The diagram as such does not enable a given order but helps the painter to deal with the chaos in his mind. He follows the diagram through scratches, rips, blots on the canvas giving way for a ‘beginning of order’. Yet, in the end, the diagram is in itself always on the breaking point of disappearing – this is the movement of the diagram. It is not the picture in itself just as sonority is not the music in itself – it is merely a thread that follows throughout the process of creation which makes possible the emerging of the elements which will constitute the painting (the Figure, the ring etc...).

IV. Hysteria: The Head

“As a portraitist, Bacon is a painter of heads, not faces, and does not even have a face. It does have a head, because the head is an integral part of the body (Deleuze, 19).” This view on the head as the main focus of Bacon instead of the face is clearly seen in Pope Innocentius. What we have before us is not a clearly discernible face with accurate traits (eyes, mouth, nose) but a disorganized image placed upon the head.

What is more visible is the zone of darkness coming out of the Pope's mouth with his white little teeth protruding from the edges of his lips. His eyes are 'in the right place' but somewhat misbalanced – they do not lie on a straight horizontal line - the right eye is above the left one.

The difference between the face and the head is its material. Face is meat, head is bone (Deleuze, 20). The 'lifting' of the face is what is seen. It is as if pieces of the face (and the body) are being detached from its anatomical structure – the skeleton. What remains is a head with a face painted upon it. This movement is connected to the process of creating a diagram. We saw that there needs to be a moment of chaos before the Figure can emerge on the canvas. What this chaos ultimately creates in the painter is a sensation of the hysterical. For the painter the hysterical takes place in the diagram – not knowing where to go or where he will end up (Deleuze, 84). But this is only on one level, a personal level. When completing the Figure and its parts (meat and bone) the Figure in itself can create a state of *hysteria* that is *felt* by the spectator. It is a level of sensation belonging to the Other. What is it then in the meat (which is the face) that gives such a sense of *hysteria*. Deleuze coins the expression *becoming-animal* as the pivotal movement we are being shown. The head/face is not merely a portrait of something; it bears a resemblance to something. It can be a human or an animal – in any case they are both connected to meat. We eat meat, in the butcher shop we see the dead carcasses lying before us – might it not just as well be us hanging there (Deleuze, 22)? Another aspect could be that the thing we are painting makes a resemblance in us. It is not uncommon that we find persons resembling an animal; it could be a nose, a way of speech, a 'feeling', that makes us think of a person in animalistic terms. When being asked on how he approaches portraits Bacon answered: "when you are painting somebody, you know that you are, of course, trying

to get near not only to their appearance but also to the way they have affected you, because every shape has an implication (Dawson, 51).” The face reveals itself to the painter as he goes by and he has to put his own affections into that process.

Coming back to the hole in the face – the mouth. It has two opposite movements – outwards and inwards. The mouth wants to suck the outside in but it also uses the mouth as a vanishing point for the body to escape through. “It is no longer a particular organ, but the hole through which the entire body escapes, and from which the flesh descends [...] (Deleuze, 24).

V. A Misinterpreted Violence

This brings us to the final point – the escape from the body as mentioned above. Firstly, Bacons’ paintings are usually described as ‘violent’ as to which he replied “[i] don’t find it at all violent myself (Finke, 124)”. The escape of bodies and the cruelty it entails are seen with the same intensity in another artist, Antonin Artaud. Jerzy Grotowski wrote on the subject; “Society couldn’t allow Artaud to be ill in a different way [...] Artaud defined his illness remarkably ... ‘ I am not entirely myself’ (Grotowski, 123). Bacon retained his sanity through his paintings while Artaud was forced to a mental asylum – all because he was misunderstood. Secondly, the escape through the body is now (in some circles) seen as an effective way of relieving physical illness. When we experience pain we usually intensify the pain (scratch an eczema, hold our head tightly in headache etc...) and yet we want to take a pill to relieve the pain (Mindell, 2). Our bodies seem to spontaneously react towards pain by wanting to ‘escape’ it from one or multiple organs (usually through the origin of pain). Studies by Dr. Mindell have shown that by amplifying the pain and letting it

‘exit’ through one part of the body the pain can be relieved and the patient comes to know the cause of the illness (Mindell, 2002).

When relating this back to the art of Bacon and Deleuzes’ notion of the body wanting to escape through a hole, the emphasis should *not* be on the terror or cruelty of what it *looks* like but to find an experiential resonance of what it *feels* like. Artaud was given the pill of doctors and was not allowed to escape through his body¹. Bacon was on the other hand allowed to escape through his paintings (the diagram) and the spectators of his paintings can escape through the sensation the works of art exert upon them.

Up until now we have discussed The Figure, The Ring, The Diagram and The Head which allowed for an interpretation of Bacon’s art through sensation itself. We started out by going from the detailed to the contour to the composition and then came to the most detailed aspect – an escape through the body itself. There are multiple layers that Bacon’s paintings unfold and they all deserve our attention, unfortunately I cannot go into all of them here. I will, however, end with an encouragement to take a considerable amount of time to really absorb the sensation of any painting placed before you. As Tom Conley wrote in the afterword to *The Logic of Sensation*: [a] logic of sensation depends, it is implied, on an extended and extensive relation afforded by constant contact, first and foremost, with the paintings, seen, touched, smelled, and felt over a long duration of time (132).”

¹ According to Grotowski Artaud never got the chance to fully develop his theories because he was obstructed by society and by himself. This led to a hollow ‘theater of cruelty’ since there is no properly developed practice for the actors to follow.

Works Cited

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