

Deleuze's Catch After His Surrender to Bacon

Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation

By Gilles Deleuze

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Review by Andrew Feldmár

My wife is a painter and has admired Francis Bacon's work for many decades. I remember in the 80's we visited the Guggenheim Museum in New York and near the top of the building we were faced with one of Bacon's triptychs, perhaps the one inspired by T. S. Eliot's poem *Sweeney Agonistes*. In a matter of minutes, she felt faint, nauseated, and ran down the spiral corridors, not stopping until she could sit outside on a bench, sobbing.

This kind of visceral reaction to Bacon's paintings is not uncommon. He deliberately wanted to convey the violence of sensation directly to the viewer's nervous system through the Figure of the human body. In my wife's case, he clearly succeeded.

Deleuze owned a few paintings by Francis Bacon, which were available to him, hanging in his Paris apartment. I imagine he must have sat for hours, absorbed by the paintings. Surrender means total experience: no defense, no critique, fully allowing oneself to be taken for a ride. Surrender and catch: a sort of epistemology. Having given myself over to a work of art, letting it have its way with me, I come back to myself. Am I richer, am I poorer, is it as if nothing really happened at all? The *catch* is the gift, the transformation, the altered state of consciousness I returned with from my *surrender* to the piece. Deleuze must have surrendered to Bacon's paintings, and his *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, originally published in France in 1981, now in English in 2004, is the rich and varied catch he returned to himself with.

Daniel W. Smith quotes Bacon in his *Translator's Introduction*, "I have often tried to talk about painting, but writing or talking about it is only an approximation, as painting is its own language and is not translatable into words." Figurative, narrative, illustrational painting could possibly be considered as the map, mapping of a territory of objective or subjective reality. Bacon, however, and modern art in general, renounced the domain of

representation. Jean Baudrillard said, “The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it.” Bacon’s paintings constitute a unique territory of their own, and Deleuze, in the book under review, attempts to articulate patterns, or patterns of patterns, in this all-engrossing, at times overwhelming world of colors, shapes, lines, and marks.

The original French version was published as a two-volume set. The first contained Deleuze’s writing, the second was a collection of reproductions of Bacon’s paintings. I felt short-changed by the English translation’s publisher’s decision to omit the second volume. It’s an arduous task to collect all the images referred to in the text, and, without the reproductions, the text is incomprehensible.

The book is not an easy read. One has to swim amongst Deleuze’s concepts, which are not well defined but gather meaning as the essay progresses. Deleuze talks of “invisible forces,” such as the “flattening force of sleep.” Other “forces that model flesh or shake it” he finds in Bacon’s oeuvre include *isolation, deformation, dissipation, coupling, uniting, separating, time*, both *changing* and *eternal*, and *life*. He speaks of *rhythms* that can be *active, passive* and *attendant*. I could find myself drowning not only in the chaos of Bacon’s paintings, but also in the chaos of Deleuze’s writing. And yet, in both realms, I felt often rescued by some faint repetition, rhythm that blossomed into recognition or understanding.

Looking at Bacon’s paintings after swimming in Deleuze’s text was a richer experience than before. Deleuze’s meticulous analysis allowed me to see, feel more than before: veils lifted, and kept lifting as my comprehension of Deleuze’s vision increased. The trinity of *material structure* out of which emerges the *raised image* with the help of the *round contour* does echo the trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, respectively. Another trinity that Deleuze identifies as the three dimensions of painting is: the *planes, color*, and the *body*. The joy of experiencing Bacon’s painting is like the pleasure of listening to the music of Béla Bartók. The joy of beginning to comprehend Deleuze is like the intellectual bliss of understanding what a *concerto* is, what the intricacies of the *pentatonic* scale are, and what is *syncopation*.

A major topic is the fight against the cliché in all its manifestations, psychic or physical. Bacon uses “free marks,” explosive accidents to destroy any nascent cliché, illustration or narration. Deleuze writes,

It is a mistake to think that a painter works on a white surface... The painter has many things in his head, or around him, or in his studio.

Now everything he has in his head or around him is already on the canvas, more or less virtually, more or less actually, before he begins his work... the painter does not have to cover a blank surface but rather would have to empty it out, clear it, clean it.

This struggle takes “much ruse, perseverance, and prudence.” Bacon’s intention is to create resemblance, but through accidental and nonresembling means. His building blocks are the destroyed, transformed, fragmented bits of clichés. I think of Frank Auerbach’s dictum:

I think the unity of a painter’s work arises from the fact that a person, brought to a desperate situation, will behave in a certain way. That’s what real style is: it’s not donning a mantle or having a program, it’s how one behaves in a crisis.

There are many who contest Deleuze’s arguments in favor of sensation as the primary modality of art. Sandra Kaji-O’Grady, for instance, wrote, “the status of meat as a culturally loaded artifact... underscore(s) the impossibility of sensation as an asignifying mode from which to found an embodied aesthetics.”

When all is said and done, I would deeply regret not ever having seen the paintings of Francis Bacon; I would not in the least regret not ever having read Deleuze’s book on Francis Bacon. As William Burroughs said, “Words are nice for the kids.”