PORTRAIT
D'UNE JEUNE FILLE AMERICAINE
DANS L'ÉTAT DE NUDITÉ

Art History after **Deleuze** and **Guattari**

Sjoerd van Tuinen,
Stephen Zepke (eds)

LEUVEN UNIVERSITY PRESS

Reprint from "Art History after Deleuze and Guattari" - ISBN 978 94 6270 115 1 - © Leuven University Press, 2017

Art History after Deleuze and Guattari

Art History after Deleuze and Guattari

EDITED BY SJOERD VAN TUINEN
AND STEPHEN ZEPKE

LEUVEN UNIVERSITY PRESS

© 2017 by Leuven University Press / Presses Universitaires de Louvain / Universitaire Pers
Leuven Minderbroedersstraat 4, B-3000 Leuven (Belgium)

All rights reserved. Except in those cases expressly determined by law, no part of this
publication may be multiplied, saved in an automated data file or made public in any way
whatsoever without the express prior written consent of the publishers.

ISBN: 978 94 6270 115 1

eISBN: 978 94 6166 242 2

D / 2017/ 1869 / 43

NUR: 654-651

Layout: Friedemann Vervoort

Cover design: Anton Lecock

Cover illustration: "Portrait d'une Jeune Fille Américaine dans l'État de Nudité" drawing by
Francis Picabia.

The Logic of Sensation and Logique de la sensation as Models for Experimental Writing on Images

JAMES ELKINS

What follows is an informal meditation on Deleuze's book. I am mainly concerned with what might count as experimental, or otherwise innovative, writing on visual art. The habits of art history, visual studies, visual theory, and aesthetics bother me because even at their most engaging – I am thinking of recent work by Sianne Ngai, W.J.T. Mitchell, Alexander Nemerov, and others in and out of disciplinary art history – they employ images as examples of argument and even as dispensable illustrations. Despite a tremendous rhetoric about the emancipation of the image, its capacity to theorize, its power, its deep interactions with the text, contemporary art scholars in all the fields I have mentioned continue to write as if images did not, in fact, need to contribute anything except exemplification or validation of claims made in the text – a text in which they are often engulfed ('wrapped' in the current page layout jargon). It seems to me Deleuze's books – in the plural, because the French and English are significantly different in this regard – display a very unusual and possibly fruitful way to rethink the ways images and texts can be presented.

Notes on the Books' Material Configuration

The first of the two volumes of the original 1981 edition of Deleuze's book (published by Éditions de la Différence) is text, and the second is illustrations (note the Roman numeral I on the cover; vol. 2 is titled 'II – Peintures').

Tom Conley's Afterword to the English translation is exemplary in its attention to this fact, but even Conley, who is arguably the scholar most likely to take formatting and illustrations seriously, doesn't draw many conclusions from the layout. He notes that call-outs (references to the images in the second volume) are placed in the margins, 'somewhat like title-summaries in *manchettes* in early-modern printed books, in which the text itself can be seen at once as a "legend" underwriting the

images or even as a component unit of a greater “fable” built upon the composite character of words and pictures’ (2005, 131).

Here is a page from an early modern Bible, for example (Fig 2), with cross-references in the margins. (There would be much more recent examples, including the original French edition of Barthes’s *Camera Lucida*.) Part of Conley’s gloss on the ‘*manchettes*’ (marginal call-outs) is plausible: the use of marginal numbers does create the effect that the text is a “legend” (caption), but for me the practice means more that the text, considered as a whole, and the images, in their separate book, are equally important, that both are continuous, and that one is not interrupted by the other. The call-outs also remind a reader that the text does not often need to specify exact images, and in fact Deleuze doesn’t always specify exactly what image he means: a figure number is anchored well enough if it is in the vicinity of its sentence. In the English edition, the call-outs only refer to the small-print list of plates at the end of the book, and not to illustrations; but they are in the text, in square brackets, which places them precisely in relation to the grammar of the text. In that way the logic of a given sentence, and its singular referent, are closely bound. In Deleuze’s usage, it is the vagueness about that relation that’s striking. Why, a reader may ask, does it not matter exactly when images are being referred to, or exactly how many images might be meant, or when a reader might choose to look at the images?

Figure 1: Page 45 from *Logique de la Sensation* vol. 1. Éditions de la Différence, 1981.

Figure 2: Page from the King James Bible, 1611.

Conley notes that once an illustration has been called out, its number may not be given again, implying either that the reader has gotten to know the image in question, or that readers aren't expected to turn back and forth as they would in a conventional art history text. Conley suggests the two volumes be read in 'juxtaposition,' perhaps in the same disordered way that the chapters of the text can be read. (Deleuze says the chapters are arranged in order of ascending difficulty, but that statement immediately, and permanently, places in question the value and meaning of 'complexity,' inviting readers to read in other orders.)

Later in the introduction, Conley guesses that Deleuze might have owned eleven paintings that were added, without explanation, to the third edition of the French text; at least Deleuze probably had reproductions on his walls or floor when he was working on the book, because 'the unlinked and paratactic quality' of his observations suggest he is 'telling the reader to break frequently with the line of his reasoning by looking in detail at an ample quantity of pictures' (2005, 132). Conley also takes note of the fact that the back covers of both volumes of the original edition have photos Bacon took of himself, which makes the covers look like contact sheets, and brings the artist's body and life back into the reading – but Conley's reading stops with those observations, and he moves on to other topics (2005, 142).

Figure 3: Front and back covers of *Logique de la Sensation* vol. 1. Éditions de la Différence, 1981.

The fundamental physical fact of the two volumes means that Deleuze's text exists alongside the paintings as a proximate but potentially detachable narrative. That property is made literal in the single-volume English translation, which is completely unillustrated and has only a list of the paintings, in a very tiny font (especially minuscule in the paperback – as if the editors felt a fiduciary responsibility to list the paintings they weren't reproducing).

It is also pertinent to the phenomenology of reading that in the original French edition, some triptychs are foldouts, producing a suddenly more immersive experience. My experience reading in the original is that I seldom have an image and text side by side, because it's too awkward. I turn from one to the other, looking or reading sequentially in either volume, then returning to the other. To see images and text in strict parallel, as in a more conventional book, it is necessary to evaporate the physical books into digital images. I imagine many people read in this way when they study the English translation, with a computer screen nearby to check references. Needless to say that sort of reading won't be what Deleuze might have imagined.

I am not aware of any documents or further information about Deleuze's involvement in the design of the book, but as it was printed, the Editions de la Différence text is a material exemplification of a theme that Deleuze develops throughout the book: the possibility of writing in such a way that the images are not reduced to illustrations, decorations, examples, or mnemonics as art history typically does.¹

The Logic of Writing in *Logic of Sensation*

Two things become clear, I think, early on in a reading of either the French or English versions of *Logic of Sensation*: the text has an unusual form, and that form is somehow related to the paintings, to the 'logic of sensation' that the text is exploring, or to both. It also becomes evident that the author will remain silent on that point, and that he is possibly working on these issues as he writes.

Some parallels are clearer than others. The idea of writing in a series of differentially disconnected chapters has to appear as a parallel to the book's subject matter, which is a lifetime of differentially disconnected canvases. The idea of writing about the logic of sensation in a series of differentially disconnected chapters also seems appropriate, even if its logic is harder to deduce. (Why write in the form of the object that is being explored? Since Deleuze isn't writing under the pressure of radical claims about the relationship between written form and content, such as the ideas in Adorno's 'Essay as Form,' it is not clear why his writing persistently explores the possibilities of presenting itself in levels, intensities, and encounters, even as it describes those very terms.)

The first of these parallels, concerning the structure and sequence of the chapters, is easier to think about. The ordering of the chapters announces its open-endedness, its randomness, at the same time as its author asserts the chapters' logical order (from simple to complex). Deleuze is consistent in his lack of interest in Bacon's development, except where it serves his themes, and his text is a conceptual analysis rather than a chronology or history – and in that regard it does not require the images to be arranged in any particular order. Conley notes that this open-ended and yet structured presentation is consonant with Deleuze's interest in open-ended structures of argument, totalities such as 'a thousand plateaux' that 'cannot be accorded a finite measure' (2005, 134).

The book all but proposes that its structure, its form, is analogous to the 'logic' of its subject. As Conley puts it, 'concepts move through and across his oeuvre analogously to the way painterly forms migrate to and from many places in Bacon's paintings' (2005, 142). Some chapters are 'thumbnail summaries of a theory of aesthetics,' and others are fragments, or portions of larger arguments (2005, 148). Conley thinks *The Logic of Sensation* gave Deleuze a logic of composition that he took with him to his later projects.

Before the *Logic of Sensation* Deleuze philosophizes and conceptualizes; after the work on Bacon a greater and more supple sense of flow, flexion, transformation, and bodily force becomes evident. The style becomes the very image of what Deleuze draws from the life he lived with the paintings (2005, 149).

These are all structural parallels between the 'logic' Deleuze finds in the paintings and the text he produces. There is a strong parallel between Deleuze's central

theory of sensation, which exists in levels and strengths, and comes at us with immediacy and without systematic mediation, and the chapters in his text, whose fundamentally disordered order and varying strength and incision mirror their content: the question is how to read the decision to represent the 'logic' of sensation in the structure of the text (its chapters, its 'supple... flexion') as well as in the text's propositional logic (its argument).

Writing Against Figuration and Abstraction

The *Logic of Sensation* can be read as a model of how not to write philosophy *at* images, or imply images *are* philosophy, or that they're adequately imagined *as* philosophy, history, or criticism: Deleuze's text refuses to be a commentary, just as it refuses physical control of the images of the sort that is implied by conventional art historical or theoretical texts that incorporate reproductions into the flow of the printed page. The writing exists alongside the paintings, both because it is physically adjacent to the companion volume, and because it thinks by enacting parallel structures of force and meaning. Sensation is immediate, it is 'translated directly' (Deleuze is paraphrasing Valéry; *la sensation, c'est qui se transmet directement*): unlike abstraction and figuration, it does not 'pass through the brain' (2005, 32; 1981, 28).

There is a problem, I think, in taking this literally. If the text was actually embodying or exemplifying sensation, it would cease to argue altogether. Yet I am continuously tempted to make a parallel between the theme of avoiding both figuration and abstraction, and Deleuze's own writing as an attempt to avoid both history and philosophy. A useful vehicle for this parallel is Deleuze's notion of the Figure.

The liberation of the Figure from figuration enacts the liberation of writing from description, history, theory, and criticism. The 'very general thread' (*le fil très général*, an odd metaphor) that links Bacon to Cézanne, Deleuze says, is '*paint the sensation*,' in italics in the original (2005, 32; 1981, 28). It would not be misplaced, I think, to read this phrase as *write the sensation*. As Deleuze says of Bacon's supposedly grisly figures, 'the Figures seem to be monsters only from the viewpoint of lingering figuration' (2005, 123): a statement that could be made just as well about his own book.

There is a brief passage on Proust (about whom Deleuze had written a book), in which Deleuze agrees with John Russell's observation that Proust's theory of involuntary memory is similar to Bacon's practice. Deleuze comments:

This is perhaps because Bacon, when he refuses the double way of a figurative painting and an abstract painting, is put in a position analogous to Proust in literature. Proust did not want an abstract literature that was too voluntary

([that would be] philosophy), any more than he wanted a figurative, illustrative, or narrative literature that merely told a story. What he was striving for, what he wanted to bring to light, was a kind of Figure, torn away from figuration and stripped of every figurative function [*arrachée à la figuration, dépouillée de toute fonction figurative*]: a Figure-in-itself, for example the Figure-in-itself of Combray. (2005, 56)

In Deleuze's critique, 'there are two ways of going beyond figuration (that is, beyond both the illustrative and the figurative): either toward abstract form or toward the Figure' (2005, 31). The Figure is a direct record of sensation, the object of Deleuze's study, and its 'logic' involves such things as color, the frame, the contour, and other elements that are the subjects of *The Logic of Sensation*.

It wouldn't be inappropriate to read this passage, and Deleuze's subject in general, as an allegory of his own sense of what it is to write philosophy to one side of painting or literature, rather than *for* or *as* painting or literature. As Conley says, Deleuze's style 'becomes the very image' of his experience looking at Bacon's paintings: it is meant to stand along with his experience of the art, just as the first (unillustrated) volume of the French original edition stands alongside the second volume of plates.

I propose that this passage, this sense of the Figure in the text, both in Proust and in Bacon, can also be understood as a story Deleuze meant to tell himself about the kind of writing he meant to accomplish. He was experimenting with writing the Figure in the text of literature: neither 'too voluntary' nor merely 'illustrative,' but a form of escape from both that was indebted to and dependent on their continuing presence. As such it is an especially strong model for how to write about images: such writing would be a deep challenge to academic modes of addressing images, up to and including post-structural theories by W.J.T. Mitchell, Jean-Luc Nancy, and others, and it would have the interesting virtue of being not entirely easy to justify, maintain, or even understand.

Note

1. These three terms are explored as part of a critique of art history and visual studies in the Introduction to *Theorizing Visual Studies*, and also online in a project called Writing with Images.

References

- Gilles Deleuze (1981), *Francis Bacon, Logique de la sensation*. Paris: Éditions de la Différence.
- Gilles Deleuze (2005), *Francis Bacon, The Logic of Sensation*. Translated by D. Smith. Afterword by T. Conley. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.