

“Movement-image”, “Time-Image”: Two Modes of Abstraction in the Work of Juan Usle’

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Introduction

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of Deleuze’s philosophy for someone working in a different field of practice is that he demonstrates a radically non-representational relation between writing and philosophy.

This paper emerges from a research process that is primarily concerned with making paintings but, given that discourse is, with good reason, an inescapable part of contemporary art practice this is a research process that is also troubled by the perpetual difficulty of being able to clearly identify what kind of relation this studio practice has or should have to its theoretical or philosophical context. With this difficulty in mind, the non-representational relation of writing to philosophy found in Deleuze’s texts provides both a model and an apparatus for imagining and constructing parallel practices that work dynamically together. However, it may sound reasonable to claim that writing becomes free of any representational function in relation to painting and vice versa, but what are the implications of this idea for both forms of practice? What is the nature of this relation and how can we say that it exists at all?

Actually it is going too far to speak in general terms about a relation between different forms of practice, for it would be just as correct to speak about paintings’ relation to itself being ‘non-representational’. So, although here the aim is to address the complexity of the non-representational relation through analysis; through the practice of writing, the paper also tries to demonstrate that the most complex paintings also demonstrate a non-representational relation to the form itself and in so doing create the form anew.

Of course, painting is generally considered to be inherently representational; as a static image painting exemplifies the requirements of representation to immobilise and spatialise the temporal flux from which experience emerges. Representation implies a referent and looks for identity through opposition, analogy and resemblanceⁱ at the expense of difference, movement and change. It seems, therefore, that the non-representational is far more complex than simply an absence of the figurative imagery; for how is it possible to think about a static form such as painting in relation to difference, movement and change and, by implication, time?

Deleuze's book on Bacon attests to the complexity of how to move beyond the realm of representation; for example, from the outset he speaks of painting 'escaping the figurative'ⁱⁱ and he repeatedly emphasises that 'The task of painting is defined as the attempt to render visible forces that are not themselves visible'ⁱⁱⁱ. However, rather than engaging specifically with Deleuze's ideas on painting, my aim is to explore how it might be possible to take up what he identifies as paintings' challenge 'to render visible forces which are not themselves visible' but in the form of writing; beginning not with observable forms, but somehow to think generative forces; to think from inside the work of art.

To get beyond the image and to suggest that painting is a temporal phenomenon is to acknowledge that it is only static when judged to be so by the equally static subject who brackets it out of the flux from which objects emerge and then compares it to a prior reality. Indeed, if we follow Deleuze and insist that the aim of art is to produce 'a pure being of sensation', a sign which 'forces us to think' and is of the order of, what he describes in *Difference and Repetition* as 'an object not of recognition but of a fundamental *encounter*'^{iv} then it's not unreasonable to understand the work of art as a living organism rather than an object per se.

With this thought we might approach the work of art as an autopoietic organism – this idea, developed in the field of biological science by biologists Maturana and Varela^v, distinguishes living organisms from non-living objects solely on the basis of their (purposeless) self-production and self-regulation. With the desire to analyse the genesis of a living form from *its* point of view and not from the observer's point of view they developed a method that did not begin with empirical observation (by observing a fully formed entity) but one based on logic. Their method is significantly different from a Darwinian perspective for whom the organism is understood to adapt to a pre-given, fixed and objective environment. Instead, the logic of autopoiesis insists that the genesis of a new species is also the creation of a new form of sensing the world so that there is the simultaneous, dynamic, creation of a new environment. By examining a species from the point of view of the species itself the autopoietic model resists the authority of Darwin's transcendental position which applies the logic of competition and telenomy to all species.

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. Their worlds coincide through what the ethologist Von Uexkull called 'contrapuntal relations' and which

Deleuze and Guattari describe (for different purposes) in *A Thousand Plateaus* as processes of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation.^{vi}

The orchid deterritorializes by forming an image, a tracing of a wasp; but the wasp reterritorializes on that image. The wasp is nevertheless deterritorialized, becoming a piece in the orchid's reproductive apparatus. It could be said that the orchid imitates the wasp, reproducing the image in a signifying fashion (mimesis, mimicry, lure, etc.)...At the same time, something else entirely is going on: not imitation at all but a capture of code...a veritable becoming, a becoming-wasp of the orchid and a becoming-orchid of the wasp.¹

At the risk of some over-simplification and conflation of ideas, my aim is to try to unfold the non-representational relationship between the heterogeneous unities of writings and paintings by appropriating/exploring the idea of re/deterritorialisation. This would begin with a question about how writing might be said to deterritorialise 'by forming an image, a tracing of a painting so that it becomes a part of the writing's reproductive system'. And, if the 'writing organisation' imitates the 'painting organisation' and 'captures a code...' is it '... a veritable becoming, a becoming painting of the writing and a becoming writing of the painting'?

Mal de Sol, Evil Sun (1994)

When we stop to think about it anything that we could possibly say about this painting is to form an image, a tracing, but for that image to become a part of writing's reproductive system (as it were) it must relinquish the purpose of explanation (for the autopoietic entity has no other purpose than auto-generation and auto-regulation) and it must 'capture (paintings') code'. Biosemioticians would express this as a process that involves receiving "news of difference" and in Varela and Maturana's terms the relation would be understood as 'structural coupling'; the evolution of a form that is capable of interpreting (but also creating) what is of environmentally significant. As *Mal de Sol* is an abstract painting and as a theoretical concern with the 'surface' has accompanied the history of abstraction we could say that discourse has developed the apparatus necessary to receive paintings' "news of difference" about the surface.

Having seen this painting in situ I can describe the process of looking as one of sustained fascination and the insistent presence of the literal surface of the work. Although the 'surface' is always already no more than a word, a word that brings with it a history of ideas, in front of the painting it's not at all clear what the referent is. Beginning with 'difference', is to begin not with what we can point to but with what is problematic and, although this 'problematic surface' remains physically flat, through the painting process of being covered over we lose sight of this literal object. Instead, we

encounter it in the same way, perhaps, that Orpheus encounters Eurydice when he turns around at the threshold of the underworld, having so nearly completed his mission. Eurydice encountered not as substantial and corporeal but as a veiled presence witnessed only in her disappearance, as absence. And just as Orpheus sets off with the rational intention of bringing his wife back from the night of the underworld, there is a rational journey which leads to this paradoxical point of fascination. We bear witness to intentional acts; identifiable motifs, for example, that look like twigs or cracks and the idea of a gap between the two; the twig as a painted 'presence' on the surface and the crack a painted absence of the surface that implies a space beneath. From such a description (which converts the image into a sort of mathematical equation) the idea springs to mind that the surface now operates, not as a passive plane that supports spatial illusion, but as an active interface of its (invisible) underneath and its (visible) appearance.

This is not an illusion or an idea that can be said to have been caused by the motifs of crack and twig but it is an Idea of paradox (the co-presence of contradictory elements). As paradox it is an Idea that can only be thought and never empirically experienced. Is that Idea writings' reterritorialisation of the sensation of a surface that disappears in the moment of the orphic gaze; or is it more accurate to suggest that artcritical/historical writing is deterritorrialised by paradox; the certainty of its terms can't function and that the act of reterrotorialisation would be to annul paradox by providing a reading. Isn't what is at stake to repeat paradox in writing; perpetual re/deterritorialisation? However, how can we really talk about a relation between this Idea of a paradoxical surface when the painting provides no visual evidence or logical cause for this Idea? Is it possible to counter the criticism that this is no more than an arbitrary fiction?

To address this concern we must demonstrate how the Idea^{vii} is contextualised by the painting as a whole; how it is folded into its structure. This involves saying something about structure beyond isolating motifs and this may be done if *Mal de Sol* is considered as a re/deterritorialisation of another important part of Usle's practice: photography.

Characteristically, space in Usle's photographs is very shallow and close to the picture plane. In fact, more often than not the photographs lack overarching spatial coherence that would situate objects in relation to each other (there is not exactly space around objects). Consequently, the surfaces of these objects effectively become part of the photographic apparatus by manipulating the amount of light that is allowed to pass through the lens. Various examples demonstrate that depicted objects block light when they become silhouettes, or allow light in etc in such a way that light becomes more

of an object than the objects which stood in front of the camera. Light becomes free from its narrative, spatial function as it is seemingly separated from its external source or causal origin. In effect, light as the indexical trace which forms the image on the photosensitive paper becomes its own subject matter- not as an identity which would be to illustrate a natural phenomenon (captured as it glistens on the water, for example) but in its inseparability from the material surface. Surface and light cross over: light as the means of depiction itself becomes depicted as an object, the surfaces that are depicted become the means of depiction as they act as photographic apparatus. *In effect the photographic images create the idea of light as material surface rather than as immaterial phenomenon.*

A painting such as *Mal de Sol* traces the image of the photograph in an act of deterritorialisation. I read somewhere that this painting was begun as the reminiscence of having had sunstroke as a child and it's not difficult to imagine the colour summoning up a memory of the intensely blue sky of a scorching day or even the subdued light of the recovery room; the painted cracks referencing broken skin. Mimicry, perhaps, of what the art historian Adrian Stokes called, the 'film colour' of the sky – of looking into a seemingly infinite depth. But then the top right square suddenly locates us, like the foreground of a photograph, and the object of our attention is brought into question; as if to make the viewer aware of photography's dilemma about what to have in or what to have out of focus – a limit/condition of photography that it can never picture itself. Thus, in the act of deterritorialising photography, by tracing or forming an image of photography (rather than the image of a photograph) the painting is haunted by its ghost through the veiled presence of a witnessed scene and by the imprint of it as a technical apparatus.

This is complicated, however, because the relation of painting to photography I'm trying to articulate here is one of repetition; a repetition of paradox; a repetition of photography's "light as material". This is effectively a disjuncture of the causal relation between what can be seen (the image) and what can be said (what the image causes the visible to mean). *Mal de Sol* repeats this disjuncture according to its own indexical formation; the incremental act of applying paint; and application that both signifies the hand of the artist and is subsumed by the overarching concept of space which gives the work a totalising unity. However, the space of *Mal de Sol* is not a totalised surface but one that is fragmented through the uncertainty of the paradoxical surface. It could be said, therefore, that brushstrokes lose their identity as gesture (index of artist) or as spatial building blocks and material differences 'become free' to operate as pure intensities, as it were. Marks are no longer said to be *on* the surface but they become synonymous with the surface, they create it. Hence, we

might say that the lines are more graphic than gestural and the sense of freedom and inventiveness typical of Usle's paintings bear witness to a formation that is, like the photographic image 'without (compositional) prejudice'.

What I have tried to demonstrate is that the Idea of the paradoxical surface is folded into the structure of *Mal de Sol* through a process of re/deterritorialisation of his own photographic practice. It is a process through which the passive surface of depiction/inscription becomes the active surface that frees material from its representational function. Although not linked to empirical experience directly the painting is *linked non-representationally* to what could, in principle, be recognised or experienced empirically by a process of abstraction, not a reductive one that seeks the essence of an object through internal formal relations (as with Modernist abstraction) but through a process that re/deterritorialises the photographic image.

La Garganta de Albers, Las Muelas de Gaudi (2003)

If *Mal de Sol* is haunted by the veiled presence of photography and perceptual references through processes of de/reterritorialisation *La Garganta de Albers, Las Muelas de Gaudi* (*Alber's Throat, the Teeth of Gaudi*) evokes no such idea of an empirical, remembered past. To the contrary it seems to present the viewer with a surface that says "this is how it is to view a surface which is no more than a facade". This is the façade as the essence of a view without depth, without content.

In some respects there is content as the title makes explicit identifiable references to the work of Albers and Gaudi. The visual quotations could be seen as post-modern irony or in autobiographical terms: a quotation of (the Modernist) Josef Albers' painting and a quirky reference to remembered images of Gaudi's buildings in Usle's native Spain. However, the challenge here is to understand how those artists' work are re/deterritorialised by Usle's painting; how the painting both traces an image of their work but also transcodes difference through the Idea of the façade as empty, as essence. But rather than beginning with a general idea about Albers work or of the architecture of Gaudi (relying on things we have read or heard before or ideas already in place) we could ask what has been woven together and, thus, what the work unfolds? For unlike the previous case of 'structural coupling', articulated in general terms between Usle's photography and his painting *Mal de Sol*, here we are faced with a relation between the painting *La Garganta de Albers, Las Muelas de Gaudi* and its outsides; works (or ideas/images?) that are far less certain, despite being more specific and, therefore, our enquiry must begin at the end.

The Albers motif seems to resist a simple reading of it as a (linguistic) sign of Modernist painting. It is as if this motif extends beyond its image to work across the surface and tease out some of Modernism's threads, putting them to work in new ways. Perhaps we could say that the 'throat of Albers', operates *metonymically* like a keynote which generates the tempo and tone, the rhythm, the interval – the wind or voice of the work – an emanating rhythm (which reveals the rhythms of colour relations of quantity and quality and the subtle rhythm of proportion and interval so typical of Albers' work); a rhythm that animates the 'teeth of Gaudi' so that the gaps, the weight of the positive and negative shapes move across the surface – to play a tune on the ivories (!). The Albers square, thus, operates as a pseudo centre (evoking but not engaging with the structure of figurative composition, and its compositional hierarchy) whose role is not so much to be seen but displaces vision to move the work of the painting along; akin to the role played by the goal of the game which is to set the game in motion and sustain play but has no ultimate value in itself. On the other hand, Gaudi's eccentric facades, translated onto a two dimensional surface, amplify the structure of Albers' painting by creating the warp of a colour field and the weft of the interval which weaves in and out of the saturated picture plane. Gaudi's facades organise the surface and provide a *metaphor* for what is to come: *the façade as the essence of a view without depth, without content.*

Having said that, it would be more correct to suggest that the empty façade *precedes* Albers' 'breath' and 'the teeth' of Gaudi. It is only through the painting which creates, not a representation or form of an actual façade, *but the essence of the façade*, that the rhythms, intervals and forces which are folded into those works become apparent *as they are freed from the form of the surface itself*. Usle's painting creates a new perspective of their work, not by composing the Albers/Gaudi axes as pre-existing elements but by creating an assemblage that invents them anew.

This idea is highly significant because, whereas the paradoxical surface of *Mal de Sol* raises questions about the relation between painting and a remembered or empirical past through its structural coupling with photography (a memory of paintings' surface as one of depiction/inscription) the empty façade of *La Garganta de Albers, Las Muelas de Gaudi* seems to propose a de/reterritorialisation of the past itself (a far more radical proposition).

To reiterate, this sign 'façade' is not a reference or representation of a particular façade nor does it signify a theoretical idea of façade (which means superficiality, for example). The non-linguistic sign, as it is discussed in Deleuze's book on Proust, would not identify itself directly with an image of a façade experienced in the past, because that would not be an empty façade but one full of a

remembered past. Rather, it is as if there is an unconscious or invisible essence of the 'façade' which inheres in the sign and resonates with past experience but is not synonymous with its image. Consistent with Deleuze's anti-Platonist project this would not be a Platonic essence or the universal, transcendent and does not involve the active faculty of recognition or judgement but would more accurately be described as the resonance of two moment of time; a resonance that is borne through the appearance of *involuntary memory*. As Deleuze discusses, this act of involuntary memory is not produced by the subject who represents past moments or associates memories together but it is a passive eruption of the differential essence. It is as if, at the sight of Usle's painting an internal, intensive, complicated, image, a virtual and differential essence of the façade (comparable to Combray) is actualised – never the façade of empirical experience, always a construction of the artwork. It is that actualisation that unfolds the forces and rhythms that Albers' paintings sing out through the instrument of Gaudi's facades.

Thus, in the 'an ontological act of time' of the fundamental encounter we find ourselves somehow inside the work; when the unity and continuity of self in time can no longer be assured; a unity that would situate us outside the work and that would separate us from the work as subject and object. It is this sense of a caesura when past is separated from future, in the moment that empirical unification fails, that is the emptiness of the façade; but a caesura and an emptiness from which a new perspective on the past is created – in this example, both symbolised and actualised in the references to Albers and Gaudi.

My final thought is to note

that it may be possible to explore the possibility of creating a new assemblage which maps paintings such as *Mal de Sol* onto Deleuze's concept of the movement-image, in so far as an empirical past of is distinguished yet enfolded in the unity of the present work and map *La Garganta de Albers*, *Las Muelas de Gaudi* onto the time-image, in so far as the present now comes before the past – or is that the future...?

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ⁱ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (New York, 1994), p137

ⁱⁱ Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, (London, 2003), p2

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, p56

^{iv} Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (New York, 1994), p139

^v Maturana and Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition*, (The Reidel Publishing Company, Dordrecht, 1980)

^{vi} The orchid deterritorializes by forming an image, a tracing of a wasp; but the wasp reterritorializes on that image. The wasp is nevertheless deterritorialized, becoming a piece in the orchid's reproductive apparatus. But it reterritorializes the orchid by transporting its pollen. Wasp and orchid, as heterogeneous elements, form a rhizome. It could be said that the orchid imitates the wasp, reproducing the image in a signifying fashion (mimesis, mimicry, lure, etc.). But this is true only on the level of the strata — a parallelism between two strata such that a plant organization on one imitates an animal organization on the other. At the same time, something else entirely is going on: not imitation at all but a capture of code, surplus value of code, an increase in valence, a veritable becoming, a becoming-wasp of the orchid and a becoming-orchid of the wasp.^{vi}

^{vii} as a conceptualisation/abstraction of surface as the condition of possibility for all visual experience