Reviews

Painting’s Figural Territory: An Impossible Refrain
a review essay by Christopher Gontar


In the Critique of Judgment (1791), Immanuel Kant investigates the aesthetic category of the beautiful. The text is, rather infamously, linked to his other philosophical works by way of the “supersensible” or thing-in-itself. In a section of his Third Critique, Kant grappled with taste as a judgment that is subjective yet relies on a sensus communis. This gives rise to the antinomy of taste and the notion that the judgment of art is based on concepts (such as common sense) and yet is subjective. His argument has been shown to owe something to the Monadology of Leibniz and his philosophy of pre-established harmony of perspective, though this does not reduce Kant’s antimony of taste to a footnote to Leibniz’s teleology. According to Kant, the “thing-in-itself” supplies the indeterminate concept grounding aesthetic judgment. Kant’s so-called “supersensible” is the concept of purpose and design in things and the universe that resides implicitly or is enfolded in every consciousness. Individuals confronted with what they take as the universally beautiful are understood to recognize that universality by way of this inner sense of purpose, which Kant equates with his “moral law within.” When Kant makes this argument, relying heavily on Leibniz, he appears to claim that the experience of art is irrational and non-discursive.

Reason thus fails to explain the nature and recognition of art beauty, yet it remains, for Kant, an event of “recognition,” which, for Gilles Deleuze and many other continental thinkers, is itself one of his false steps. Kant, however, seems not to distinguish between free judgment (which he treats as a right, albeit one subject to some concept of authenticity), and the impossibility of a discursive explanation that would allow a kind of secondary consensus. Kant has not really located the irreducible freedom of aesthetic judgment. It appears to involve either inability of reason to act directly on aesthetic experience or the impossibility of a dispute, tribunal, or hegemony of taste in reflection. One is reminded of the ambitions of German Idealism in which Hegel and Schelling dealt with the Absolute and the reconciliation of necessity and liberty and where they aim to reflect the more paradigmatic enigmas of philosophy.
As a student, Deleuze himself no doubt began to form his famous polemic against Hegelian thinking in the 1940s while studying Jean Hyppolite’s writing and lectures on the dialectic. Starting with these aesthetic concerns and their larger context, one can posit another question: Is the art object a rational project that tries to “territorialize” itself, along with aesthetic judgment and experience? Or is it, on the contrary, an irrational force that either territorializes (or deterritorializes) thought? “Territorialize” here seems both ambiguous and lacking any clear correlation to thought, yet my intention is to acknowledge, rather than to multiply, the difficulties. Readers, it may be argued, sense the ambiguity in Deleuze’s dual concept of (de)territorialization as it is elaborated in *A Thousand Plateaus, Anti-Oedipus*, and other works.

In Elizabeth Grosz’s *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari* and Simon O’Sullivan’s *Chaos, Territory, Art*, two recent works that address these philosophical concerns, the authors are divided on the question of the relation of art to deterritorialization, a concept that appears to be taken as a kind of counter-reason, though not necessarily as active force and the will to power. Grosz takes art to be territorialization; O’Sullivan views it as a form of deterritorialization. This reconsideration of Kant’s critique of beauty and taste may provide a strong link between these two recent studies on Deleuze’s relationship to art. It must first be acknowledged, however, that Elizabeth Grosz distances her book from the realm of aesthetics: She writes: “My goal is to develop a non-aesthetic philosophy for art, a philosophy appropriate to the arts that neither replaces art history and criticism nor claims to provide an assessment of the value, quality, or meaning of art, but instead addresses the common forces and powers of art, the regions of overlap between the various arts and philosophy (2). Like Deleuze, Grosz argues that art does not create concepts in the way philosophy does. Yet because Kant’s aesthetic judgment involves the creation of a concept of beauty, aesthetics share something with Deleuze’s philosophy—namely, the idea of “concept creation.” Nonetheless, Deleuze and Grosz’s writing on art falls within a Kantian lineage, since it places art alongside philosophy as a response to the problems of ideas and experience. In his study, O’Sullivan reverses this view, holding that art always involves an original territorializing frame—a stance that is evident in his discussion of Francis Bacon’s modern paintings. This frame establishes what Deleuze sees as the conditions for deterritorialization.

Grosz’s briefer volume is written in a more poetic style influenced by Deleuze, perhaps Plato, and other feminist and Existentialist thinkers. Grosz also explores the sexual and biological foundations of music, drawing upon the theories of Darwin, Spencer, Von Uexküll, and the phenomenologist Erwin Straus. In discussing Von Uexküll, Deleuze,
and Bergson, she develops the idea of layers of musical counterpoint in nature and argues against Darwin that sexual selection has primacy over natural selection in the origins of music. Grosz rightfully understands the refrain as an analogue of the territorializing project of art and music in warding off chaos. This notion appears prominently in Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* where the animals formulate a refrain, making light comedy out of the “eternal return.” It must be given a specificity since the refrain is necessary for voices to be joined together simultaneously in any form. This makes the refrain the comic or harmonious moment in music or sexual relations in which violence (chaos) is interrupted. Grosz effectively makes the refrain the territory in music or nature that music must deterritorialize in its full complexity, or tragedy.

This analogy of the refrain cannot by itself reconcile the concepts of territorialization and deterritorialization. If deterritorialization were reducible merely to active force, one could think of its opposite in Adorno’s conception of art as a “useless” phenomenon—a claim that constitutes a polemical move against society and which O’Sullivan pointedly calls into question. O’Sullivan also employs the subjective metaphor of “spectacles” in positing that art constitutes the deterritorialization of the subject. We find Grosz, on the other hand, considering art’s origins—and its modern condition in the light of those origins—as territorialization. These divergent views might be reconciled in the different contexts relating to art’s territorializing origin in Grosz and its deterritorializing modern complexities in O’Sullivan’s analysis.

Grosz and O’Sullivan both include a small chapter on Deleuze’s theories on modern art, in particular his commentary on Cézanne, Van Gogh, and Francis Bacon. Bacon experienced a difficult and at times brutal childhood. Yet his transvestitism and other life issues have an unusually complex relation with his art, intentionally eluding commonly understood relations of violence and representation. Neither Grosz nor Sullivan explores the theme of hysteria in Deleuze’s book on Bacon—an undertaking that may well have further complicated their analyses. Hysteria also would be important for the relation Deleuze establishes between Bacon and the subject of inspiration that he found in the portraits of Diego Velázquez (1599 – 1660). Bacon analyzed the affect of Velázquez’s portrait of Pope Innocent X, and through it the human faces of many other paintings. These matters will become more relevant in the later discussion of sensation. In this context, Grosz ceases to focus on territorialization in order to discuss the “percept and affect” in Deleuze’s study of Bacon—an artist whose style epitomized what Deleuze termed “figurality,” an artistic expression that transcended the “figurative” which, in visual art, refers to human representation.
In Bacon’s *Study after Velázquez’s Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1953), the Pope’s elongated expression, typical for Bacon, is intentionally problematic. It is a sort of critique of the human subject. According to Deleuze, suffering is divided between the immediately sensed pain and convulsion of responding to pain, and the spectacle of the self-as-object. This is a dichotomy that may recall French Existentialism and Sartre’s “unhappy consciousness.” Yet the problematic that Bacon presents here is not one that distinguishes between the sensations of a consciousness and the sensible objects that it desires to possess or reduce. The similarity to Existentialism is heightened by the fact of the intentionality of consciousness, at least in its externally directed faculty. For Deleuze or Bacon himself, “painting the scream” means that a kind of silent scream emanates from the mouth, formed of the sensations that give rise to it. Thus the “inhumanity” of Deleuze-Bacon’s element of the percept or perceptible may refer to the stance it takes against privileging the subject, associated with phenomenology. There are two compositional elements running counter to the hegemony of the human, or “all-too-human”—namely, an inhuman “percept” and “affect” which, for Deleuze, form the “monument” of a work. Again, a vestige of Existentialist thought appears in the idea of a “dilemma” that arises between “painting the horror” and painting the scream, though this is not the dilemma that would appear in either of the two cases.

A column-shaped area around the Pope in Bacon’s 1953 *Study* is dominated by unbroken, though thinly applied brushstrokes. These lines merge with the facial features, joining these even to the folds of the robe and the throne-legs. That the figure is disappearing and appearing from out of a veil of shaded lines may suggest the wresting of sensation from the materials of painting. This is an aspect of Bacon’s “figural” style in which it appears that the image is invaded by many senses converging in a polyvalent body. It is, then, the contingent presence of an observing body in—or before—the plane of the painting. There is, of course, some similarity between Deleuze’s artistic concept of “sensation” and Kant’s “supersensible.” Deleuze’s “Logic of Sensation” is arguably an allusion to his epistemological work, *The Logic of Sense* (1990), in which he introduced his concept of “sense” as a criticism of Frege and Husserl. This “sense” has certain parallels with “sensation” and its liberation in figural art.

Sensations in Deleuze-Bacon are “subjective objectivities or equally objective subjectivities” (Grosz 76). However, in his chapter titled “The Ethicoaesthetics of Affect,” O’Sullivan frames the Deleuze-Bacon question by way of Deleuze’s interpretation of Spinoza and his *Ethics*. Here Deleuze saw a kind of deterritorialization of morality as a confluence of inner forces that abandoned the hegemony of redemption and punishment.
for an ethical “typology of modes of existence” and the pantheism that also influenced Schelling’s and Hegel’s idealism. Along with considering this aspect of Deleuze’s thought, O’Sullivan posits the modern abolition of figuration and representation as the artistic alteration of everyday consciousness, opening up a world of vibrating forces and affects, rather than representations.

Here it is a question of making yourself a “Body without Organs,” the latter understood, in this context, as a strategy for accessing that which is normally “outside” yourself (that is, outside your signifying self), your “experimental milieu” which everywhere accompanies your sense of identity. Sadomasochistic practices, meditation, drugs, and so on, all in different ways open up these molecular worlds. (48)

These assertions are in step with Grosz’s explanation of the excavation of Baconian “affects and percepts” from the human.

Perceptions and affections, forces lived in everyday life, can only be wrenched from this (evolutionary) context to the extent that the natural and the lived are themselves transformed, the virtual in them explored [. . .]. (Grosz, 78)

Indeed, Grosz and O’Sullivan are in close agreement that Bacon’s figural paintings produce other “possible worlds” by embodying the “virtual.” Yet these authors differ somewhat on Deleuze’s “bloc of sensation,” and the vibratory expressions of “inhuman” perception and affect as they are presented in Bacon’s 1953 Study. For Grosz, in figurality, whether Bacon’s or that of a faint precursor, sensation is not one of the elements mediated in the plane of “painting sensation.” Rather, sensation is this mediation, standing between chaos and “the virtual forces of bodies” (80). In this reading, it may seem that “territorialization” is still a key concept, since the new plane of painting is given a conceptual name: sensation. O’Sullivan, however, claims that the figural occurs between sensation and material. Nonetheless, in any reading, this induces in us certain strange affects, which normally we do not experience well at all. O’Sullivan and Grosz note that, for Deleuze, sensation is a contraction of vibrations. Although Grosz does not discuss figurality in as much detail as O’Sullivan, she mentions several painters important for Deleuze, making her book an excellent companion to O’Sullivan’s.

Both Grosz and O’Sullivan understand Deleuze’s “sensation” as an element of contingency in the figure, which figural art will liberate. The difference I wish to state here is that Grosz may understand or view this possible art movement more in the sense that the figural becomes art or takes on the position of art more generally, in the manner of a Nietzschean
“becoming what one is.” In O’Sullivan’s account one gets more of the impression that this liberation involves a liberator, or that the aesthetic subject begins to “deterioralize” sensation’s “action of forces” from above, while maintaining itself (59, 63). But in any case, sensation as the action of forces that proves most elusive in representation of the human is somehow present in any figurative image. In Cézanne and Bacon, a similar stratum begins to be explored aesthetically, and that effort progressively breaks more radically with figuration. O’Sullivan is thinking of the emergence of sensation from the point of view of a more invariant aesthetic subject that undergoes this development. Thus he focuses on the refinement of concepts of creation and form, and on “deterioralization” as how art ceases to “represent” and becomes something more radical.

Another way to look at this difference is that Deleuze’s understanding of “sensation” in painting is marked by the counter-Impressionist thinking of Cézanne and Bacon. In fact, the origins of painting sensation are, according to Deleuze, not specific or definable, and they appear in Cézanne as a kind of critique of Impressionism. The more we include the history of art in this development, the more it will seem as if art is already pregnant with the possibility of emerging “sensation.” Impressionism withdraws subjectivity from the painted surface considered as a transparent representation, or conventional figuration. Through the perspectival and affective properties of color, Impressionism “(de)territorialized” the viewing subject, and territorialized the object.

Painting “sensation” and the “figural” itself would, however, involve something quite different and more complicated. Rather than a visual sensation situated between subject and object, Cézanne and Bacon strive to insinuate a whole body sensation or contingent physical body in a similar mediate position. The polyvalence of such a body results from the causal relationships implied between the senses, beginning with the eye, but multiplying after that point. The figural is, then, a poetry or metaphor that has exploded onto the canvas in every direction. If this style exposes sensation in the extreme, perhaps this is because every possible organ of sense traverses the image and engages with the objects of every other sense.

It is in the figural, the visual contemporary of Artaud’s poetry, his “body without organs,” that one finds an aesthetics of psychosis. Unlike Surrealism, dismemberment and deformation are more radical and purposeful. Dead and living bodies are deconstructed in a way that is beyond the more simple concept of a “zombie.” There is something cryptic about D.H. Lawrence’s remark (of which Deleuze and his commentators take note) on Cézanne’s capturing of the “apply-ness of the apple,” for it is almost a parody of psychosis. It differs fundamentally from Surrealism which, for example, merges fantasy and free interpretation. Surrealism
suggests a specific relation of image to meaning, which may appear to idealize, or to perfect in fantasy, that which exists in an arbitrary interest or obsession with random shapes and their suggestion of figural shapes and bodies. Thus, what might be attempted in Surrealism is the conveying of the absolute freedom of representation through arbitrary similitude and not merely the exploration of unconscious meanings or connections between things.

Deterritorialization does carry the sense of a hegemonic imposition on the earth and on the will to power. Like capitalism, however, it also conveys the inner drive or unconscious that Deleuze intended to divert away from Freud (who himself can be seen as a deterritorializer) toward the genealogy and psychology of Nietzsche. If art were to be compared with deterritorialization, this may nonetheless be compatible with ideas of art’s origins or rationality. Modern art forms such as Impressionism constitute a finer or higher “recognition” of the coupling of rational experience with unconscious impulses. They nonetheless appear to be as much a perfection of rational conditions as they are a failure of their imposition on art’s forms and objects.

In the question of art and (de)territorialization, are we to read the failure of these categories to signify a territorialization of art, or does the controversy suggest an already present ambivalence? Grosz explores art and art concepts as structural impositions on chaos. Conversely, O’Sullivan applies the idea of deterritorialization and the desiring machine mostly to art’s modern predicaments: “We are moving towards a notion of art experience, of art practice, whether it be making it, seeing it, or writing about it, as complex and expanded. No longer the static production, distribution and consumption of an object, but art practice as a process, as a ‘desiring-machine’, always ‘in’ production” (24).

Though pursuing something like “(de)territorialization” is not in vogue, the practice to which O’Sullivan refers is reminiscent of deconstruction. The so-called “pharmakon” is, after all, conceived of as an ambiguous agent that undermines text, self, or practices of power. It has not been shown that “territorialization” or its reversal is the imposition of a grid or mathematical boundaries onto what are already defined as territories; nor does deterritorialization signify the removal of such a grid. What one may imagine as an oppressive social grid may, in fact, resemble the more primitive subdivisions of nature and society that precede geometry and many basic tools of the construction of a grid.

Along with taking art to be a form of territorialization, Grosz also seems to follow Nietzsche in thinking of art as an overabundance of life. This, again, suggests that artistic creation springs from immanent, subjective differences in humanity, rather than from a substrate that is present in
all and is open to determined rational investigation. For Grosz, Deleuze’s philosophy of “concept creation” appears to take on an immediate role in the very nature of art. It takes this role, standing on the ruins or the oppressive hegemony of some previous concepts of art, which would be taken as permanent, transcendental, and unchangeable:

Twin rafts over chaos, philosophy and art, along with their more serious sibling, the sciences, enframe chaos, each in its own way, in order to extract something consistent, composed, immanent, which it uses for its own ordering (and also deranging) resources. (8)

Or again, in a nearby passage:

The emergence of the “frame” is the condition of all the arts and is the particular contribution of architecture to the taming of the virtual, the territorialization of the uncontrollable forces of the earth. (11)

The importance of Kant relates, on the one hand, to the hegemony and primacy of “representational thinking” that he established, like a set of shackles, to be escaped by later philosophy. Deleuze held the influence of Kant on modern philosophy to be profound and unshakable. Yet his writings on art and metaphysics from roughly 1965 (Kant’s Critical Philosophy) to 1993 (Pure Immanence) often run counter to an important thread in all of Kant’s philosophy. It is a vein of thought in which experience involves the recognition of concepts that are the “conditions of the possibility of experience,” and are brought to experience by the understanding. In his response to Kant, Deleuze tends to turn this process on its head. In the first place, he sees concepts not as recognizable, absolute forms but as creative “conditions.” Though these are already encountered in a problematic, paradoxical form, they are themselves capable of a certain secondary change and variation. These “conditions of actual experience” are an important point of reference in considering the aesthetic and ideology of the “encounter” that O’Sullivan’s book emphasizes in numerous ways.

Deleuze introduced the quasi-dialectical language of “de-territorialization.” It emerged at the height of the counter-psychoanalytical movements in both commercial production and personal therapy, and found its full resonance in the novelty of computer communication and vigilance. This age resembled an uncanny fascism/socialism in its radical intersection of consciousness and control, and the continual subjective colonization of historical time and everyday objects. There was a mostly clandestine war between individual subjective desire and taste and the hegemony of social and mental control, resulting in a more deeply ambivalent product, event, and subject. This process was naturally and quickly interpreted as a victory for Hegel.

A similar controversy surrounds Kant’s earlier argument in the Third Critique, which holds that pleasure in art beauty is without interest.
Adorno famously responded to this question in the first major step in his *Aesthetic Theory*. Here he placed Kantian “disinterest” in essential contrast with the erotic suspicion of Freud’s psychology, arguing that the opposing views had to be reconciled, and that “artworks imply in themselves a relation between interest and its renunciation.”

Adorno, much like Deleuze and Heidegger, thought of art objects as ruptures in the course of history and experience. Many scholars, including O’Sullivan in *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari*, try to distinguish these three thinkers’ idea of art as a historical rupture. However, investigation of Deleuze’s writings and their interpretation reveals that this breakage in or surrounding the work of art resists any simple division or characterization. Consequently, what appear to be fundamental differences of conception concerning the break often suggest, instead, the ways that various thinkers try to deal with its elusive relationships.

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Notes

2. Originally formulated by Antonin Artaud in his 1947 radio broadcast “To Have Done with the Judgment of God,” this phrase was made famous by Deleuze in *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980). It refers to a phenomenological mode of opposition to “societies of control” and to clinical psychoanalysis. Deleuze writes: “The full body without organs is the unproductive, the sterile, the unengendered, the unconsumable.” See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. R. Hurley, M. Seem and H. Lane (London and New York: Continuum, 2004) 8.