

On the artificiality of life

Francis Bacon seen by Bataille and Deleuze

Henk Oosterling (EUR)

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I present you an update of my research on Deleuze. I just outline two questions: one on new meta-physics as the horizon of an ontology of the in between and one on the relation between art and life.

“The temptation to see analogies between Bacon’s life and work is something that the artist himself has encouraged while at the same time demonstrating its futility. If his painting is, as he declares, a lasting record of his life, it is not a direct reflection – rather an irregular echo, a reworking of lived experience”(13).

In the opening sentence of Christophe Domino’s book *Francis Bacon. Taking Reality by Surprise*, art and life do not reflect but echo. Georges Bataille gives a more dramatic characterisation of his ‘reworking of lived experience’. The relation between his life and his writing at the beginning of *Sur Nietzsche*, written during wartime, is characterised as follows: "What obliges me to write, as I see it, is the fear of going mad."²⁹ Writing to counter madness. According to Foucault’s *History of Madness* madness is the absolute limit of a work of art. Gilles Deleuze was writing on nomadism, but hardly ever moved or travelled. But if the horizon of his critical diagnoses is a philosophy of immanence – let’s say: as a Nietzschean inspired Bergsonian transformation of Kant’s transcendentalism with a touch of Humean empiricism – related to lines of flight, then both his life project and his violent suicidal jump are articulated pointedly in his posthumous publicised text: “L’immanence: une vie ...”.

Bacon, Bataille and Deleuze. What did they share? They all had problems with breathing: Bacon had asthma, Bataille a pneumonia and Deleuze a lung disease. The fear that results from breathlessness at least engenders a sharp physical awareness of bodily presence in the world. This could throw some light on the specific materialism they developed. Bataille calls this tension ‘eroticism’, Bacon ‘nervous system’ and Deleuze ‘sensation’. But I agree physical reductionism doesn’t answer these questions.

Does an experienced artificiality/artificiality of life correspond to an aesthetic experience? A preliminary remark. In a broader context these questions point towards the problematic relations between politics and aesthetics. In modern times these tensions have been explored and articulated in a twofold sense: on a cultural-political level as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, on an individual artistic level - using a notion Foucault introduced in his last writings – as an ‘aesthetic of existence’. In a 19th century configuration: Wagner and Wilde (or Baudelaire). In a 20th century configuration: Bauhaus and Beuys. As for the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Bazon Brock suggests a differentiation between the philosophical *Gesamtkunstwerk* (Schelling, Hegel), the artistic *Gesamtkunstwerk* (Wagner, Bauhaus, maybe nowadays Peter

Greenaway) and the political Gesamtkunstwerk (totalitarianism). As Benjamin concludes his famous essay on *The work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproduction*, in the political Gesamtkunstwerk either politics gets aestheticised (fascism) or art is politicised (Stalinism).

Although in futurism and surrealism – Marinetti, Breton - the demarcation line between art and politics is very thin, 20th century avant-garde art keeps its distance to politics. At most, it presents itself as a specific form of cultural politics or as a micropolitical aesthetic of existence – Schwitters, Dali, Bunuel. It is obvious that avant-garde art is a balance act on a rope, double binded between life and art: as the rope dancer in Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra*, the artist continuously is threatened by falling into the abyss that both connects and separates art and life.

Materialism: the sensible and violence

A lived experience of a work of art – both on the production-aesthetic level of the artist and the reception-aesthetic level of the public – engenders an awareness of the artificiality of life. From a philosophical point of view this transition presupposes an ambiguous materialism that does justice to what Deleuze calls the sensible and according to Bataille and Bacon is centred round notions that are covered by every front-page of whatever newspaper: violence and the flesh, in a less frivolous terminology: mortality, with its existential counterpoint: immanence.

Why are Bataille and Bacon so obsessed with violence? Is it a traumatized relation with their fathers or their failing to come to terms with a crucifictional Catholicism? Of course this psychological reductionism is as inadequate as the above mentioned physical reductionism. "I think that the violence of my life", Francis Bacon says to David Sylvester, "the violence in which I have lived, differs from the violence of the painting". "If you talk about the violence of the paint, it has nothing to do with the violence of war. It is connected with an attempt to recreate the violence of reality." Artistic violence is ambiguously recreative. Bacon does not paint representations of violent situations; he produces a violent imagery by "the suggestion of the painting itself, which can only be conveyed by the paint."

In *Les larmes d'Eros* (1961) Georges Bataille selected paintings that give the reader a glimpse of violence beyond representation as the unintended goal of human behaviour. To Bataille mankind imposes limits (prohibitions, concepts, identities) in order to experience what Derrida in his analysis of a text of Benjamin on violence qualified as 'originary violence': the abyssal aporetic foundation of the Law. On an anthropological level this ambiguous reality of prohibitions, according to Bataille, is only revealed in its transgressions. Communicating this violence in sacrificing the most valuable – life - brings "a subject at its boiling point". Understanding this experience does not call for unambiguous concepts, but for series of phantasms with the parodic function of access and passage.

The Bataillean phantasms are supposed to have a comparable impact on its readers as Bacon's images must have on their spectators. Bataille's early work offers a range of mythological parodies. He sketches the transition from animal to human being in a variety of different, often strikingly inventive heterologies. Epistemologically this 'mythological anthropology' surrenders knowledge to non-savoir without destroying

the truth. Figure and parody are conceived as strategies to reactivate a suppressed dimension of the human condition *as experience*, because what we read or see has no identifiable existence outside the painting or text. Nevertheless it becomes 'real' in its material effects. Nowadays we call this 'virtual'. Like painting, philosophical writing literally figures out what reality is in exploring the borders between figuration and non-figuration. In creating concepts, it produces reality.

Bataille inflicts violence on truth by parodying the achievements of science. He does not establish truth; he subverts it by producing an ambiguous experience of fascination and repulsion in order to shock – or choke – his readers. In *Le plaisir du texte* Roland Barthes formulates this as follows: "it creates a situation of loss, which creates a sense of unease (...) causing the historical, cultural, psychological foundations of the reader, the coherence of his predilections, values and recollections to founder, and throwing his relation to language into crisis."³³

Bataille's choices for the images in *Les larmes d'Eros* is motivated by the same fascination Bacon had: exploring the boundaries of representation. Both are not fans of abstract paintings or formal art. They at most favour Picasso's imagery. One painting by Bacon is included in Bataille's last book: two men on the bed, reworking one of Muybridge's images. The caption says: "Francis Bacon, a young English painter who is one of the most important of his generation, is distinguished by unusual paintings which express an idiosyncratic lack of polish."¹⁶ Apparently Bacon's imagery rings a bell to Bataille.

Did Bataille influence Bacon's work? Bacon lived in surrealist Paris in the thirties, where Bataille and Michel Leiris, Bataille's bosom friend and Bacon's later intimate friend, initiated *Documents* that Bacon has read. But there are only sporadic and vague references to Bataille in the literature on Bacon - "the photographs and texts in *Documents* might have been a source" and "It might be possible to refer Bacon's human/animal to Bataille's discussion of this theme" – there is no hard evidence, Dawn Ades writes.

The sublime and the flesh

So let us leave the aesthetic-production level behind and concentrate on the reception-aesthetics. How do Bataille's parodic and Bacon's visual figurations affect us? From a reception-aesthetic perspective Bataille's perverted materialist translation of the Kantian sublime – his 'bas materialisme' - is the dynamic affect of horror: the viewer's reaction oscillates between repulsion and attraction. Kant's all encompassing power of reason – the subject's guarantee for autonomy - is broken. Bataille qualifies this 'experience interieure' as "what is usually called a 'mystical experience': no 'interiority' as cogito, but an experience in which inner and outer are connected by affective dynamics. This 'inner experience' is foremost a sublime experience of lost coherence and comprehension. Bataille characterized this loss in negative theological terms, though his fascination with zenboeddhist's notion as 'satori' and the 'void' in *Sur Nietzsche* bare witness to a more affirmative approaches.

Given the nature of their medium, both Bataille and Bacon seem to embark on the same enterprise: laying bare the violence that is inherent to the human condition. But

even if Bataille's *La Somme athéologique* and Bacon's *Studies at the base of a Crucifixion* conjure within a wider critical perspective, they do not realize this violence in the same way. The irreducible autonomy of on the one side Bacon's visual imagery as 'cruci-fiction' and on the other – to use a Lyotardian notion – the 'fiction-theory' of Bataille cannot be neglected.

While we are desperately searching for meaning, lacking representation and narration, the disturbing radiance of these images directly affects our deeper instincts. By He positing images *on* the border of representation rather than *beyond*, Bacon wants his paintings to penetrate our 'perceptive capacity': the nervous system. His imagery literally gets on the spectator's nerves. Unlike the surrealist Dalí or the abstract painter Mondriaan, Bacon dissolves everyday reality by evoking one of its invisible aspects as an ambivalent sensation. Bacon's Pope is screaming in his gaping, empty chasm. As in Bataille's textuality the medium – the style of painting and the use of material - becomes violent. Bacon's figures are isolated in frames, hidden behind veils. Their faces are erased, scratched and rubbed. The screaming mouth is transformed into the spasms of the deformed body, that begin to merge with the material surface.

Obviously it is the mouth, not the eyes, that 'communicates' this violence. Being fascinated by the cry of Poussin *Massacre of the Innocent* and Mussolini's big mouth, Bacon always wanted to paint a mouth as "Monet painted a sunset". "It is no longer a specific organ, but the hole through which the body fully escapes and through which the flesh (chair) descends". The gaping mouth displays the interior both literally and metaphorically as flesh: "If you scream", Bacon says, "you are always the prey of invisible and incomprehensible forces which obstruct every spectacle and which even exceed the pain and the suffering". In more Bataillean terms, in pain and pleasure, i.e. in eroticism, the body loses its coherence and is experienced as a field of intensities: as 'flesh'. As a limit concept it functions as a receding horizon for the body as organism. According to Michel Leiris: "Through the mediation of the figures, the spectator who approaches them without fixed ideas gains direct access to a reality of flesh and blood which is not very different from the suffocating experience provided by the physical act of love-making in everyday life." Around 1930 Georges Bataille writes a short text entitled *The mouth* in *Document*: "The mouth (...) is the most vital part, that is, the one which is the most terrifying to animals of the same kind. Human beings, however, are not constructed as simply as animals. (...) It is the eyes or the forehead which play the signifying role of the animal's jaws.(...) However, the violent significance of the mouth has been retained in a latent state. (...) And at major moments human life is concentrated once again in the mouth as in an animal: teeth gnash in rage, and fear and dreadful pain turn the mouth into an instrument of agonizing screams. Then it is easy to see that an individual in distress raises its head, strains its neck like a madman, so that the mouth is aligned as closely as possible with the spinal column, *i.e. in a position which it normally assumes in the animal state.* (...)."

Bacon's figures and Bataille's parodies are not so much concerned with the distinction between human and animal, as with the feverish state in which human beings become animal, with the process in which identity is momentarily dissolved

into non-identifiable intensities. "The person who suffers", Gilles Deleuze remarks in *Francis Bacon. Logique de la sensation*, "is an animal, an animal that suffers is a person. It is the reality of becoming an animal. Bacon's work is constituted by an indiscernible and undecidable zone between man and animal"(20/40). The body, becoming flesh, turns inside out. The organs lose their instrumental function. To Deleuze Bacon's 'flesh' reflects in a painterly sense Artaud's 'body without organs', the notion he, with Félix Guattari, introduced in the first book of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia. Anti-Oedipus* (1972). This violent experience no longer refers to an Outside or reaches Upwards, but it uncovers an Inside that folds itself within itself.

Plane of immanence

And it is within this perspective of an Inside without subjectivity, of a 'materialism of the incorporeal' that Deleuze enters the stage. In *Logique de la sensation* Deleuze applies Lyotard's notion of the Figural form *Discours, Figure* to characterise Bacon's non-figurative painting and introduces 'sensation' as an affective dynamics. Sensation is explicitly distinguished from the sensational. To Deleuze the defigured, hystericised Figures cannot be grasped within aesthetics of the beautiful. But neither does a negative aesthetics of the sublime suffice. Nevertheless the 'irrational logic of sensation' circles around 'an indiscernible and undecidable zone'. So, while Bataille is still focusing on borders and transgressions implicitly suggesting an Outside, Deleuze focuses on a zone, a black hole in figurality that finally will be 'identified' as an inbetween. As an inter this is framed and yet open. Sensation is a non-quantifiable duration. Of course one cannot apply this logic as a method. Sensation is a reception-aesthetic notion, captured in the reception of a work of art. Looking at Bacon's Figures one can almost touch it with one's eyes. The haptic space connects the eye with the hand, the optic with the tactile, triggering vibrations and resonance between both. *Logique de la sensation* is a subtle exploration of this haptic dynamics: it explores the rhythm between the armature or structure, the Figure and the contour or outline(62), determined by operations as isolation, deformation and dissipation: "The ultimate, Deleuze states, is the connection between the rhythm with the sensation"(31). 'Between' appears to be a crucial notion. I quote: "forms are articulated on the INBETWEEN (entre-deux) of the two planes that they arouse (81); the form no longer is essence but accident that introduces an INBETWEEN of the two planes, where the fall takes place (87); (Pope) the Figure falls INBETWEEN the two planes (88); Bacon's colourism (modulation) also implies THE INBETWEEN of the colour regimes" (97).

a. affect and interval

Here the notion 'plane' is still a painterly category which has to do with perspective lines. The notion 'plane of immanence' is not systematically introduced in *Logique de la sensation*. Referring to Bergson Deleuze introduces this notion in his books on Cinema. In accordance with his analysis of Bacon's paintings Deleuze characterizes cinema as "the image which itself moves in itself. In this sense, therefore, it is neither figurative nor abstract"(156). But instead of the mind making the movement as in painting, it is now moved by pictorial images. With choreographic or dramatic

images, movement is still kinaesthetically incorporated by the receptive body, but with cinema the movement has become automatic, “producing a shock to thought, communicating vibrations to the cortex, touching the nervous and cerebral system directly”(156). Deleuze’s materialism unfolds itself: “The infinite set of all images constitutes a plane of immanence. The image exists in itself, on this plane. The in itself of image is matter: not something hidden behind the image, but on the contrary the absolute identity of the image and movement”(58/9).

The plane of immanence is not distinct from the representations of the plane. This, Deleuze concludes, is machinism: “The material universe, the plane of immanence, is the *machine assemblage (agencement machinique) of movement-images*”(59). I prefer a notion introduced by Kodwo Eshun: imageneering. Descending into image-matter, these intervals are found on every level. According to Bergson the universe is a meta-cinema, a bundle of chains of actions and reactions, but “at any point whatever of the plane an *interval* appears – a gap BETWEEN the action and the reaction”(61). Though we don’t mind the gap, it nevertheless constitutes us experiencing movement. Technologically spoken: 24 frames a second. Referring to Bergson’s *Matter and Memory* Deleuze goes as far as to state that “the brain is nothing but this – an interval, a gap BETWEEN an action and a reaction. The brain is certainly not a Cartesian centre of images from which one could begin, but itself constitutes one special image among others. It constitutes a centre of indetermination in the acentred universe of images”(62/3).

The movement-image consists of perception-image, action-image and affection-image that are realised as montage or INTERassemblage. A film can be overdetermined by one of the images, but the others always play their part. But whatever image Deleuze refers to, each of them is constituted by an INBETWEEN (entre-deux or interval). Bataille and Bacon remerge when Deleuze focuses on the crucial aspect of the image: affection. This, however, in a non-sublimistic sense: “The shock would be confused, in bad cinema, with the figurative violence of the represented instead of achieving that other violence of a movement-image developing its vibrations in a moving sequence which embeds itself within us”(157). Bunuel’s eye-cut in *Un chien Andalou* is still sublime on a content-level, but for Deleuze shock as avant-garde sublimity is a mediamatic effect: it can be recognized in the way movement-images are cut. In the French inter-bellum cinema of Gance Deleuze recognises the mathematical sublime, while in Fritz Lang’s cinema the dynamical sublime persists.

Not shock, but affection and sensation are the key words: “Affection is what occupies the interval, what occupies it without filling it in or filling it up. It surges in the centre of indetermination, that is to say in the subject, between a perception which is troubling in certain respects and a hesitant action. It is a coincidence of subject and object, or the way in which the subject perceives itself, or rather experiences itself or feels itself ‘from the inside’”.(65)

b. immaterial Whole: Open and Outside

The interval, Deleuze stresses time and again, is the affect. In the affect different planes of immanence are connected. The inter or the inbetween has a ‘metaphysical’

complement (although I prefer to qualify it, with a Derridean terminology: ‘is supplementary’): a Whole, as Deleuze, characterizes it rather plainly. Outside and Inside are understood as a functions of a dynamics of the Whole: “the relationship with a whole which can only be thought in a higher awareness, the relation with a thought which can only be shaped in the subconscious’s unfolding of images, the sensory-motor relationship BETWEEN man and world, nature and thought”(163). In the pre-war cinema the whole was that in which the narrative and action-image were anticipated, in the post-war cinema “what counts is on the contrary the *interstice* between images, between two images: a spacing which means that each image is plucked from the void and falls back into it”(179) As for the relation between sound and image: “... the sound itself becomes the object of a specific framing which *imposes an interstice* with the visual framing”(180) Intermediality is its rule: “It is the method of BETWEEN, ‘between two images’, which does away with all cinema of the One. (...) The whole thus merges with what Blanchot calls the force of ‘dispersal of the Outside’, or ‘the vertigo of spacing’...”(180).

The Whole as a plane of immanence cannot be made explicit discursively. It is sensed in the sensible. However, the movement-image stands in a different relation the Whole than the time-image. In the first the Whole is open: it more or less perforates and perforates the interval. In the time-image cinema the Whole is the Outside working from the Inside. Implicitly Deleuze refers to the aporetic dynamics of the unthought within thought as one of the articulation of the analytics of the finite Foucault developed in *The Order of Things*. Foucault rephrases his conclusion of an essay on Blanchot's writings, written in the same period: Thinking of the Outside. In this essay Foucault circumscribes what fiction is. We immediately recognises Deleuze's Bacon statements: “Fictions in Blanchot will be, more than images, the transformation, the displacement/dislocation, the neutral intermediary, the in-between (INTERSTICE) of the images. (...) The fictive is neither in the things nor in men, but in the impossible verisimilitude of what is IN BETWEEN them: encounters, proximity of the most distant, absolute dissimulation there where we are. Fiction does not consist of making the invisible visible, but making visible how invisible the invisibility of the visible is”(I.524). This is not a dialectical turn but a supplementary differing.

Deleuze also refers to Blanchot in *Cinema 2. Time-image*: “What Blanchot diagnoses everywhere in literature is particularly clear in cinema: on the one hand the presence of an unthinkable in thought, which would be both his source and barrier; on the other hand the presence to infinity of another thinker in the thinker, who shatters every monologue of a thinking self”(168). Still qualifying Eisenstein's movement-image cinema as an attempt to make visible what is invisible, in his chapter on ‘Thought and Cinema’ Deleuze states, again referring to Blanchot, that “far from making thought visible, as Eisenstein wanted, we are on the contrary directed to what does not let itself be thought in thought, and equally to what does not let itself be seen in vision”(168).

Deleuze's later conceptualisation of ‘sensation’ makes use of the same terminology. In *What is Philosophy?* sensation finally is circumscribed as “compounds or blocs of percepts and affects” that transcends individual perceptions and affections. In

defining the percept Deleuze seem to fall back behind Foucault and Lyotard: “to make perceptible the imperceptible forces that populate the world, affect us, and make us become”(182) Deleuze’s own materialism of the incorporeal must surpass this dialectic.

As with Lyotard the centre of Deleuze’s aesthetics is the aistheton, that which is felt or perceived. Doing justice to the sensible a complex of forces emerges that Deleuze in his book on Bacon already calls ‘spiritual’. This ‘spirituality’ returns in *What is Philosophy?* as a pseudo-metaphysical ontology: “Sensations, percepts and affects”, Deleuze and Guattari conclude, “are *beings* whose validity lies in themselves and exceeds any lived. “The work of art is a *being* of sensation and nothing else: *it exists in itself*”(164) “Sensation belongs to a different order (than the material) and posses an existence in itself for as long as the material lasts”(193). Although matter is the ultimate criterium, there is something that ‘transcends’ it in an ontological sense. And it is this ‘something’ that is called ‘a plane of immanence’.

And arrived on this point, my research is confronted with two questions:

1. How metaphysical is the notion of immanence?
2. What does this all mean for the relation between artwork and life world?

1. What is this plane of immanence, once it is compared with Blanchot’s notion of the Outside? My problem with Deleuze’s references to Blanchot boils down to the problems I have with one of Blanchot’s soulmates: Georges Bataille. It is the negative theological connotation of the Outside, a connotation that can even be recognized within the thoughts of the Bataillean inspired Jacques Derrida. Bataille has rephrased this Outside in *L’expérience intérieure* on an experiential level as a mystical experience – to my opinion a literary move. Derrida has turned it into a supplementary margin of the ‘écriture’. But a more intensive reading – for instance on the notion of ‘chora’ – would make my argument for an negative theological aspect in Derrida more plausible. Does this all imply that Deleuze has transformed his materialism into a new metaphysics? Can we also trace this as a crypto-negative theological aspect in Deleuze’s philosophy?

The provisional answer is that it is, as long as we interpret immanence in metaphysical terms. However, in the posthumously published text “L’immanence: une vie...” Deleuze distinguishes his notion of immanence from the traditional notion: it is not the opposite of transcendence. This conventional metaphysical dichotomy is made possible by his understanding of a plane of immanence. When in “L’immanence: une vie ...” Deleuze states that the ‘entre-temps’ forms the invisible bond within a plane of immanence that constitutes individual lives, he for the last time in HIS life stresses the importance of an ontology of the relation, perhaps even a metaphysics of the inbetween: the being of sensation can be explored as the becoming of an inter. In analogy with Deleuze tracing this immanency within the history of western philosophy to the transcendental plane that Kant invented – philosophy is about inventing concepts, not about contemplation, reflection or communication in a Habermasian sense – I would propose to coin this ontology of relation or becoming of the inter, having Kant’s influence on Deleuze in mind – as

inter-esse: a materialist translation of Kant's *sensus communis*. If this is situated against a contextualized metaphysics, this can be understood as Lyotard coined it: an immaterial materialism focused on the *aistheton*.

This leads us to our second question: HOW DOES THIS ALL RELATE TO ART? The end of WiPh science, art and philosophy are connected as follows: "The three thoughts intersect and intertwine but without synthesis or identification. With its concepts, philosophy brings forth events. Art erects monuments with its sensations. Science constructs states of affairs with its functions. A rich tissue of correspondences can be established between the planes. But the network has its culminating points, where sensation itself becomes sensation of concept of function, where the concept becomes concept of function or of sensation, and where the function becomes function of sensation or concept. And none of these elements can appear without the other being still to come, still indeterminate or unknown. (...) Each created element on a plane calls on other heterogeneous elements, which are still to be created on other planes: thought as heterogenesis." (Wiph. 198/199) If, as D/G state in *What is Philosophy* art is composition – on an aesthetic and a technical level – and every art thinks as philosophy does, but always contextualised and in its own medium, and if this means that these modes of thinking have their own reflectiveness, does this mean that their creative force produces new modes of existence time and again? If so, this artificiality is based on inter-esse.

Can we reformulate these questions in post-modern times, after post- and transavant-garde, once, the aestheticization of public space, lifestyle and the theatricalization of social performance have become a matter of fact? Does this mean that Lifeworld finally has become a work of Art and every artwork a Lifeworld, in the sense that life imitates art and art imitates life??

My provisional answer is that we have to trace the relation between art and life on a different level. Wasn't it Seneca that proclaimed: *De mortibus nihil nisi bene*: as for the dead nothing but the good. This aesthetic of the beautiful, based on realised mortality starts once we are dead: individual life with its *entre-temps* is framed and forced into a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, at least on a photographic or videomatic level. But while alive we are already framed. However, this aestheticization – composing our lives - is working from within as the radiance of a plane of immanence with its lines of flight: *l'immanence: une vie*. We are individuals before we are individuals. Becoming requires an aesthetic as well as a micropolitics. The Whole of an individual life results from this indiscernable zone, that works from within, deterritorializing and reterritorializing codification time and again. As inter-esse, this individual enterprise requires an aesthetic of the invisible, an aesthetic of the inter. It is exactly on this point that art and life intertwine.