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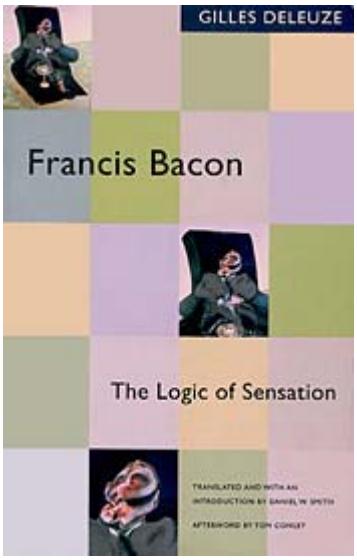
"Francis Bacon: A Centenary Retrospective," installation view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, with Bacon's *Triptych Inspired by T.S. Eliot's "Sweeny Agonistes,"* 1967

Installation view of "Francis Bacon: A Centenary Retrospective," at the Metropolitan Museum of Art



Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation by Gilles Deleuze (University of Minnesota Press, 2004)

BACON, HALF-BAKED
by Ben Davis

The large Francis Bacon show currently drawing multitudes at the Metropolitan Museum of Art really speaks for itself. You don't need any theory to love it. The hits are all there -- the wailing Popes, the naked wrestlers, the melted portraits of the British artist's colleagues and lovers. All of these are crowd-pleasers, exuding an atmosphere of fertile angst that is immediately accessible. (The first thing you see as you enter, in fact, is Bacon's triptych of serpentine, phallic monsters, inspiration for the chest-bursting creature of *Alien* fame, a curatorial decision that hammers home the populist appeal of Bacon.)

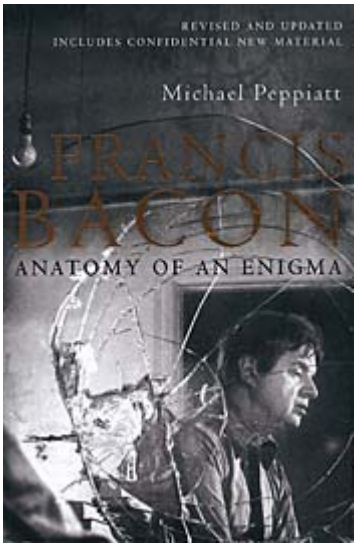
As I passed through the galleries one Tuesday morning with the crowds, however, I recalled that despite the horror-movie vibe of it all, there is a particular reference that gives Bacon's work a sheen of intellectual mystique for me: Gilles Deleuze's small book, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, first published in 1981. The much-cited postmodern philosopher, part of the canon in any college theory class, was a Bacon fan. That fact by itself has always made Bacon's work seem somehow important in a way it might not otherwise have.

I know I'm not the only one who feels this way. I know because the Met show quotes Deleuze in its wall text about one of the iconic Pope paintings: "Bacon's scream is the operation through which the entire body escapes through the mouth." Every single writer in the Met catalogue feels bound to reference Deleuze's book (though Martin Harrison does acknowledge that Deleuze is wrong to ascribe to Bacon a fundamentally anti-narrative agenda; more on this in a sec.) Even Bacon's biographer, Michael Peppiatt, whose *Francis Bacon: Anatomy of an Enigma* was recently republished to coincide with this show, tells us that Deleuze's treatise "put discussion of Bacon's painting on a new plane of pure, often playful and always inventive intellectual conjecture" -- though he doesn't say that much more about it (Bacon and Deleuze apparently did meet, once, in the early '80s; as Peppiatt puts it, "no friendship evolved").

A few years ago, University of Minnesota Press sent me a copy of a new edition of *The Logic of Sensation* when it was reissued in a new translation. After seeing the show at the Met, I decided to pick it up and see if its insights still held today.

I'll spare a build up and say that I don't think *The Logic of Sensation* does hold up to scrutiny (though any book that contains a sentence as crazy as "The head-meat is a becoming-animal of man" can't be all bad either). Before I get into the details of why, however, I will note that Deleuze's sibylline manner, which I think connotes a sense of timeless intellectual mystery for his admirers, today strikes me as a dated, period style. Overcomplex and bombastic, it's a bit like the philosophical equivalent of prog rock. *The Logic of Sensation* was published the same year Rush released *Tom Sawyer* -- coincidence? (Deleuze himself would probably prefer a comparison to Talking Heads; he quotes *Crosseyed and Painless* somewhere in this book.)

What, in essence, is Deleuze's argument about Francis Bacon? *The Logic of Sensation* amounts to 17 tangentially connected essays,



Francis Bacon: Anatomy of an Enigma by Michael Peppiatt (Skyhorse Publishing, 2009)

The first painting in "Francis Bacon: A Centenary Retrospective" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art: Francis Bacon's *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*, ca. 1944, Tate

Detail of Francis Bacon's *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* (ca. 1944)

each one a different formal/philosophical analysis of one aspect of Bacon's practice. Deleuze considers, to pick a few random examples, the fact that Bacon tends to isolate figures in a round area at the center of the frame; the recurrence of animal imagery in his paintings; his recourse to the triptych format; and his use of colors. He postulates a common "logic" that underlies all these various choices. In essence, Deleuze sees in Bacon's liquescent brand of Expressionism an illustration of his own philosophical thesis that what is most real about bodies is their virtuality, their irreducibility to any one fixed form or identity. Thus, for Deleuze, the isolation of Bacon's figures at the center of the frame is a way of cutting them out of any narrative relation that would ascribe to them a fixed meaning; the animal imagery reflects the blurring of the self and other; the triptych is a way of showing different aspects of a single form without reducing it to a common essence; and Bacon's use of color is a way of escaping the hypostatizing effect of linear representation, instead rendering spaces and bodies as flows of mercurial energy ("Each dominant color and each broken tone indicates the immediate exercise of a force on the corresponding zone of the body or head; it immediately renders force visible.")

And what's wrong with all of this? Nothing -- unless you actually take it seriously. I'll proceed through four counts, from the most inconsequential to the most compromised aspect of Deleuze's adoption of Bacon.

First of all, Deleuze's adventure into art is thrilling -- but when he actually tries to talk about art history, he plays so fast and loose with references that it is distorting. One of Deleuze's least helpful contributions to understanding Bacon, for instance, is his pronouncement that "Bacon first of all seems to be an Egyptian." This is fine as a superficial bit of color -- there's nothing outrageous about the observation that Bacon's squashed spaces might resemble the absolute space of Egyptian art a little. But this is not a flourish for Deleuze; he repeats it multiple times, and actually seems to think that Bacon's Egyptian-ness is a matter of world-historical import. When he asks the reader what accounts for the *difference* between Bacon's painting and Egyptian art, Deleuze actually replies by stating the following: "What is at stake here is no longer just Bacon, but undoubtedly the entire history of Western painting" (Gotta love how art theorists who reject all historical "meta-narratives" can let a statement like that slide). But then it turns out what is important about "Egyptian art" for Deleuze is just one thing -- bas-relief, an art form which (so he says) collapses the opposition between visual and haptic space, a quality that Deleuze also values in Bacon's painting. Never mind that bas-relief is not really particular to Egypt, or that there is really a lot more to Egyptian art than bas-relief. . . I suppose if I defined an apple as any sweet round fruit, then an orange would also be an apple.

Second, while the power of *The Logic of Sensation* is due largely to what translator Daniel W. Smith calls Deleuze's "extraordinarily specific and detailed analyses of individual paintings," in fact the account has a yawning blind spot when it comes to the actual work of Francis Bacon. If you had to describe the characteristic tone of Bacon's imagery, you'd probably think of claustrophobia, of dread, of a sense of visceral repulsion. And yet, Gilles Deleuze's *entire argument* is based on bracketing this aspect of the work out as insignificant. From Deleuze's own introduction to his book: "Bacon, to be sure, often traffics in the violence of a depicted scene: spectacles of horror, Crucifixions, prostheses and mutilations, monsters. But these are overtly facile detours. . . What directly interests him is a violence that is involved only with color and line: the violence of a sensation (and not of a representation)." Later, he tells us that "Bacon's deformations are rarely constrained or forced, they are not tortures, despite appearances," and still later, he asserts that Bacon

Francis Bacon
Head VI
1949
Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London

Francis Bacon
Study after Velazquez
1950
Steven and Alexandra Cohen Collection
© 2009 Estate of Francis Bacon / ARS / DACS

Francis Bacon
Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X
1953
Des Moines Art Center

"is not a painter who 'believes' in death. His is indeed a figurative *misérabilisme*, but one that serves an increasingly powerful Figure of life."

But no, wrong -- Bacon's paintings are inescapably about crucifixions, monsters, torture, death, albeit of a surreal variety. That is part of their "logic." A work like *Paralytic Child Walking on All Fours* (1961), on view at the Met, is pregnant with all sorts of meanings -- but it does invoke the image of a disabled child, and owes some of its impact to the fact that this referent is explicit (we can be certain, because it is citing a frame from an Eadweard Muybridge serial photo). Deleuze, admittedly, is interested in championing the concept of the "diagram," a manner of representing bodies that, he tells us, doesn't try to replicate an original referent, but instead strives toward "a creation of original relations that are substituted for the form." Apparently, such an operation renders subject matter indifferent; or, better said, it seems that technique is the only real subject matter for Deleuze. In effect, what Deleuze is doing is saying that Bacon is not "really" interested in what he is clearly most interested in, then rhapsodizing over how well his own edited version of the work fits his own thesis!

Now, of course, one can argue that some secret life-affirming force is at work underneath Bacon's imagery of horror and loneliness -- but in that case, you still have to account for how the explicit and buried contents interact. If Bacon's painting is fundamentally about unleashing powerful flows of desire, why do these primarily manifest themselves through horrific imagery? It is not as if sometimes he paints blood and ghouls, and sometimes he paints rainbows and frolicking puppies; he's not indifferent to content. Similarly, it is no good to state that what is most fundamental about Bacon is a bracketing out of all narrative suggestion, when this is clearly not the case -- at the Met, a work like *Study for a Portrait of Van Gogh VI* (1957), a depiction of the shadowy Dutchman slouching across a yellow field weighed down by painting instruments, as if in a funk, proves that Bacon is interested in plugging his paintings into recognizable figures and stories, however fragmentary. (As a matter of fact, you can even say he had a taste for stories -- Peppiatt notes that the van Gogh series was inspired by the Kirk Douglas film *Lust for Life*!)

Deleuze fans will say that the philosopher is not interested in "interpreting" paintings, but in generating new ideas about them. However, if such a method is not going to operate just as a license to *make shit up*, it must be based on a reading of the actual material at hand. In his famous readings of philosophers, Deleuze prided himself on a method of overreading, using their own words to create something new and "monstrous" by pushing their internal logic to its limit -- "the author had to say, in effect, everything I made him say." This is not the method he follows in the much more openly "monstrous" case of Bacon's art. Here he is simply superimposing his own affirmative philosophy onto his object.

Both of these problems with Deleuze's reading of Bacon -- his haphazard use of history, his tone-deafness when it comes to the paintings themselves -- are symptoms of a more fundamental issue of approach. For, despite his attentiveness to specific artworks, it is not really art that interests Deleuze. He is only interested in art as it relates to a specific problem in philosophy, which is the representation of being. Thus, the history of art and the quirks of Bacon's particular oeuvre both get reduced to responses to the dilemmas of representation -- the space of "classical" painting, for Deleuze, is reducible to a manner of establishing an "objective" space which separates out the subject from the object, while he defines the achievement of Bacon as having to do with the way his work undoes

Francis Bacon
Three Figures in a Room
1964
Georges Pompidou Center

Francis Bacon
Triptych
1991
Museum of Modern Art
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Francis Bacon
Three Studies for a Crucifixion
1962
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum
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Francis Bacon
Portrait of Isabel Rawsthorne Standing in a Street in Soho
1967
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie
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this separation, collapsing visual space and returning the subject to its vital co-dependence with its environment.

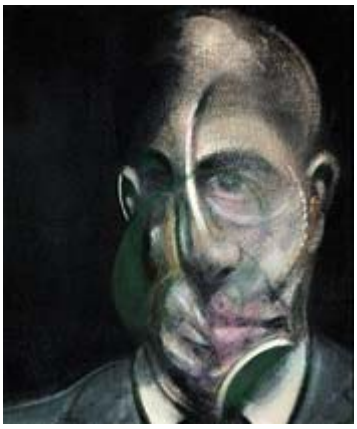
There is some truth to this reading (though I will take David Harvey's account of the Renaissance production of "objective" perspectival space as a function of a nascent mercantile capitalism's needs for objective cartography and scientific knowledge over Deleuze's placeless, causeless account any day). The real problem lies in the way that *The Logic of Sensation* reads artworks as nothing more than responses to intellectual problems, turning philosophical pertinence into a device for evaluating artistic quality. Despite the protestations of both his translator and Tom Conley, who writes an afterward for the most recent edition of the book, *The Logic of Sensation* does in fact amount to a philosophical esthetics. It is full of casual generalizations about the ontology of art that are used as evaluative tools. Take the following: "[T]here is a special relation between painting and hysteria. . . Painting directly attempts to release the presences beneath representation, beyond representation." Deleuze then goes on to judge the success of various styles of painting against this definition of painting's essence.

The paradoxical result, given this thinker's reputation as a champion of difference, is that various artworks are conceived of as offering right or wrong answers, thereby strictly limiting the modes of appreciating art: "There are two ways in which the [modern] painting can fail," Deleuze pronounces confidently, "once visually" -- that would be abstraction of the Mondrian/Kandinsky variety, deemed to be too wrapped up in a quest for ideal Forms -- "and once manually." The latter case is that of Pollock-style abstraction, which Deleuze finds not merely distasteful, but demonstrably false. "By liberating a space that is (wrongly) claimed to be purely optical, the abstract expressionists in fact did nothing other than to make visible an exclusively manual space." Marcel Duchamp, likewise, comes under fire for being too random, and therefore still implicitly posing a difference between human agency and impersonal chance. In the end, it seems Deleuze's theory is only flexible enough to accommodate Cézanne, Michelangelo, Rembrandt and Bacon.

Which brings me to my final point, which is about the self-undermining nature of Deleuzian "logic" in general. Even philosophical rivals like Alain Badiou will admit that Deleuze constructed a system that is formidably suggestive. However, it must be admitted that any attempt to actually *do anything* with his thought has mainly added up to nothing, or worse. The most successful attempt to put Deleuze's insights into political form, for instance, is Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's tome *Empire*, a work that essentially amounts to proposing not having a plan as a strategy for the anti-globalization movement (This is not a surprise, really -- Deleuze's frequent role-model was French philosopher Henri Bergson, whose reflections on the "élan vital" famously became reactionary when taken up as a political philosophy; the Bergsonian tendency to leave politics to "the irrational, to chance" is a subject of critique in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*).

Who was Gilles Deleuze? He was a French leftist philosopher who wrote all his major works in the '60s and '70s, most of them in the wake of the uprising of May 1968. As such, his work partakes of the sense of radical intellectual experimentation of that period, but also of the New Left's disillusionment with material and historical explanations for reality (somewhat understandable, given the Stalinized nature of the French Communist Party's politics, and the major role it played in French intellectual life). The philosophy Deleuze offers, in his book on Francis Bacon and elsewhere, gets much of its appeal because it still resounds with liberatory rhetoric. We live in a world that brutally instrumentalizes bodies, tries to sell people unrealistic Platonic ideals of what they can be -- so Deleuze's

Francis Bacon
Two Studies for a Portrait of George Dyer
1968
Sara Hildén Foundation / Sara Hildén Art Museum



Francis Bacon
Portrait of Michel Leiris
1976
Centre Pompidou

Francis Bacon
Portrait of John Edwards
1988
Estate of Francis Bacon, courtesy Faggionato Fine Arts and Tony Shafrazi

anti-Platonist philosophy that bodies cannot be confined to any one definition, that they are indisociably part of a constantly surging flux of self-differentiating energy, has a potent social content. (It's always worth remembering that Deleuze, like his colleague Michel Foucault, had a famous -- if equivocal -- association with the gay liberation movement.)

Nevertheless, the problem with Deleuze's attempt to write difference into ontology is that in reality what is "different" is determined in relation to actual, historical events, not in some abstract, free-flowing psychic space. Without anchoring concepts in relation to a real context, there is no way to stop one's prescriptions from becoming ahistorical formulae, no matter how many times you state that they can't be. In some contradictory way, I think that it is precisely this formalistic character which explains the continued appeal of Deleuze in art circles today: He allows his followers to insist that they are committed to liberating desire from all pre-established structures, while in fact confining themselves to a pretty narrow, predictable structure (Badiou rightly declares Deleuze's oeuvre to be conceptually "monotonous" underneath its superficial complexity). In *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze and collaborator Felix Guattari tell us that philosophy is not about establishing fixed axioms and rules, but about creating new concepts, new trajectories of thought. It should therefore be deeply embarrassing that 99 percent of all writing on Deleuze is simply slavish blow-by-blow recapitulation, and that the Met show pays homage to him as a kind of aphorism-spouting sage.

In the final analysis, Francis Bacon's oeuvre itself provides a tremendous example of the necessity of a historical approach. Read Jerry Saltz's recent biographical sketch of Bacon's career [see "Sacred Monster," May 27, 2009]. Whereas in *The Logic of Sensation*, it often seems that Bacon's career trajectory is nothing but a circling ever closer to Deleuze's own position, Saltz shows how Bacon's style, at one point an expression of a potent and unique worldview, eventually became a gimmick, a defense mechanism. The very same formal tics that had been an expression of an original thought became a way of resisting confronting further original thought. "What's especially poignant about Bacon is that he knew he'd built his own prison. As early as 1963, he referred to 'my rigidness.' He talked about the 'drawback' of his style and how he used painterly tics as a 'device.'"

My sense is that these days the gleam is off the postmodern apple. But intellectual life moves slowly, weighed down by the structures of tenure, inherited prestige, institutional inertia and so on. There will always be room for difficult-to-understand figures, simply so that curators and scholars who need to establish some kind of objective authority in the profoundly subjective field of art can invoke something that goes over the head of the average person. But it seems to me that these days the recourse to Deleuze's flawed Bacon book is its own kind of rigid "reflex," its own kind of inert intellectual "device." In invoking its authority, it's worth wondering whether we aren't building a prison around Bacon, rather than seeing him well.

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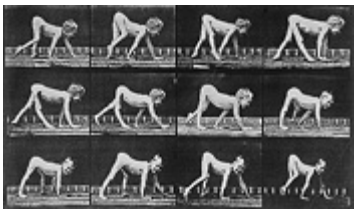
Gallery

Francis Bacon
Blood on Pavement
1988
Private collection

Francis Bacon
Paralytic Child Walking on All Fours (from Muybridge)
1961
Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, The Hague



Eadweard Muybridge
Infantile paralysis; child walking on hands and feet, plate 539 from 'Animal Locomotion'
1887
V&A Museum

Francis Bacon
Study for a Portrait of Van Gogh IV
1957
Tate Gallery, London

Installation view of "Francis Bacon: A Centenary Retrospective," at the Metropolitan Museum of Art