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## **‘The Picture Plane and the Page: Moments of Order in Painting/Writing’**

**A paper given at the 8<sup>th</sup> International Deleuze Studies Conference, *Daughters of Chaos*, Stockholm 2015**

It is the case that philosophers interested in Deleuze and interested in writing about painting invariably refer to his book on Francis Bacon, which was first published in 1981. One of the problems for a painter working now, however, is that the nature of contemporary art practice has changed over the last 35 years and the terms of reference now seem rather out of date. How might this ‘logic of sensation’ relate to the challenges of the current milieu; one in which questions about figuration and abstraction do not dominate questions of value in painting, and where the idea of the Figural becomes complicated in an environment where what counts as painting can no longer be taken for granted.

In *The Logic of Sensation* Deleuze claims that, unlike other arts which *associate* catastrophe, painting “hysterically” *integrates* catastrophe; as he says:

‘...painters pass through catastrophe themselves, embrace the chaos, and attempt to emerge from it. Where painters differ is in their manner of embracing this nonfigurative chaos and in their evaluation of the pictorial order to come, and the relation of this order with this chaos.’ (p103)

In the 1980s, looking backwards, Deleuze gives us three ‘great paths’ which designate a “modern” function of painting: the geometric abstraction of artists such as Mondrian, the gestural abstraction of artists such as Pollock and the figural painting of Bacon. Perhaps, now we are forced to question what has become of these paths and what alternatives might designate a “post-modern” function of painting?

In such a context, the aim of this paper is to think about the notion of a ‘pictorial order to come’ and its relation to chaos by looking at an example of contemporary painting. *La Garganta de Albers*, *Las Muelas de Gaudi* is clearly an abstract painting but painted fairly recently fits uneasily into one of the ‘three great paths’. Is it still the case that ‘Painting has to extract the Figure from the figurative’? [p8] Within a so-called post-modern context what might be the *figurative givens* that dominate the artistic imagination in front of the canvas and which must be emptied out, given that the context for Deleuze’s third way, the either/or of

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abstraction and figuration, has been superseded by questions about where the boundaries of painting lie in relation to other disciplines.

Of course, figurative givens are located in the form of representation and are not 'natural'. The figurative is what is familiar and has become conventional and through the figurative we represent ourselves within the world. What is the figurative now for an artist who claims to be a painter (if we include from Deleuze's list, not just photographs, illustrations, narrations, cinema-images, television-images but also ready-made perceptions, memories and phantasms) in other words 'a whole category of things that could be termed "clichés"' which already fill the canvas.

Let us imagine that as Juan Usle approaches his canvas the clichés that populate his mind, that populate what would be 'a white and virgin surface' [p11] are, like for all artists, not simply images of the visible world but images too of artworks that belong to a tradition that has engaged with that world. Right now inscribed within what might be called a pictorial tradition are anxieties, or questions at least, about the very nature, role and validity of painting itself; how it engages with other forms of practice as well as with its own history. This is the context in which Usle makes his paintings. If the figurative is a form through which we confirm our identity then it is also a form that is itself formed through various dialectical oppositions: the abstract and the figurative or painting and architecture, for example: oppositions that operate outside a work of art and are used to represent it to ourselves (it is that and not the other) as we confirm our own identity (I think this and not that). Perhaps it is the very insistence of such oppositions because the artistic environment is so troubled by them that they have become the figurative givens that Usle's process of painting erases, flattens and shreds as he moves paint around on the surface and lets it dry? Is it the case that without the certainty of the either/or, which would co-ordinate Usle's identity; what he thinks, what he is sure of; he passes through catastrophe '...so as to let in a breath of air from the chaos that brings us the vision'?

What sort of Figure can be said to emerge from such figurative givens, givens that are not located in the body as they are in Bacon's paintings, but in the identities that belong to the history of painting; its images and objects but also how those objects have been defined through various dialectical oppositions. At first this question might seem more problematic in

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a painting that does not capture elementary forces 'like pressure, inertia, weight, attraction, gravitation, germination' i.e. when there is no clear connection with the visible world. (Although Deleuze's question about whether Time can be painted indicates how complex this question is.) G/A is what would commonly be described as an abstract painting but does this mean that it is a painting about painting i.e. a re-coding, lacking a struggle with chaos and the corporeal world?

For Deleuze, abstract painters like Mondrian followed a path that reduced chaos to a minimum; leaping over chaos as if it were a stream in order to create a purely optical space. Mondrian left the figurative landscape through an act of recoding; the figurative becomes an ideal Form elevated to a transcendent plane of organisation. What is missing is a struggle with chaos through a process not aimed at realising optically pre-existing abstract concepts but one that breaks with the figurative in a 'more direct and sensuous way' [Cinema II, p14 – look this up]

'The diagram is indeed a chaos, a catastrophe, but it is also a germ of order or rhythm. It is a violent chaos in relation to the figurative givens, but it is also a germ of rhythm in relation to the new order of the painting.' [p102]

For Deleuze, the work of Pollock is both a catastrophe-painting and a diagram-painting. That process of working on the floor, using technique as the principle of composition; a technique that employs the rhythm of the body moving across the surface removes the visual co-ordinates of representation and introduces, with each splash of paint, "possibilities of fact" ("...asignifying and nonrepresentative lines and zones, line-strokes and colour-patches.' [p101]). But, unlike in Bacon's work, these possibilities never actually constitute fact because they don't evolve into a Figure, they are not reinjected *into* the visual whole because they *are* the visual whole. Pollock's lines without contour, although breaking with the figurative through a manual rhythm that abandons visual control, is criticised for subordinating the eye to the hand to create a veritable "mess" [p109]

The third path is exemplified by Bacon. These are paintings *of* the body made *by* the body; a struggle with chaos that takes place, not in the mind, but on the surface of the canvas: the body as subject matter, the body of the artist, the body of the paint. But Bacon's physical acts of applying paint do not dismantle the optical, Deleuze argues (as does abstract expressionism's empty, all-over space). Between the two alternatives of purely optical, ideal

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space of geometric abstract painting which subordinates the hand to the eye by internalising vision and the manual space of action painting which reverses this by subordinating the eye to the hand, lies the haptic space of Bacon's oeuvre. The haptic speaks of a relationship between the hand and the eye; not simply that 'the eye judges and the hands execute' but, as Deleuze puts it '...sight discovers in itself a specific function of touch that is uniquely its own, distinct from its optical function.' [p155]

It is the operation of the diagram localised in the body (as figure and as artist) which makes possible the passage to *haptic vision*; the manual splashes and splodges of paint operate as 'possibilities of fact' which, without the complete disappearance of all figurative givens, do not 'eat away at the entire painting', and can be re-injected into the visible whole, from which a new figuration emerges.

'...this liberation [of painting's analogical language of body, planes and colour] can occur only by passing through the catastrophe; that is, through the diagram and its involuntary irruption...' [p118]

The question is whether or not this logic of sensation can help us think G/A; whether G/A thinks differently from the optical abstraction of Mondrian and the action painting of Pollock; does the "middle" way open up the possibility of making sense of contemporary painting or is Deleuze's analysis specific to the painting of the last Century?

To affirm the usefulness of Deleuze's thinking for opening up a painting like G/A we have to distance it from the label "Abstract painting" (in fact, Usle's oeuvre has a strong connection to the figural abstraction of Miro, who doesn't really fit into the categories of the geometric or action painting either). We have to establish the work as 'analogical' rather than 'digital' so that it can be said to have passed through a diagram rather than a code. As Deleuze says 'The middle way...is one that makes use of the diagram in order to constitute an analogical language' [p117]

I suggested earlier, that as Usle approaches the canvas he confronts the figurative givens of the incorporeal, dialectical terms (such as painting/not-painting, abstract/figurative) which identify and represent the work of Albers and Gaudi to him – but this would seem to contradict the centrality of the body in Deleuze's logic as it confronts a corporeal figurative

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image. However, as Usle chooses his “subject matter” he embarks on a process of painting which is a process of letting go of such incorporeal identifications attached to visual givens and, through the material process of painting; through the body of the paint on canvas and through his own physical involvement thought plunges into the body ‘in order to arrive at the unthought’. It is a struggle with chaos that extracts ‘Figures’. A movement from the left side of the brain to the right:

“Analogical language,” it is said, belongs to the right hemisphere of the brain or, better, the nervous system, whereas “digital language” belongs to the left hemisphere. [p113]

However, there is no evidence in G/A of those manual ‘...asignifying and nonrepresentative lines...’ which are so clearly visible in Bacon’s finished paintings and which are a sign of Bacon’s operative diagram. But what is asignifying in one instance is not necessarily so in another because it is characteristic of a specific diagram according to the clichés that must be overcome. Thus, what are the signs of G/A’s operative diagram; how have the figurative givens of Albers and Gaudi been deformed so that abstract relations and forces are folded together and then unfolded in the new system of Usle’s painting?

(to repeat)

‘... this liberation can occur only by passing through the catastrophe; that is, through the diagram and its involuntary irruption...’ [p118]

The juxtaposition of Albers and Gaudi is an assemblage and is integral to the diagram which breaks up these ‘names’ as figurative givens. For example, it would be easy to identify the Albers motif as a metonym for Modernism as it could be said to import, via this Albers fragment, utopian ideals and the essentialism and historicism of Modernism’s teleology. But the diagram defeats this image and cliché and demands a different interpretation which attends to how the painting operates – the sensation of the work rather than its image. As an assemblage the two heterogeneous species of ‘painting’ and ‘architecture’ come into contact; a coupling that liberates each as they become a part of the other.

The line or block of becoming that unites the wasp and the orchid produces a shared deterritorialisation: of the wasp, in that it becomes a liberated piece of the orchid’s reproductive system, but also of the orchid, in that it becomes the object of an orgasm in the wasp, also liberated from its own reproduction. [TP p293]

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The image of a painting becomes a part of the façade of a Gaudi building, liberated from its own physical boundaries: it is as if the motif is drawn across the surface which extends the rhythm of colours created by Albers through chromatic interaction and weight. The Albers motif sits in a position that mimics the central square of Albers' own painting (reversing the gravitational weight) embedded within the Gaudi component which gives a new life to its specific chromatic and compositional musicality; a façade which through a subtle symmetry seems to also suggest a (pictorial) deception: not a façade but an image and its reflection.

Like a keynote the 'throat of Albers' generates tempo, tone, rhythm and interval to create the voice of the work which vibrates through the 'teeth of Gaudi'. The sense of contraction and expansion, made sensible by the quantity/quality colour relations of the Albers motif, extends across the intense red surface through the positive and negative shapes made by white paint scumbled on top. The Albers motif 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 to displace vision and 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 which has no real value itself. On the other hand, Gaudi's eccentric facades, translated onto a two dimensional surface, amplify the structure of Albers' painting by creating a colour field through which the rhythm weaves in and out. The pictorialism of Gaudi's facade draws out the rhythms of Albers colour experimentations and the Albers picture draws out a pictorialism from Gaudi that frees the façade from the body of architectural space.

It is as if the virtual diagram through involuntary irruption, splits these figurative givens so that on the one hand we are reminded of objects of perception that can be remembered, described and written about but on the other hand, a memory of feelings, a memory of the body becomes schematised in the work. Indeed, Deleuze draws attention to the appearance of pure figures in Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* which, he says, were written as a function of involuntary memory as opposed to voluntary memory 'which was content to illustrate or narrate the past' (p67).

And in his book *Proust as Philosopher*, Miguel de Beistigui discusses the nature of memory in Proust's novel:

...Proust sees memory as the quite possibly infinite reservoir of what was never actually experienced, so to speak, but which returns all the same: a sort of *unlived* experience, if you like, which Proust is going to make the very matter of literature. (de Beistigui, 2013: 28)

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This idea of ‘unlived’ experience, to which de Beistigui refers, is crucial because although it refers to the past it is not the past that was once experienced and now forgotten, but the memory of what remains to be lived and what’s still to come in any lived experience. This suggests the possibility that with every perception or lived experience there is an accompanying unconscious ‘unlived’ experience; a time that doubles that which we are aware of.

Accordingly, the claim is that G/A creates an “aesthetic Analogy” (p116) through the memory of what was never lived; what was left when a perception was cut from a plenitude of sensations but which remained awaiting action; a memory of feelings. In the temporal paradox of aesthetic sensation, the unlived returns, not through a conscious act of remembering but through the irruption of involuntary memory. This is not to fictionalise the event of involuntary memory as that which was experienced by artist or viewer but to locate it in the diagram of “sensation”.

But the question still remains: What Figure does G/A extract from the figurative givens ‘Albers’ and ‘Gaudi’?

Although I have suggested that the diagram defeats the clichéd reading of the Albers motif as a Modernist icon through an Albers/Gaudi assemblage it is also the case that this figuration does not completely disappear. The diagram introduces ‘possibilities of fact’ but as Deleuze says ‘In order to be converted into a fact, in order to evolve into a Figure, they must be reinjected into the visual whole...’ p101. This reinjection happens through the operation of the assemblage/diagram which decomposes then recomposes. What are the forces which become decomposed, become liberated through the diagram?

One way to approach this is to understand the Albers motif as a folding of cultural forces. Taking Albers oeuvre in its context of production it can be seen to express a point in the evolution of Modernist painting when, through an increasing focus on the form of painting instead of subject matter, expression became located on the surface, in the material stuff of paint, rather than behind the façade of a (figurative) depiction. Classically this is the point at which the tactile space of representation was replaced by the purely optical space of abstraction; (and Deleuze’s critique of Mondrian’s opticality would be consistent with this view). This observation or conscious perception, however, can be understood as an

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actualisation of virtual relations of difference: that of the façade of depiction (absolute artifice) characteristic of a figurative idiom, and the surface of expression (absolute truth) characteristic of abstraction; these differential terms accompanying what is perceived as ‘unlived’, virtual and unconscious genetic conditions even when one pole dominates. [ref to Smith]

In an analogous way, Modernist architecture turned buildings inside out, also diminishing the importance of the façade. Hubert Damisch has argued (Vidler 2005: 209), that Modernist architecture replaced the facade of Baroque architecture as a sign of value with an orientation towards the architectural plan. Thus, every building can be understood to actualise a relation of differential terms; a relation between the vertical, fictive façade and the horizontal, literal plan.

However, the relation of façade and plan in Gaudi’s idiosyncratic, organic expressionism seems out of step with such a narrative. It is well known that Gaudi worked with models rather than architectural plans and we can see that the façade expresses something of the internal space of the building. In other words the façade is not the actualisation of the plan/façade dichotomy but of a more corporeal set of oppositions: it is as if his buildings bring the inside outside, or the inside of the building is written on its façade.

The diagram redistributes these generative differentials in the involuntary sensation of the work. *Through this recomposition the painting extracts the Figure of the Façade from the figurative givens of Albers and Gaudi.* But this is not the façade as it was ever experienced. This is a moment when the present resonates with the past. It is as if the “unlived”, virtual, differential relations of painting (the façade of depiction and the surface of expression, actualised in the work of Albers) and those of architecture (two dimensional, fictive façade and three dimensional internal space, actualised in the work of Gaudi) return through the façade as it becomes a Figure.

The virtual diagram schematises involuntary memory so that what returns is not subjective experience but that which was of no interest to perception in the past but which remains as a pure past accompanying every present. At the moment of return the past and the present are synthesised to cancel out temporal distance.

The time that separates them is annulled and they are carried onto another level, another temporality. They converge in a sort of instantaneousness that runs parallel to the flow of



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time, a sort of “time outside time” that is at the same time the very essence of time, what Proust calls “time in its pure state”. (de Beistigui, 2013:56)

It is as if G/A schematises the act of picturing in two dimensions that is experienced in three dimensions; a haptic vision that includes the body of the artist who moves through (architectural) space.

The suggestion is that by extracting the Figure of the Façade it is encountered in its essence i.e. as pure and empty. This is not a subjective act of representation but an involuntary eruption; not a transcendent essence but immanent. It is as if the pure and empty form of the façade is a schematisation of a moment of incomprehensibility in which there is no content, no knowledge, and which marks a radical moment of discontinuity in the subject. This is the event of the empty canvas erased, cleaned, flattened that lets in ‘...a breath of air from the chaos that brings us the vision.’ (*What is Philosophy?* p204)