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**The multiplicity of form and the matter of sensation : an exploration of intensity
in *Francis Bacon the logic of sensation***

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Over the last two decades, we have witnessed a major shift in the realm of theoretical production, many current approaches being marked by a renewed interest in the real, the material or the ontological. This is the so-called material turn, a theoretical perspective whose common denominator is a perceived neglect of matter, in the dominant Western tradition, as a passive substance intrinsically devoid of any meaning. This theoretical tendency finds its clearest expression in approaches such as « speculative realism », « object-oriented ontology », « vital materialism » or « assemblage theory », among others. Breaking away from the so-called Kantian « correlationism », these « new materialisms » will, on the one hand, criticize the anthropocentric, linguistic and constructivist orientations of some of the most important perspectives in twentieth-century theory, and, on the other hand, they will emphasize how matter is « alive », « lively », « vibrant », « dynamic », « agentive », and thus, *active*. Given the fact that Deleuze raised important criticism to a purely linguistic constructivism and to different humanist theoretical approaches of his time, and taking into account that much of his philosophy is focused on material becomings and assemblages, it comes as no surprise that his work figures as an important reference in the writings of Manuel DeLanda, Rosi Braidotti, Jane Bennett, Ray Brassier, Steven Shaviro, Elizabeth Grosz, Levi Bryant, or Quentin Meillassoux, to name a few.

If, for the most part, Deleuze's work can be read through the lenses of a « vital materialism » — knowing the importance he embodies for Bennett in *Vibrant matter* — I'd like to present today a more complex view of matter than just a solely active, self-creative, and productive instance. By showing the critical reappraisal of the notions of form and matter in Deleuze's account of Francis Bacon's painting, I'd like to stress the « performative » character that matter possess in Deleuze's philosophy of art —this is the process in which it is inscribed. I will focus thus on the main *effect* that Bacon's painting embodies, namely their intensity, their violence to representation. From here, I hope to show how Deleuze establishes an *interaction* between forces and materials (two terms that embody the reappraisal of the matter-form

scheme) to account for the matter of artistic production. Deleuze's account of Bacon will allow us to think matter as the establishment of a reciprocal and immanent relation, a *modulation*, in which the malleability of an instance (material) *resonates* with the multiplicity of the other (force). Far from reducing matter to a vague flat ontology of force in general, we will see how the intensive character of Bacon's work allows Deleuze to stress not just the morphogenetic capability of matter to generate form on its own, but also the capability of form to work onto this same matter, to deform it in multiple ways — The main text to consider will be Deleuze's famous 1981 essay *Francis Bacon: the logic of sensation*¹, nonetheless we will be paying special attention to Bacon's interviews with David Sylvester reunited in *The brutality of fact*².

1. Context

Deleuze's work offers us a critical approach to the status, validity and use of the notions of form and matter mainly through the prism of the metaphysical problem of individuation. Indeed, a large part of his thought constitutes what could be called a radical alternative to the classical way in which Western philosophy has conceived the individual as a composite of form and matter. For instance, one of the main interests of *Difference and repetition* is to explore a process of individuation that precedes *de jure* form and matter as individuating factors: instead of the so-called hylomorphic scheme — whether it be its Aristotelian version or its Kantian reappraisal in the a priori forms of understanding and the material content of sense data —, Deleuze will try to establish a field of « fluid intensive factors », which no more take the form of an I than of a Self, to account for the genesis of the individual. Moreover, in *A Thousand Plateaus*, this field of intensive factors will constitute the famous « becomings » which, as Deleuze and Guattari say, located « between substantial forms and determined subjects », establishing « a natural play of haecceities, degrees, intensities, events, and accidents » will constitute « individuations totally different from those of the well-

¹ Deleuze, G. (2003). *Francis Bacon: the logic of sensation*. Translation: Daniel W Smith. London : Continuum. Cited as FB.

² Bacon, F. & Sylvester, D. (1987). *The Brutality of Fact: Interviews with Francis Bacon*. New York : Thames and Hudson. Cited as TBF.

formed subjects »³. As we can see, at the heart of this alternative a certain concept is key, namely, intensity. First introduced in *Difference and repetition* as the « being of the sensible », the « closest noumenon to a phenomenon », intensity, in *A Thousand plateaus*, will open up the way to a reflection on the cinematic and affective modulations (movements and speeds) that traverse the body and define a new vision of the individual that permeate *between* form and matter.

Although the logical and ontological ramifications of intensity are mainly developed in works such as *Difference and repetition* or *A Thousand Plateaus*, little attention has been paid to its *aesthetic* character, even if, for instance, already in *Difference and repetition*, intensity is defined as « the object of a violent encounter and the object to which the encounter raises sensibility »⁴.

2. Intensity in Francis Bacon

This aesthetic character of intensity will be best embodied, in Deleuze's view, in the work of Francis Bacon: in front of one of his paintings, we are faced primarily with a *poignant pictorial intensity*. Bacon not just exemplifies intensity, he *performs* it. As Bacon tells David Sylvester in the *Interviews*: « I've always hoped to put over things as directly and rawly as I possibly can »⁵. Indeed, we are here confronted in his works to bodies, heads, or different distorted figures which appear as the « subject » of all sorts of static spasms or silent convulsions, all of this in the midst of an ever-present shallow depth of pastel color. If some of these images seem to exhibit some type of cruelty, Bacon remarks, it's because « reality is cruel ». For Deleuze, this fact of Bacon's work is equivalent to a certain *violence* central to his artistic production, « a violence that is involved only with color and line: the violence of a sensation, a static or potential violence, a violence of creation and expression »⁶. Not to be identified with the violence of war or the violence lived by the author, Bacon himself states that this « violence of paint » deals only with « an attempt to remake the violence of reality

³ Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1988). *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. Bloomsbury Publishing. p. 253. Cited as ATP

⁴ Deleuze, G. (1994). *Difference and repetition*. Columbia University Press. p. 145

⁵ TBF: p. 48

⁶ FB: p. X

itself »⁷. As he tells Sylvester, this artistic concern toward the violence of reality has meant, at different stages of his career, « to catch the fact at its most living point », « to get to the living quality », « to bring over the sensation and the feeling of life at the most acute point one can, as closely to one's own nervous system as one possibly can »⁸. Moreover, to bring back this intensity of reality has meant for Bacon a re-invention and re-creation of realism: art needs « to wash the realism back onto the nervous system because there isn't such a thing in painting any longer as natural realism »⁹.

This reinvention of realism is interpreted by Deleuze in a very precise manner. Seeing in Bacon an heir to Cézanne and Soutine, Deleuze will argue that the chief interest in Bacon's work is *to discover the body as flesh, the reality of meat, and the invisible forces that act upon it*. In doing so, Deleuze underlines a crucial point for us: in Bacon's artistic production, he says, we won't find a standard and historically predominant relationship of form and matter, instead everything here is a relation between « materials and forces ». In this view, for instance, the traditional vision of form as an active, independent and static principle of determination of matter will be, as Bacon says, « shuttered »¹⁰. We believe that a reinvented realism in Bacon's work amounts to a critical reappraisal of the matter-form scheme in the relation of materials and forces. In doing so, Deleuze advances a new conception of the task of art: the problem of art is not a question of finding forms appropriated to reproduce a certain thing or a certain subject; instead art is performative, dealing with the question of *capturing forces*, being its task nothing more than « to render visible forces that are not themselves visible »¹¹.

3. The Figure against representation

In the first place, Deleuze is interested in Bacon because he sees in his work an alternative to an omnipresent matrix for painting, namely, *representation*. In visual art, representation is

⁷ TBF: p. 81

⁸ Cf. TBF: p. 54, p. 174, p. 43

⁹ TBF: p. 176.

¹⁰ Cf. Bacon's remarks about Degas in TBF pp. 46-47 and p. 176.

¹¹ FB: p. 56.

embodied in painting's concern with figuration, illustration or narration: an object to represent, a story to tell, a subject to figure:

the figurative implies the relationship of an image to an object that is supposed to illustrate; but it also implies the relationship of an image or other images in a composite whole which assigns a specific object to each of them. Narration is the correlation of illustration. A story always slips into, or tends to slip into, the space between two figures in order to animate the illustrated whole¹².

Long before the study on Bacon, *Difference and repetition* had already challenged representation as the predominant image of thought in the history of philosophy, image whose elements could be traced back to the philosophies of Aristotle, Descartes, Kant or Hegel. In this place, representation is developed as the presupposed image of thought as the natural exercise of a faculty with an essential affinity for truth. One of the main postulates of this image is the model of recognition: thought is supposed to recognize subjects, objects, or even the values attached to it; everything revolves here around the "I think" as the most general principle, an I think, pure form of thought, who projects unity and identity, who informs, a certain indeterminate object, a certain passive matter, which appears opposed to it. Likewise, painting's concern with figuration, illustration or narration implies a deep interest in recognition. When confronted to a painting, we are called to be capable of discerning its theme, identifying its object: painting appeals here to the understanding, more so than to sensation; the painter acts here as the pure form of thought who determines, through a specific form, an indeterminate matter in order for the viewer to recognize in it the clear vision of a scene, a story or a person.

In opposition to this figurative mode of painting, Deleuze sees in Bacon's work the liberation of the *Figural*, liberation of the figure as opposed to a pure form. What is the difference then, between figuration-illustration and Bacon's figures? It is a question of how the way images work. A figure is for Bacon an « attempt to bring the figurative thing up onto the nervous system more violently and more poignantly »¹³. The difference between illustrative and non-illustrative means lies in the fact that « an illustrational form tells you through the intelligence

¹² FB: pp. 2-3.

¹³ TBF: p. 12.

what the form is about », whereas a non-illustrational form, a figure, « works first upon sensation and then slowly leaks back into the fact »¹⁴. Bacon's figures do not speak the language of form, they perform instead the power of an intense experience, being literally not « telling ». These figures do not operate through the means of recognition, instead they *record* a fact, something that Bacon says « has a life completely of its own, that lives on its own », something « to do solely with *instinct* »¹⁵. In this sense, Deleuze resumes Bacon's non-illustrative endeavor: « to stick to the fact »¹⁶.

4. Deleuze's structural analysis of Bacon

This artistic interest in rendering the fact becomes clear if we recall Deleuze's structural analysis of Bacon. The figure, being the central element, is nonetheless not alone in the painting, we consistently find also a color-field and a contour. Not detached from one another, but in the same plane, these elements appear intertwined, exhibiting a certain tension. This dynamic character is explicit in the first relation established in the paintings, namely the *isolation* of the *Figure* by a round or ovale area. Isolation renders sensible an exploration of the figure's fact: something happens inside the contour, something strictly unrecognizable. Alongside them we find the paintings being systematically occupied by large fields of « bright, uniform, and motionless color ». These color-fields are not a back-ground for the isolated figures: its function is merely spatial, atmospherical, being located *strictly to the side of* figures, or rather, *all around* them. Everything in the painting is thus grasped in a close view, a tactile or « haptic » view Deleuze says: every element is found in the same continuous plane and nonetheless something shocking appears.

Bacon confronts us with a fact: something is shown to us but we cannot grasp it as a story, nor as a subject, nor an object. Form appears displaced by the figure. For Deleuze this is the mark of an *athleticism* proper to Bacon's images, a pictorial tension which renders visible in the painting a set of movements and affects that permeate *beyond* the Form. On the one hand, color curls around the contour, enveloping and imprisoning the figure (this creates their

¹⁴ TBF: p. 56.

¹⁵ Cf. TBF: p. 17-18, p. 54

¹⁶ FB: p. 3.

extreme solitude, the confinement that characterizes the bodies depicted by Bacon). On the other hand, the figure is affected by a strong convulsion, a *spasm*, a forced movement in which it tries to escape, to go outside, toward the color field. The figure is then a plexus, the site of a conflict, a battle. What is more representative of this fact than the scream, the operation through which the entire figure tries to escape through the mouth? Painting is thus an energetic being, the site of a potential energy where the figure not only appears as isolated, but, most importantly, appears as the subject of a process of deformation: « The Figure is not simply the isolated body, but also the deformed body that escapes from itself. »¹⁷.

This athleticism between the field and figure is the power of the painter's work to produce a « clear and durable » sensation, Deleuze says, through a careful orchestration of visual relations or forces. « Matter » appears here not as a passive recipient but as a plastic and malleable material, the body through oil paint: Bacon records all the intensity of the body. The sensible deformations of the body are the fact of Bacon's painting. « The body, Deleuze says, is the Figure, or rather the material of the Figure »¹⁸.

5. *Form, becoming and force*

The Figure is the site for the application of force, this is the poignant element of the picture, element that engages in new kind of pictorial expressions beyond the scheme of form. These new kind of expressions are best captured in Deleuze's notion of a *becoming*. Give, for instance, a human face or a human body to Bacon and he will render you something different, not a representation, but its fact: the human body will *become* an animal body; the face, for example in Bacon's series of portraits, will *become* a head. As *A thousand plateaus* reminds us « becoming is not to imitate or identify with something or someone »¹⁹. Bacon pursues a rather different path: to dismantle the face, to dismantle its form, and to rediscover the head or make it emerge from beneath the face. In its *becoming*, instead of formal correspondence or formal qualification, the material is worked in its relation to a force. The fact that the material is comprised in a state of becoming means for Deleuze that he is to be found in the

¹⁷ FB: p. 18.

¹⁸ FB: p. 20.

¹⁹ ATP: p. 272.

midst of a certain « community » of distinct forms, contradictory forms, opposed forms, community which constitutes « a zone of indiscernibility or undecidability between man and animal »²⁰. This community of forms, Deleuze warns, must not be understood as a combination of forms, rather it is to be understood as a common fact, « the common fact of man and animal », the common fact of form and form, a multiplicity of forms or a form of the multiple rendered visible in the painting of a force. This common fact discloses, concomitantly, the malleability of the material: the fact that the figure is to be found in a zone of indiscernibility means that the material is already, virtually, this and that, can be this and that, precisely because it is ontologically indiscernable, unrecognizable, from this or that. The form is then deformed in favor of a *multiplicity of forms* in a force. Force is the trait that visually performs the potential energy of the material, it emerges concomitantly to the plastic dispositions of the material, force is in a reciprocal relation to the material's position, to its dynamic, to its situation. Painting expresses then the virtual power of a body, of any-body, a person, a crowd, an animal, a mountain, a machine: a body can be this and this and this, and so on... precisely because form becomes imperceptible in a wider network of coexisting forms in a force.

6. *Matter, meat and materials*

Bacon presents us then with a zone of indiscernibility of forms. Force, as opposed to form, is multiple and emerges concomitantly with the different declensions of the material. The malleability of the material signals in this sense a revaluation of the notion of matter as a passive receptacle of form. In Bacon, Deleuze says, it is not just the body that is exhibited but all its *affective nature*: the body is here nothing more than meat, flesh. This is no static or passive matter, on the contrary it embodies a rich and powerful dynamic: « Meat is not dead flesh; it retains all the sufferings and assumes all the colors of living flesh. It manifests such convulsive pain and vulnerability, but also such delightful invention, color, and acrobatics »²¹. Meat is not an object conceived to be grasped intellectually through the recognition of the form it would carry, it is a fact that acts immediately upon the nervous system. Meat refers then to a matter of sensation, this is, the pathic or affective malleability

²⁰ FB: p. 21.

²¹ FB: p. 23.

of the body as a matter of an intense experience. « What is painted on the canvas is the body, not insofar as it is represented as an object, but insofar as it is experienced as sustaining this sensation »²².

To paint sensation, to record its fact, that's Bacon's principal goal for Deleuze. What is at stake here is no ordinary concept of sensation, but an ontological one. Sensation is ontological for Deleuze, as it was for Merleau-Ponty in *The visible and the invisible*. The body experiencing the weight of a sensation discloses a vital power (*puissance vitale*) that, contrary to the lived experience at the core of the interest of phenomenology, exceeds every domain of the organism. In painting we see recorded then a body that sustains affectivity, a supple and ductile body prone to be modeled in different ways by different emotions, states, etc. It is, as Deleuze remarks, a body constituted not of parts, *partes extra partes*, but by thresholds or levels, degrees, « an intense and intensive body of sensation » exposed not to objects, but to « allotropic variations »²³. This body, the famous body without organs, the matter of sensation, is then a throbbing material, « flesh and nerve » Deleuze stresses²⁴.

7. *Rhythm and modulation*

We can thus understand the conceptual shift Deleuze is operating. The performative fact of Bacon, the violence of his paintings, shifts the interest from the notions of form and matter to the dynamic between forces (an indiscernible multiplicity of forms) and materials (a malleable and pathic matter of sensation). Unlike the hierarchical, static and closed relationship established between form and matter, forces and materials develop a more reciprocal, a more dynamic and a more open-ended relationship. This new relationship discloses what Deleuze calls the *rhythms* of painting, a coexistence of different *durations* that distribute movement in a painting, between a diastole and a systole, a systole « which

²² FB: p. 35.

²³ ALLOTROPY is a property of certain elements, as carbon, sulfur, and phosphorus, of existing in two or more distinct forms; a synonym of this process is allomorphism.

²⁴ Cf. FB: pp. 44-45.

contracts the body, and a diastole, which extends and dissipates it »²⁵. Everything is disposed then between a maximum and a minimum, between a crescendo and a diminuendo, an expansion and a contraction of color and figure. This twofold process is then the heart of a true materialism in Bacon.

Far from reducing the multiplicity of matter into a vague flat ontology of force in general — as some vital materialism do by thinking matter as solely active, self-creative, and productive²⁶ — in Bacon's colorism force and material are related through a certain *resonance*, this is a *reverberation*, a rhythm where the multiplicity of force *acts* upon the material, while the malleability of this material *reacts* to the same force. This means that the prevalence of a force in a determined area of the painting signals a concomitant contraction of the material; while the absence of this force's activity refers to a concomitant expansion, a free flow, of the material. In this view, the matter in the painting is « vibrant » or « alive » to the extent that it displays a twofold throbbing process of activity and reactivity, contraction and expansion, enclosure and fluidity: force acts and contracts the material into the deformation of the figure; and at the same time, the material untouched by force expands and relaxes into the motionless color of the fields. A painting is thus an individual disposition of active and variable forces and ductile and plastic materials, a continuous contraction and expansion of their differences in a particular colorism. This trait of his work, remarks Bacon, renders painting *saturated* with different orders of one and the same sensation, these orders accumulate or coagulate, for it is the nature of sensation, as Deleuze stresses, « to envelop a constitutive difference of level, a plurality of constitutive domains »²⁷. These different levels of saturation are best described by Bacon when he talks about the malleability of oil paint:

²⁵ FB: p. 33. The key passage in question is the following: « Everything is divided into diastole and systole, with repercussions at each level. The systole, which contracts the body, goes from the structure to the Figure, while the diastole, which extends and dissipates it, goes from the Figure to the structure. But there is already a diastole in the first movement, when the body extends itself in order to better close in on itself; and there is a systole in the second movement, when the body is contracted in order to escape from itself; and even when the body is dissipated, it still remains contracted by the forces that seize hold of it in order to return it to its surroundings. The coexistence of all these movements in the painting... is *rhythm* »

²⁶ The key objection to ask here is the following: « If all matter is active to the point that it has been stripped of passivity, then how can matter act without an object on which to act? ». For a reconstruction of vital materialism and its objections see Gamble, C. Hanan, J & Nail, T. (2019) What is new materialism?, *Angelaki*, 24:6, 111-134.

²⁷ FB: p. 37.

With oil paint being so fluid, the image is changing all the time while you're working. One thing either builds on another or destroys the other...I mean, it's in the way that one end of the brush may be filled with another color and the pressing of the brush, by accident, makes a mark which gives a *resonance* to the other marks; and this leads on to a *further development* of the image²⁸

Take as an example the depiction of an organ: following this fluidity of the material, at a certain level, following a certain force, according to a certain accident, an organ can sprout while the painter is working; in the process of painting, this organ will change if the force itself changes, or if it moves to another level, or if something else happens. The *ongoing process* that this way of envisioning painting presents *modulate* the emergence or destruction of the particular image.

We have to finally stress the word modulate here. Extracted from Gilbert Simondon's work *L'individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information*, to modulate means « to mold in a continuous and perpetually variable manner »²⁹. As Anne Sauvagnargues remarks, in modulation we do not have the imposition of a form, but a *reciprocal* « assumption of form (*prise de forme*) » between a force and a material, a continuous and temporal moulding; what counts here is that both instances enter into a common system and together realize an operation of individuation through a continuous exchange of information, through a joint exchange of the material's properties and the concrete action of the force³⁰. Establishing a modulation, Bacon's painting takes matter already as the bearer of forms as expressive and energetic features: in this sense, as Daniela Voss remarks, the material already carries implicit forms and the form itself is material; the material already carry the seeds of its alteration, and forces are never fixed moulds, they are determined by the very singularities of the material that impose implicit processes of deformation³¹. Sensation recorded in oil painting is already

²⁸ TBF: p. 121

²⁹ Simondon opposes modulation to moulding saying: « *Mouler est moduler de manière définitive; moduler est mouler de manière continue et perpétuellement variable* » See Simondon, G. (2005). *L'individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information*. Éditions Jérôme Millon. p. 47.

³⁰ Sauvagnargues, A. (2016). *Artmachines: Deleuze, Guattari, Simondon*. Edinburgh University Press. p. 69.

³¹ Voss, D. (2020). Modulating Matters: Simondon, Deleuze and Guattari in Przedpełski, R., & Wilmer, S. E. (Eds.). *Deleuze, Guattari and the Art of Multiplicity*. Edinburgh University Press, pp. 50-54.

a matter-energy full of virtual forces to discover in painting; by modulating this immanent relation, the painter acts as the heart of a throbbing dynamic: he works either by contracting or enclosing color or by letting it relax, expand, and flow; by the latter movement color develops into planes connected and merged in a shallow depth, and by the former, color curls into the figure which integrates force in the imbalance of its deformation. As Daniel W Smith explains: « each element of Bacon's paintings converges in color, and it is this modulation that explains the unity of the whole, the distribution of each element, and the way each of them acts upon the others »³². With this process of modulation as the pinnacle of the logic of sensation, painting discovers what Deleuze & Guattari had already advanced in *A thousand plateaus*' eleventh plateau « 1837: On the refrain » namely, the fact that « art is no longer a question of imposing a form upon a matter but of elaborating an increasingly rich and consistent material, the better to tap increasingly intense forces »³³.

³² Smith, D. W. (2012). *Essays on Deleuze*. Edinburgh University Press. p. 234.

³³ ATP: 329.