

'The Elusive Surface'

Paper given at *Space, Time and the Image* Symposium, APT Gallery, London, May 2010

This paper is a work in progress; an investigation that began with an increasing awareness, through making my own paintings, of the 'surface' as a place where things happen in painting. In particular this painting, *A Dutch Affair*, which began to make sense when something seemed to get figured through the surface; when it became a sort of sensitised plane where nuances in the application of paint began to make a difference rather than drawing or colour per se. I have borrowed this simple technique from Juan Usle but it's not the technique that is important per se, for I've used it many times before. I don't usually write about my own work but for this symposium I decided to think about a question that came directly from my studio experience and see where it took me. On a recent trip to the National Gallery I became reacquainted with Ruben's *Judgment of Paris*. 1632-1635 and was reminded how the red cloak has always held great fascination for me.

So, I started this piece of research wondering whether it would be possible to say something about an awareness of 'surface' generated by my own paintings in relation to this fascination with Ruben's painting; as if contemporary painting could repeat something from the past even though it looks very different. I was not interested in investigating 'surface' as discourse but, at least to begin with, as a matter of perception. Of course, Greenberg wrote about Modernism's reversal of the surface/illusion dialectic in his essay of 1954 'Abstract, Representational, and so Forth' and, as we know, for him the surface (or at least its flatness) became the locus of paintings' battle for self-definition and thus cultural survival. However, my aim is not to offer a critique of this Modernist classic or to make generalisations about the predicaments of contemporary painting. Instead, the aim is to find out if it is possible to think about the nature of this repetition, not as the repetition of an identity or set of terms produced at historically specific moments; but the repetition of *a relation*.

However, the difficulty comes in being able to say something about this relation when its terms are not clear. My initial thought was that this could be investigated as a relation between image and surface, so that although the terms are not repeated (image, technique etc.) a relation between them might be. From the outset, however, it seems that the experience of the 'surface' is in itself a problematic idea, for as soon as I say 'surface' I realise that I am not talking really about the literal physical plane, nor its flatness as a form. It would be more correct, perhaps, to describe this as an encounter with processes of formation and deformation; the cause of which remains elusive. The pleasure of looking at the painting can be understood to be 'caused' by my admiration for Ruben's mimetic skill and his ability to render, in paint, the sensuous qualities of the cloth, which is wholly convincing.

The sensation of 'surface' (or is it 'materiality'?) is an involuntary response, however, that happens alongside this recognition; something I'm aware of but can't comprehend but I also know that I never will. It is not as if, if I knew more or had greater experience (or wrote a brilliant paper) I would be able to solve the puzzle of what *causes* it; *it is* as if what is incomprehensible is located in the work itself and not in some external solution. This sensation is not, however, synonymous with aesthetic satisfaction – it is too 'problematic' for that. The sense of incomprehensibility that accompanies the pleasure of the image could be described an encounter with what Deleuze would call 'signs'. These are not linguistic signs, not strictly speaking an objects of perception, but an encounter with something that 'forces us to think', and, significantly for this discussion, something that he also describes as that which can *only* be felt. Deleuze contrasts this with an object of recognition which can be felt, but also can be remembered, imagined, conceived and so on and. Accordingly, the recognisable object is one upon which all the faculties agree in the formation of common sense, whereas the 'sign' exercises the faculty of sensibility without the limit of conceptual recognition.

The idea that this encounter both 'forces us to think' and can *only* be felt is articulated by the Deleuze scholar Keith Ansell-Pearson as the creation of the 'radically new' which he describes not as a matter of judgment but of a new kind of thinking that 'springs from intuition'. It is distinguished from what can be recognised by the intellect as new (fashion, for example) which is satisfying because within the new there is the security of recognising the old. Instead, the 'radically new' elicits a new kind of thinking from within an initial incomprehensibility, not an inability to comprehend because of a lack of understanding or knowledge but in the more affirmative sense of an incomprehensibility that is an encounter with what cannot be grasped from the point of view of recognition and common sense<sup>1</sup>. I quote;

...although [the radically new] strikes us initially as obscure we discover, by undergoing a new kind of thinking, that it also 'dissipates' obscurities, and problems which seem to us insuperable, dissolve either by disappearing or by presenting themselves to us in a different manner.<sup>2</sup>

The creation of the 'radically new' is clearly not a reassembling of existing elements. It raises a problem for interpretation because it is not an object that can be experienced empirically in the conscious act of conceptual recognition and judged accordingly. What kind of discourse is possible in relation to something which has no identity? How can discourse remain close to the material specificity of the work and yet not operate in a purely theoretical domain. From a painter's point of

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of this idea refer to Daniel Smith's essay 'Deleuze's Theory of Sensation: Overcoming the Kantian Duality' in *A Deleuze Reader*, ed Paul Patton (Oxford, 1996)

<sup>2</sup> Keith Ansell Pearson, *Germinal Life*, (London, 1999), p32

view it would be ideal if it were possible to write from the point of view of painting itself as an alternative to writing from the painter's point of view or to satisfy the interests of interpretation and academia. Isn't this what the 'radically new' implies? The experience of incomprehensibility, which 'elicits a new kind of thinking', does not describe the analysis of a static form but focuses on the creation of something new; a form of life. Any engagement with this life must discover how to maintain that life in a new context; another form of life; a painting, a discussion, a piece of writing and so on.

With this in mind I am going to borrow a model of interpretation from biological science and the theories of Maturana and Varela, who developed the concept of "autopoiesis" (or self-production) as a theoretical framework that could offer a logical method of distinguishing living entities from non living ones. This method of selection does not begin with the observable formal characteristics of the organism because that would be to begin with the fully formed entity, rather they develop a method capable of analysing the genesis of that entity as a *living form*; from its point of view. *A theoretical framework, in other words, that is not based on empirical observation but on logic.* There is no time here to give an adequate account of autopoiesis but its significance for this discussion is that its method requires that the living organism be understood in relation to its environment and, in particular, how the organism evolves. Contrary to a Darwinian perspective, in which the organism adapts to a pre-given, fixed and objective environment, the if we follow the logic of autopoiesis the genesis of a new species is also the creation of a *new form of sensing the world*. It follows that this new species is not an adaptation to a given environment but simultaneously the creation of a new environment. For example, a wasp and an orchid may inhabit the same spatial region but their genesis actually creates two different environments according to what is important or significant to each species. The autopoietic model aims to examine a species from the point of view of the species itself and thereby resists the authority of Darwin's transcendental position which applies the logic of competition and telenomy to all species.

But how is it possible to examine a species (or by extrapolation a painting) from the point of view of that species? To re-iterate, the attempt to define a system *as* autopoietic cannot rest on the observation of formal structures, for that would be to serve the interests of the observer and not to define the system from the point of view of the system itself. Rather the living system is defined in terms of a dynamic unity or 'network of relations' which the authors call its *organisation* and which produces the components of the system. According to this theory this organization is what defines the stability of a living being and not its structure or particular components. These (virtual) dynamic

processes actualise the living system as a machine; a machine with no other purpose other than to “create itself”.

The idea that a work of art is an autopoietic system is not to make an analogy or to understand the artwork metaphorically. Although a static form, painting is a temporal phenomenon in so far as it is only the act of judgement by the fixed and static subject that turns the life of aesthetic creation into a representation by comparing it to a prior reality in relation to which it will always be measured as an inferior copy. Understood as a form of life, the work of art is also the creation of a new way of sensing the world; it creates a new environment which is, in effect, a dynamic relation to the outside. This means that rather than producing a fixed and static meaning, to write from the point of view of painting itself is also to bring something new into existence. Just as autopoiesis seeks out the virtual, invisible ‘organisation’ which generates the visible form of the organism, its interactions and so on, our analysis of the *Judgement of Paris* (or more precisely the genetic conditions of its sensation) must also seek out something of its invisible organisation. Once again we reach the methodological problem of how to develop an analysis of the internal workings of the painting which is based on logic rather than observation.

At the risk of deferring the problem again, I am going to extend my use of biology and suggest that the painting’s invisible organisation produces a relation to the outside that is mimetic and not representational. Whereas representation implies comparison and judgment, mimicry begins at the same place (with appearance) but its underlying function is not to copy a pre-existing model. I am referring specifically to the French Surrealist writer Roger Caillois’ understanding of mimicry in his essay ‘Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia’. Writing in 1935 he argues against the accepted opinion that mimicry is a defence mechanism. Rather he suggests that it is a disordering of spatial perception so that what breaks down is the boundary between organism and environment. He gives various examples of organisms which mimic the milieu in which they live so that the organism is unable to maintain a distinction between self and environment. In short he argues that mimesis is the dissolution of inside and outside, organism and environment. So that from the organisms point of view:

“The individual breaks the boundary of his skin and occupies the other side of his senses. He tries to look at himself from any point whatever of space. He feels himself becoming space...He is similar, not similar to something, but just *similar*. And he invents spaces of which he is ‘the convulsive possession.’” (quoted in Bois and Krauss, p75)

How might this model of understanding appearance help us to say something about how Rubens painting operates? It is important to note that we are not talking about the artist’s act of mimicry but, from the point of view of the painting itself, as a form of life, the painting self-produces its own

mimesis. In other words the invisible organisation of the painting produces its appearance that is not representational (a copy of a prior model) but it is mimetic. It is a matter of how we think about the appearance of the painting as the production of similarity - not to compare the image with what we could have seen before, but similarity itself. It is worth re-iterating that this is not *our experience* of similarity because that would be to return to the representational hypothesis, rather this is 'similarity' in principle.

To make this more convincing we need to determine what boundary the mimetic painting breaks down? To follow the logic of Caillois' notion of mimicry it is the boundary between organism and environment; the inside and the outside of the painting. It is not possible to use these terms as if they referred to the empirical experience of the painting because, logically, the dissolution of the boundary puts them out of reach. In other words the inside and the outside become purely theoretical terms; in this sense the dissolution of the boundary is a dynamic relation which forms part of the virtual organisation of the work as an autopoietic entity. This idea is counter-intuitive, of course, for there is still bounded object with a pictorial inside and the space outside in which we stand. However, if this painting, is a form of life, an autopoietic entity, it is also the creation of a new way of sensing the world and the differentiation of a new environment. In other words the 'outside' is not a given; it's not essentially spatial or social even for it does not pre-exist the work.

At the beginning I suggested that my aim was to research the idea that contemporary painting repeats a relation rather than a set of terms. So I will begin by exploring the relation between 'narrative' and 'materiality', despite my instinct to play down the fictional narrative of the painting and focus on other more formal things. By narrative I don't simply mean the narrative of figurative painting but the narrative of any conscious decision-making process, which would include abstract painting. In this case, however, Rubens narrative is The Judgment of Paris. Here we have the scene depicting Paris in the process of judging which of the goddesses Hera, Athena or Aphrodite (Roman name = Venus) was most beautiful and who would consequently receive the golden apple. Over Hera, who offered the power of kingship, and Athena, who offered wisdom, Paris is persuaded to choose Aphrodite in return for the love of the world's most beautiful woman, Helen of Sparta, wife of the Greek king Menelaus. The retrieval of Helen by the Greeks is basis for the Trojan War which followed. The moral of the tale is that a judgement which rewards desire over wisdom and strength has dangerous consequences.

The other term of the relation is the material, the surface. From what has been said so far the implication is that something of a different order to a recognition of form and narrative subject is generated by the material specificity of the painting.

In *What is Philosophy?* Deleuze and Guattari distinguish two kinds of painting which produce sensation in different ways.

In the first case *sensation is realized in the material* and does not exist outside of this realisation....In the second case it is not longer sensation that is realized in the material *but the material that passes into sensation.* (p193)

If Rubens realises sensation in the material then what can be said about how material is involved in the sense of incomprehensibility that complicates the narrative that we can comprehend perfectly well?

To investigate this it is necessary to return to the idea of the 'sign'. As we have heard, Deleuze contrasts this with an object of recognition which is defined as the harmonious exercise of our faculties on an object that is supposedly identical for each of these faculties; it is the same object that can be seen, remembered, imagined, conceived, and so on.' (Smith p30) The 'sign' is what he describes as 'an object of a fundamental encounter'; put simply it is the exercise of the faculty of sensibility liberated from the limitations of agreeing with the other faculties in the formation of a common sense. In such a disjunctive synthesis the faculty of sensibility ('confronts its own differential limit') does not perceive a pure sensation - colour, for example, because reason is not there to identify it as such, so it must follow that without identity there is only difference. To illustrate this, take a perception of the colour green. According to one system of understanding it is green because it is not red etc. According to a Deleuzian perspective green can be determined by the differential relation of yellow and blue – not a mixture of colours but a difference – not the difference between the two colours because they have disappeared and are imperceptible. They have entered into a differential relation and the faculty of sensibility feels that difference, unconsciously as it were, before conscious conceptual recognition. It follows that as differential relations are not themselves perceptible or memorable they are productive and generate conscious perception. We could say that the unconscious perceptions can only be a function of our body and the faculty of sensibility which only registers difference (the binary stimuli of on/off). Consequently, conscious perception is not simply a matter of recognising an object situated in space and time, attributing perception to concept, but is related to the minute and unconscious perceptions from which it emerges.

I am trying to suggest that, although on one level it is possible to recognise the narrative subject matter on another the material specificity addresses the body in the creation of 'signs'; as if there were a disjuncture of corporeal bodies (the immediate communication between colour and light and

so forth and the faculty of sensibility) on the one hand and on the other the incorporeal effects of the pictorial narrative as we read the image.

Of course, I can't prove any of this with reference to the painting so instead I will offer a *figure* by juxtaposing the understanding of narrative and the corporeality of sensation:

The ostensible subject of the painting is a warning about the consequences of rewarding desire. The tableau also addresses the faculty of understanding and knowledge (about the story and its symbolism and cultural relevance etc.) and endorses the hierarchy of abstract thought over corporeal sensation; all this through a perspectival construction which, theoretically at least, subordinates hand to eye. The painting is also centred around the act of judgement. It, therefore, seems ironic that judgement is the subject of the painting in the light of what I have said about the 'radically new' which begins with an incomprehensibility that is the very absence of judgement; and ironic too that this sensation is an encounter with signs – signs which can only be felt or sensed by a body. My claims about the sensation of the painting appear to perfectly contradict the narrative of the painting.

There is a suggestion here of a disjuncture of material and narrative image (is this the same as saying that the material specificity of the work is vital?) so that it is the body which this painting addresses. In so doing the painting can no longer be judged against the model of desire but becomes *simulacral*; it pretends to be about moral judgement as an idea but through the creation of signs (the differentials of consciousness without the limit of common sense) it destroys the narrative of understanding; through the creation of desire itself, perhaps (the excitation of the body?) it eludes the act of judgment through an incomprehensibility that is the mimics loss of boundary.

As a mimetic form of life these ironies become paradoxes. Irony suggests a point of view that can compare two instances and see the contradiction i.e. outside the work. However, mimicry dissolves the boundary that marks inside from outside and so without a perspective from which to compare and judge we would have to say that comparison and judgment have been internalised – a perspective on variation itself rather than varying perspectives . However, the loss of boundary does not mean that there is no real difference between organism and environment. We are really discussing a relation to the outside so that the loss of boundary is actually nothing but boundary; the co-existence of outside and inside – an interface; a surface with no depth - we are aware of our incomprehensibility at the same time as we experience it.

To end this discussion I want to use the idea that the relation of narrative and material in Rubens is simulacral [and the idea of a surface with no depth] to comment on my own 'appropriation' of other artist's work.

Earlier I put forward the idea that the relation repeated within the tradition of painting is a relation between 'narrative' and 'materiality' and that this does not refer simply to the narrative of figurative painting but the narrative of any conscious decision-making process, which would include abstract painting.

I am not making any great claims for this painting but thought if *A Dutch Affair* could demonstrate what Deleuze and Guattari meant when they wrote about 'the second case', (or abstract painting - my term, not theirs), that "material passes into sensation".

In this painting the 'narrative of decision-making' goes something like this (although this is of course a very selective account). I began with the idea of putting together spatial 'fragments' from paintings by Kenneth Noland, Mondrian and Vermeer. Not in an ironic way, I hasten to add, but as a way of extending my own painting vocabulary and to combat my own tendency towards cliché. Perhaps more importantly I wanted to become these artists for a while by following in their footsteps, physically; living their life in painting. I put together a Vermeer floor and a Mondrian rhombus, along with some Noland chevrons.

As the painting developed the Mondrian rhombus got covered over by the fossil-like spiral of blue/black. In that act of over painting I felt that I had unconsciously revealed something to myself about Mondrian's diamond paintings. It makes no real sense to tell you this because it is in an important way a private realisation that cannot be articulated – a 'sign' perhaps - however I'm going to attempt to in order to illustrate my point. For some reason a simple comment Yve-Alain Bois wrote about Mondrian has always stuck in my mind; that he excluded any form of figuration from his work by increasingly excluded the curve. I have also never really been able to fully appreciate Mondrian's diamond paintings. In the act of painting the blue-black spiral over my copy of a Mondrian and the top part of the painting the thought came to me that in turning the square on its corner Mondrian had displaced the curve onto the outside of the painting (as if it never really went away and remained as a differential relation). Thus my appropriation of Mondrian's painting had become, not the image which I had copied but this act of displacement – not literally of course but as a displacement of the curve onto the surface. The surface on which material and image come together 'becomes' graphic; it no longer supports an idea about Mondrian's work but creates a sensation; an inseparability of image and material.



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