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The Aesthetics of Sensation

Since sensation has been widely viewed as the basic subject matter of art, a consideration of whether it can ultimately be insulated in this role from the influence of popular and media sensationalism is critical for evaluating the possibility and coherence of an autonomous aesthetics, just as it constitutes a test for the potential of any 'cultural aesthetics' that aspires to transcend these self-imposed limits.

From Pater to Deleuze

By the late nineteenth century, the implications of scientific sensationalism for aesthetics were being widely debated. For both Seurat and Nietzsche, argues Crary, 'meaning in art was not about representation but a relation of forces', and with Cézanne, too, we find 'not a logic of contemplative distance ... but rather an account of a nervous system interfacing with a continually transforming external environment'.¹ Cézanne himself wrote of 'becoming more clear-sighted in front of nature' but added: 'with me the realization of my sensation is always very difficult. I cannot attain the intensity that is unfolded before my senses.'² For the influential Walter Pater, the aesthetic critic should regard works of art and nature alike as 'powers or forces producing pleasurable sensations, each of a more or less peculiar and unique kind'.³ For Pater, we should submit *only* to the laws of our nature, this 'magic web woven through and through us, like that magnetic system of which modern science speaks, penetrating us with a network, subtler than our subtlest nerves, yet bearing in it the subtlest forces of the world'.⁴ Our physical life is a 'perpetual motion' of these 'elementary forces' that range beyond us, all around us, leaving us 'broadcast, driven' by them. Considered subjectively, however, these objects and forces seem to break up into unstable, inconstant, flickering impressions, sensations of 'colour, odour,

texture' which 'burn and are extinguished with our consciousness of them.' Each moment is 'gone while we try to apprehend it' in this 'strange, perpetual weaving and unweaving of ourselves'⁵ that situates both the challenge to art, and its potential – and here we move towards the more controversial aspects of Pater's perspective, with its own significance for future developments.

These moments of intense apprehension of experience in the flow of necessity, these bursts of energy in the networks of sensation, are 'pulses' or 'pulsations', moments of 'concurrence' between forces that immediately part; these are the moments that 'burn' in our apprehension of them, the moments to seek out, breaking with habits and 'facile orthodoxy', so that we can 'be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy'. And so to Pater's most famous formulation: 'To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life.' It is great passions that manifest these pulsations, give us this ecstasy; in particular, the 'poetic passion ... the love of art for its own sake' is what can give 'nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake'.⁶

We can pause here, to note, in all this, the emphasis on instability, transience, the sense in which the moment is gone even in the 'apprehending' of it. Not only this, but the fate of the passing impression or sensation seems to be that of the apprehending self, too, woven and unwoven in each fleeting moment. The sensation only exists in its passing, just as it only exists in the apprehension whereby the transient self, too, has its being. Awareness of sensation depends on changing sensations, the friction of difference, just as the moment of pleasure in turn dissipates and fragments into flux. This pleasure in the very passing of the sensation, then, seems to involve a reflexive dimension, a fusion: the sensation is apprehended in that very transience that is *also* the transience of the act by which it is experienced as such. Hence, suggests Jonathan Loesberg, Pater is led 'to posit a self-validating aesthetic perception, in its own contradictory reflexivity'. The abstraction of difference, embedded in the concreteness of sensation as experienced, permits the Paterian moment of aesthetic fulfilment: 'Here then is a sensation of flux that can be held onto, dwelt on, intensified without its own flux being denied.' Thus, 'we have arrived here at an essential sensation of self-dissolution that embodies the form of sensation as friction or contrast'. We have a 'founding sensation of a reflexive awareness of self-dissolution'.⁷ Taking this further, we can suggest that in this 'founding sensation' we encounter two differences mapped on to one another: between a sensation emerging and passing away, experienced *in* this passing, and between the 'weaving and unweaving' of the self, in parallel, the self-dissolution that *is* this

very experience of the sensation. And we can suggest that it is in the *intensity* of this fusion, this homology of process, a process embodying the very paradox of reflexivity, that the pleasure lies, as simultaneous fusion and release.

This emphasis on sensation itself, along with its distinctiveness on each occasion, carried on into modernism, but the latent hedonism here, so central to Paterian aestheticism and its impact on Victorian culture, was widely repudiated in the succeeding generation.⁸ For the modernists, Shklovsky, in his 1917 manifesto, claimed that 'art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things.' Hence the purpose of art is 'to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known.'⁹ Underlying all this is a contrast between 'sensation', as the core of the aesthetic experience, and the alleged 'undifferentiated drift' of the everyday experience of life,¹⁰ the world of tradition, cliché and banality. And we have already seen that a necessary corollary of this contrast is that since popular and media sensation-alism is constituted by, and draws on, this very same dichotomy, the result is a serious challenge for aesthetic theorists who wish to defend the integrity and superiority of the arts, or even the very possibility of their separateness. This is a challenge that Deleuze, above all, proves only too willing to try to meet. Since his work provides a more extended and ambitious case for a 'pure' aesthetics of sensation than any other, it is worth detailed analysis.

The work of art, proclaims Deleuze, is 'a bloc of sensations, that is to say, a compound of percepts and affects'. He adds: 'The work of art is a being of sensation and nothing else: it exists in itself.' It is not subordinate to anything outside itself, either to human purposes or aspirations or to canons of representation in relation to the world beyond it. Nor is this affected by the material of art: 'Whether through words, colors, sounds, or stone, art is the language of sensations', he claims, adding: 'Art undoes the triple organization of perceptions, affections and opinions in order to substitute a monument composed of percepts, affects, and blocs of sensations ...'¹¹ This series of distinctions makes it clear that what is being proposed here is not a psychology: the sensation may involve feelings or perceptions, but is clearly not reducible to them, indeed is constituted as autonomous from them; and we encounter the introduction of 'opinions' as something that art defines itself against, implying that in this respect, at least, we are still recognizably in the tradition of modernism.

As for the term 'monument', used in the passage above, and which might give the wrong impression, Deleuze explains that a monument 'does not commemorate or celebrate anything that happened but confides to the ear of the future the persistent sensations that embody the event: the constantly renewed suffering

of men and women ...'¹² The term 'event' introduces a concern with time, process and movement, which are indeed central to the Deleuzian conception. At the same time, the reference to 'human suffering' suggests that in painting itself, for example, the ideal may not be abstraction – central to Greenbergian modernism – but something that remains closer to human concerns, something that accepts the challenge of figuration or the figurative even in transforming it. From this angle, it seems hardly surprising that Deleuze's choice of artist for close engagement, vital for the development of his theory of sensation, is Francis Bacon.

Apart from the inherent interest and ambition of his own account, and his evident determination to separate 'sensation' in art from 'sensationalism' in the wider culture – which enables us to ask about the plausibility of such a programme – there are two other reasons why Deleuze is particularly significant here. Firstly, his own work grows out of an immersion in that late nineteenth/early twentieth century universe of energy, nerves and force, that fusion of science, philosophy and culture crucial to the articulation of the 'circuit of sensation' discussed previously. Bergson's philosophy of process – discussed by Deleuze – grows out of this; if it is Bergson, in *Matter and Memory*, who claimed that 'our present is the very materiality of our existence, that is to say, a system of sensations and movements and nothing else',¹³ it could as easily have been Deleuze. And John Rajchman points to the 'nerve-science' of the era of early cinema and its influence on the Deleuzian 'neuroaesthetic'.¹⁴ Secondly, his critique of 'recognition' as the basis of everyday 'commonsense' and habit, along with his emphasis on the now and the new in experience, is part of a critique of the concept of representation itself, as used in art and philosophy, along with the concept of narrative. For Deleuze, these compromise the integrity of art by subordinating it to an 'outside' that cannot, anyway, perform the function intended for it. And if Kant's 'representational turn' involves a critique of metaphysics, it seems appropriate that Deleuze, in turning away from Kant, and almost single-handedly recreating a metaphysics for the late twentieth century, should turn back to Kant's two great metaphysical predecessors of the preceding century for further inspiration, Spinoza and Leibniz, particularly the former, whose materialism could be taken as an appropriate corollary of the science of process, energy and sensation.

This in turn reminds us that, with the possible exception of Badiou, Deleuze is the only one of the leading *maîtres à penser* to have emerged in France during and since the 1950s who did not have his roots in language-based analyses or in semiologies that implicitly or explicitly privilege language. Instead, language is

returned to the world, the world of organism, process and energy, absorbed into thought considered as an attribute of body, Spinoza's 'thinking substance'. This relocates 'sensation' from being the product of a mysterious subject grasping or reflecting an inscrutable object to a position as the central component or compound of experience, as the nervous system in *immediate* relation with the world of forces and energies that it participates in. And art, as the language of sensation, is that aspect of thinking that works *on* and *in* sensation; again, no thought/world dichotomy is invoked here. As Daniel Smith puts it, to say that 'the aim of art is not to represent the world, but to present a sensation ... is to say that every sensation, every work of art, is *singular*, and that the conditions of sensation are at the same time the conditions of the production of the *new*'.¹⁵

This, then, is a metaphysics of process, in which becoming, movement and virtuality replace identity, representation and fixity. Spinoza's determinism gives way here to an emphasis on flux, diversity and multiplicity, with individuality as an emergent perspective, a 'point of view' on our one world, a world that is thereby, nonetheless, uniquely different for each such perspective on it. This individualization involves not identity but performance, not thought as representation but the sign as a fusion of sensation and thought whereby individualization is simultaneously experienced and projected, produced *in* the world as a dramatization *of* it. And if this world of process and becoming is one in which 'events are the reality of the virtual',¹⁶ then indeed the real must encompass the virtual as much as the actual. Hence this summary, by James Williams: 'The only things that can be considered to be real are both actual and virtual, made up of relations of ideas, intensities and actual things; these are individuals and signs, where signs prompt the evolution of individuals.'¹⁷ And, overall, Dana Polan suggests that the aim is 'to go beyond the surface fixities of a culture and find those forces, those energies, those sensations that specific sociohistorical inscriptions have blocked and reified into social etiquettes and stultifying patterns of representation'.¹⁸

In the beginning, though, is intensity. Deleuze tells us that sensation has 'only an intensive reality'.¹⁹ Sensations emerge out of, and express, intensities; in this sense, it is intensities that put the sensational into sensation, the element of novelty and challenge, the rawness of experience *as* experience, the experience of becoming *as* such. Hence intensity implies a contrast to the 'extensive', as the objective, the measurable, the world of ordinary perception. As Claire Colebrook puts it: 'Intensities are not just qualities – such as redness – they are the becoming of qualities: say, the burning and wavering infra-red light that we eventually see *as* red.' Later, Colebrook in effect elaborates aspects of

this example, suggesting that sensation is not just 'seeing colour' as a sense-datum, but occurs when 'this seeing gives us the thought or image of that virtual difference that allows colour to be given, not just *as given to us* ... but as anonymous *affect*'. So we 'see' the colours of the art-work as 'there to be seen, as visual, as powers of the sensible'.²⁰

This intensity of sensation, acting in and as the virtual, thus operates beneath and prior to any subject-object dichotomy; as Deleuze himself puts it: 'I *become* in the sensation and something *happens* through this sensation ...'²¹ In sensation, the intensity of virtual difference is realized in becoming as event, more fundamental than any secondary differentiation into subject and object. And it is this relation, or encounter, that constitutes the reality of the sign, rather than the latter existing through representation of the object. In Flaxman's words, then: 'The space-time of cognition, of the image-sensations that affect us, we call a sign ...'²² Seeing the implications of linking these themes of intensity, difference and the sign, Smith explains that 'The sign constitutes the limit-object of sensibility, an intensive product of differential relations: it is intensity, and not the a priori forms of space and time, that constitutes the condition of real, and not only possible, experience'.²³ Intensity *is* difference, the virtual condition of experience as actual, realized in and through sensation. Through the intensity of sensation, the virtual becomes embodied in the actual, and individual identity shifts.

Deleuze's language itself – a language of terms like resonance, vibration, envelopment, unfolding and infolding – testifies to a certain quality of unboundedness, of overflowing, in the phenomenon described, refracted as it is through metaphors that are also figurations, figuring forth, or embodying, the power of language as part of the very process it ostensibly describes. There is, after all, *movement* here, process, the 'becoming' of sensation that is also a becoming-aware. Developing a Deleuzian programme, Massumi points to the way sensation presents a 'directly disjunctive self-coinciding', in that 'It is always doubled by the feeling of having a feeling. It is self-referential'.²⁴ It is rather like a resonance, an echo, which remains self-continuous while occupying a complex unfolding in time. It is this resonance that indeed constitutes the intensity of sensation, and thereby also constitutes the sensation as event and experience. And this is also the process of individuation, of self-constitution, entailing as it does the aspect of performance, of dramatization. It is only thus – rather than through the impossible separation of representation – that an individual can both express, partake of this whole *and* be distinctive, a particular perspective *on* it. Hence Deleuze claims that 'intensity is individuating' and 'all individuality

is intensive', and concludes: 'The intensive field of individuation determines the relations that it expresses to be incarnated in spatio-temporal dynamisms (dramatisations)'.²⁵

There, in outline, we have the Deleuzian aesthetic, albeit in what are as yet rather abstract terms. It is probably film studies that has felt the impact of this perspective most strongly, partly no doubt because of the availability of Deleuze's film books in English since the late 1980s. Thus Steven Shaviro calls for a foregrounding of 'visceral, affective responses to film', describing the cinematic apparatus as 'a new mode of embodiment'.²⁶ Barbara Kennedy reminds us that the cinematic gaze is 'never purely visual, but also tactile, sensory, material and embodied', presenting the cinematic encounter as 'an "event", as a processual engagement of duration and movement, articulated through webs of sensation across landscapes and panoramas of space, bodies and time', whereby 'the affective is formulated through colour, sound, movement, force, intensity ...', and perception is reconstructed through the 'synaesthetics of sensation'.²⁷ Nonetheless, Deleuze's single most extensive development of his aesthetic perspective, and his theory of sensation, comes in his close engagement with the painting of Francis Bacon, and it is this that will now be explored.

Bacon and Deleuze

Approaching Bacon, one can feel both fascination and repulsion, as if the paintings both induce shock and defend against it: the viewing process 'becomes an oscillating dialogue of intrusion and expulsion across continually adjusting permeable boundaries, a foray into psychic dislocation', as Robert Newman puts it.²⁸ This can lead us into a central tension running through the art of Bacon – and what makes him of particular interest is that this tension refers, in concentrated form, to a central strand in the aesthetics of modern representation and figuration generally, that is to say of any art or cultural product that aspires to refer to a world that in some sense lies beyond it. This is a tension between presence and representation, representation as a 're-presence', a doubling. That there is a forceful aspiration to presence in Bacon's work seems clear enough. In his own reading, Michel Leiris claims that Bacon conveys no message to distract us, nor any other form of distancing. In any painting of his, there are 'incandescent parts, seething with energy', against a contrasting, neutral background, and this 'marriage of hot and cold cannot fail to arouse attention and heighten the sensation of presence'.²⁹ Sensation *as* presence, one might say, and presence

as sensation – the very being of presence *in* sensation, locking the experience in place. And the reference to energy is significant too, as though the force of presence is a force *in* the painting. For Deleuze, the task of painting is defined as ‘the attempt to render visible forces that are not themselves visible’, adding that ‘if force is the condition of sensation, it is nonetheless not the force that is sensed, since the sensation “gives” something completely different from the forces that condition it’.³⁰

At this point, Deleuze’s use of the notion of ‘figure’ comes into play, for it is through figure that force can take visible form. Of Bacon, he claims that never since Michelangelo has anyone ‘broken with figuration by elevating the Figure to such prominence’. The crucial contrast for Deleuze, then, is between the figurative, the representational, the symbolic, with its links to received meaning and convention, and figure as the direct presence of sensation (with ‘figuration’ as a term that can ambiguously encompass both). There is also a contrast with the retreat from figuration altogether, into abstraction: ‘The Figure is the sensible form related to a sensation; it acts immediately upon the nervous system, which is of the flesh, whereas abstract form is addressed to the head, and acts through the intermediary of the brain ...’³¹ This positive sense of figuration, in the production of figure, is also a process of *deformation* of figure-as-appearance, of figuration as a reproduced cliché of representation. Smith adds that Bacon’s primary subject matter emerges as ‘the body deformed by a plurality of forces’.³² For Deleuze, ‘sensation is the master of deformations, the agent of bodily deformations’;³³ this is because sensation necessarily crosses between boundaries, levels, areas, just as it transgresses or questions subject-object distinctions. Kennedy adds that, if deformation is a kind of defiguration, a rendering of the subject depicted as ‘less figurative’, then, with Bacon, ‘defiguration is used to achieve pure force and intensity, through the figural’.³⁴

Two aspects of this are worth pursuing: the relation between deformation and violence, and the relation between deformation, appearance, and truth; and these are indeed connected. The suggestion of violence in Bacon’s paintings is unmistakable. Bacon himself refers to his wish to ‘unlock the valves of feeling and therefore return the onlooker to life more violently’;³⁵ and suggests that the image, in his work, is ‘an attempt to bring the figurative thing up onto the nervous system more violently and more poignantly’. This deformation of bodies *is* violence, but is a violence inseparable from deformation as a *painterly* strategy; thus Deleuze complains that merely figurative painting ‘attains only the bogus violence of the represented or the signified; it expresses nothing of the violence of sensation – in other words, of the act of painting’;³⁶ while it is the

latter that is central to Bacon. This leads to the second aspect, for deformation is here a vehicle for truth; if mere appearance is vulnerable to commonsense appropriation, deformation seeks to go deeper. Bacon himself claims that 'if you want to convey fact and if you have to do it, then this can only ever be done through a form of distortion. You must distort, if you can, what is called appearance into image.' He links these points, by reflecting that the aim of the painter is always to 'reinvent the ways that appearance can be made, and be bought back into his nervous system more violently than what's been made before, because what's been made before has already become an absorbed solution.'³⁷

Looking at the content of this 'deformation' takes us further. Even the most cursory glance at Bacon's paintings suggests that there is a strong emphasis on flesh – and indeed bone – so that 'presence' is thereby carried particularly strongly in this embodied form: presence-as-flesh. Newman draws our attention to the melting and spilling of bodies, the 'smudged close-ups of spasms and shrieks' whereby 'The outer shell, its solidity and continuity providing a familiar sign system ... implodes to interior ooze', and the 'amorphous, squirming remnants offer no explanations, yield no conclusions.'³⁸ At the same time, the lack of the more recognizably human details of individual bodily appearance can at times suggest not only a strong sense of indistinction, but a 'deformation' of the conventional boundary between human and animal. Deleuze's interpretation emphasizes the latter, concerned as he is that too much emphasis on 'flesh' risks a secular version of the doctrine of the incarnation, objectionable not primarily because it is religious but because of the recourse to meaning. 'Flesh is not sensation, though it is involved in revealing it', he argues; for 'what constitutes sensation is the becoming animal or plant ... Flesh is only the thermometer of a becoming.' Ultimately, then, 'the being of sensation is not the flesh but the compound of nonhuman forces of the cosmos, of man's nonhuman becomings ...'³⁹

Here one can conjoin some suggestive thoughts of Bacon. Asking about how to catch 'the mystery of appearance within the mystery of the making', he replies that chance plays a significant role, enabling 'other shapes' to play a part in this process of deformation/reconstruction, adding that 'if the thing seems to come off at all, it comes off because of a kind of darkness which the otherness of the shape which isn't known ... conveys to it'.⁴⁰ In Deleuzian terms, one can say that the intensity of the virtual in sensation itself can be conveyed in no other way: as process, as becoming, it reveals the 'nonhuman' within – and beneath, beyond – the human, the force that 'animates' this process. (And 'nonhuman' is not 'inhuman', after all.) Nor indeed can this process really be captured in these

static distinctions – human/nonhuman, organic/inorganic – which have only a relative meaning. In the virtual, they overlap, envelop each other. Hence we are, again, dramatically back in the late nineteenth-century circuit of sensation; we can envisage an ‘inorganic life of things’, reminiscent, Deleuze tells us, of Fechner’s and Conan Doyle’s ‘splendid hypothesis of a nervous system of the earth.’⁴¹

But we are never far from this anyway, as another issue raised by this sensation/deformation nexus will show: namely, a powerful link to hysteria. Bacon’s paintings frequently present us with an image of the body as visceral, yet oddly unbounded, undefined, as if flowing, shapeless, barely held together. *Reclining Woman* (1961) can serve as one example, among many. These particular images could be taken as near-perfect exemplifications of the ‘body without organs’, a concept ultimately derived from Artaud but one that Deleuze has made his own.⁴² In effect, a clear contrast is drawn between the ‘organism’, as the mode of organization of organs, their subordination to specific functions, and the underlying dynamism of life itself: ‘the organism is not life, it is what imprisons life’. So the ‘body without organs’ is not literally without organs; rather, its organs become indeterminate, interchangeable, displaced, no longer defined by their role in organization. This is important for our understanding of sensation. The latter results from the reaction between the life force of the body and the impact of an external force; this will affect a specific organ or organs, but is also displaced beyond, into another level or domain. Hence sensation ‘takes an excessive and spasmodic appearance, exceeding the bounds of organic activity. It is immediately conveyed in the flesh through the nervous wave or vital emotion ...’, and this displacement, or series of displacements, constitutes ‘the hysterical reality of the body’, a process Deleuze himself presents quite explicitly as continuous with the nineteenth-century experience of the hysterical body.⁴³

This hysteria can be linked to presence and the whole presence/representation dynamic. Indeed, one could ask – as Deleuze does himself – whether painting itself could be an articulation of this ‘hysterical reality’ of the body. If we return to ‘classic’ hysteria, one finds the displacement of symptoms, across the body, itself symptomatic of the simultaneous need to articulate meaning, the impossibility of articulating it, and the impossibility of not articulating it, in this register of the symbolic. Hysteria could thereby testify to the desperation to avoid representation and the impossibility of succeeding, making the connection to art all the more explicit. And it is a connection that Deleuze draws on directly, in arguing that ‘there is a special relation between painting

Francis Bacon, *Reclining Woman* (1961) London, Tate Gallery © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved. DACS 2014

and hysteria', at least insofar as painting is based in sensation, and does not try to evade this by recourse to abstraction or the figurative. 'Painting directly attempts to release the presences beneath representation, beyond representation.' Hence: 'Everywhere there is a presence acting directly on the nervous system, which makes representation, whether in place or at a distance, impossible.' Thus we find presence, as we do insistently, in Bacon – and the hysteric.

‘The hysteric is at the same time someone who imposes his or her presence, but also someone for whom things and beings are present, *too* present, and who attributes to everything and communicates to every being this excessive presence,’ so that in this excess we encounter ‘the identity of an already-there and an always-delayed.’⁴⁴ Presence *insists*; it breaks through the conventions, the boundaries, of the representational economy; but this very insistence makes it excessive, carries its own overflow, displacement. It can never be present enough, and is always present too much; it calls on those very possibilities of representation that it tries to burst through, to destroy. And how could it be otherwise? Representation is re-presentation, an ostensible ‘doubling’ of presence that cannot reveal presence save as simulation. If representation is a kind of evasion of hysteria, an avoidance of its necessity, it nonetheless calls it into being through its very attempt to affirm presence through representing it, inscribing and inviting a counter-attack in the name of presence. Hence the significance of the figural or the figure, in Bacon, concentrating the aspiration to presence in its very intensity.

We find we have been led to a point which may not have been where Deleuze intended; instead of sensation entailing an end of representation, through presence, we find the possibility that the conflict between the two may be not so easily or conclusively resolved, or even ineradicable. Exploring this further takes us into the links between Deleuze’s critique of representation and his critique of popular sensationalism, crucial for our understanding not only of Deleuze but of the challenges posed by sensation and sensationalism to aesthetics itself, going to the heart of its concerns.

Sensation without sensationalism?

What has become known as the ‘screaming popes’ series includes some of the most famous – and most discussed – of Bacon’s paintings. They are known to have been derived from the Velázquez portrait *Pope Innocent X* (1650), and – in the case of the scream itself – to have been influenced by the famous image of the nurse shot on the Odessa steps in Eisenstein’s film *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). As is often the case with Bacon, then, we are as aware of sources and influences as we may be puzzled by his own aims. It seems clear that the scream is not – or is not *intended* as – a howl of anguish at the human condition, or a protest at modern alienation;⁴⁵ Bacon himself contrasts his work here with the Edvard Munch *Scream* (1893), claiming that ‘I’m just trying to make images as accurately off

Francis Bacon, *Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1953) Des Moines, Des Moines Art Center © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved. DACS 2014

my nervous system as I can ... I'm not saying anything.' What he tells us, most directly, is that 'I wanted to paint the scream more than the horror'.⁴⁶

The scream more than the horror: it may be that some visible horror or experience of horror produced the scream, or that the scream could induce

horror, but it is the scream, as sensation-in-itself, that Bacon is trying to express in paint. One might say: a scream cleansed of what might make it either meaningful, biographically or politically, or 'sensational', as a media-inflected magnification of the drama or story lying behind it. What Luigi Ficacci writes of another Bacon work might be equally pertinent here: the painting shows us 'the lacerating expression of a cry, regardless of its nature or cause'. It is a cry 'reduced to its wild force, beyond the normal human need to identify and resolve the causes of malaise'.⁴⁷ So Bacon's scream exists beyond the human, beyond communication, connecting rather with the intuitive level of sensation itself. It could even be said that perhaps it is *we* who scream; Bacon's grotesque mouths remain open, caught in a strangled, interminable, eternal silence.

Moving towards Deleuze, one can say that the scream is not uncaused, but that the 'intensive forces' cannot themselves be captured in the scream. 'If we scream, it is always as victims of invisible and insensible forces that scramble every spectacle, and that even lie beyond pain and feeling'.⁴⁸ And if we think of our own confrontation with this scream, or the image of it, the scream in its relation to our sense of the other, in this context of ignorance of cause or context, how can we relate to it? Elsewhere, earlier in his work, Deleuze refers to the example of a terrified face – he is not explicitly referring to Bacon here, but might as well be – and suggests that its 'expressive value' lies in its revelation of a possible world, a terrifying world, the very sense of the 'possible' in and beyond the actual.⁴⁹ Williams glosses this as claiming: 'The other individual does not show or reveal an actual world to me. Instead, it shows a different relation of sensations, intensities and Ideas (the possible world is outside the frame and only expressed through the other's dramatisation of that world)'.⁵⁰ In this sense, neither Bacon nor Deleuze show much interest in communication as such: relations between subjects become relations of envelopment, contraction, resonance, intensities, at a sub-conscious and sub-rational level, as possibilities actualized – dramatized – through the sensory.

The core of Deleuze's treatment of Bacon's scream paintings, however, takes us directly into his critique of the sensational, his determination to isolate 'sensation' from the pollution of the spectacular, the vulgarity of popular sensationalism. In the context of the scream/horror contrast, the dilemma or choice that faces Bacon, according to Deleuze, is most cogently summarized here, by Smith: 'either he paints the horror (the 'sensational') and does not paint the scream, because he represents a horrible spectacle and introduces a story; or he paints the scream directly (the 'sensation') and does not paint the visible horror, because the scream is necessarily the capture of an invisible force.'

Hence, 'the violence of a horrible spectacle must be renounced in order to attain the violence of the sensation.'⁵¹ This distinction certainly seems fundamental to Deleuzian aesthetics. Thus he refers to 'the action of forces upon the body, or sensation (the opposite of the sensational)'; and he suggests that Bacon has always tried to eliminate the sensational in his art.⁵²

This returns us to the figurative and figure (or the figural), and the contrast between them. For Deleuze, the two aspects of the figurative are illustration and narrative, both of which trigger recognition, and both of which distract us from sensation, from the figure as constituted in the experience of the painting. As Andrew Brighton puts it, 'in a painting we should *experience* the sensation of a figured body rather than *recognise* the sensation of a depicted, figurative body'.⁵³ Rather similar language is used in Bacon's own reflections on his work. 'Illustration', for Bacon, means images that illustrate texts, and images that are secondary to appearances, merely imitating them. Thus he claims that he wants his art to be 'deeply suggestive or deeply unlocking of areas of sensation other than simple illustration of the object'. And 'story' plays a role equivalent to 'narrative', as in his observation that 'the moment the story is elaborated, the boredom sets in; the story talks louder than the paint'.⁵⁴ A notoriously self-critical artist, Bacon is known to have destroyed a considerable number of his own canvases, particularly when he felt them to be too close to narrative, illustration or sensationalism.

But are there nonetheless problems for Bacon here? As has been indicated, his own modernism, based as it is on 'figuration', in some sense of that term, clearly takes its distance from the abstraction that is for Clement Greenberg the purest form of modernism in painting. Not surprisingly, he encounters criticism from that quarter. Greenberg accuses him of cheapness, coarseness, the use of 'transparent devices', and adds: 'Bacon is the one example in our time of *inspired* safe taste – taste that's inspired in the way in which it searches out the most up-to-date of your "rehearsed responses"'.⁵⁵ In short: far from escaping the inauthenticities of sensationalism and cliché, Bacon merely reproduces them. Bacon himself seems to accept that in some degree this is inevitable, and that the resulting tension – not present in abstraction – is a powerful force in his art, as it may be indeed in *any* art that aspires to retain some connection with a human subject matter. Hence: 'I think that art is recording; I think it's reporting'. And, in a late interview, he explicitly 'confesses' that 'in spite of theoretically longing for the image to be made of irrational marks, inevitably illustration has to come into it'.⁵⁶

Indeed, this is a painter who is most clearly subject to literary influences

and inspirations, and who can hardly be said to avoid the figurative in practice. Both the figurative and the linear are significant in Bacon, and both conjure up again the issues of recognition, resemblance and representation. Expanding on one aspect of this, Brighton suggests that the linear ‘works with the recognition of things rather than the optical sensation of the painterly’. One can say, then, that his work both stimulates *and* resists interpretation, involves *and* questions recognition. Of a 1971 painting, a triptych, Brighton writes that it disrupts our normal reflexes, making us conscious of them, in that it draws on and stimulates our awareness of the body: ‘It calls forth acts of spontaneous recognition below the level of thought comparable to our spontaneous actions when encountering people in the street ...’ Bacon thereby ‘sets up expectations of norms and fears of abnormalities.’⁵⁷ This does indeed engage us at a visceral level – sensation is crucially in play here – but this does not exclude words, meanings, interpretations, issues of representation; rather it exists in a tension with these that is part and parcel of the power of the work itself. Thus criticisms of Bacon – and his own self-critical strain – have a tendency to end up confirming the appeal or significance of his work, by reinforcing the suggestion that there may be something irreducible about the tension between presence and representation that is central to it.⁵⁸

These points suggest the need to ‘reconfigure’ figuration, in that figure (the figural) does not need to be seen as existing in a sphere that is incompatible with representation; rather, that although there *is* indeed a tension between figure and the figurative, this is a tension that is in some sense *within* representation. Figure expresses the force of the other, the non-representational, threatening and fracturing representation even as it relies on it. This might be a way of understanding Brighton’s claim that Bacon’s paintings ‘threaten nature speaking virulently through art ... The instant horror, revulsion and fascination of these images attest that at some level we do experience them as real.’ Thus, through these bodies of sensation, the horrors of nature are ‘immanent within the ambiguity of fractured pictorial conventions’. He adds: ‘The image incites a perceptual panic, a need to make sense, to conceptualise and to recognise ...’,⁵⁹ and it seems as though this is a version of the hysteria we have already encountered, confirming as it does the need to ‘make sense’ and the impossibility of doing so, the impetus to representation in the very craving for, and flight from, presence.

Here it can be pointed out that Deleuze himself seems to admit that representation is ultimately ineradicable, even if it is transfigured through art. While he defiantly asserts that ‘no art and no sensation have ever been representational’,⁶⁰

he also accepts that since fighting the figurative involves producing the figure, 'the pure presence of the figure is indeed the reconstitution of a representation, the recreation of a figuration' whereby we again encounter the 'hysteria' of painting. Once again, the very attempt to avoid representation seems to produce the hysteria Deleuze associates with the latter, this time as a feature of his own argument. Deleuze is even forced to acknowledge a type of analogy, whereby 'a sensible resemblance is produced',⁶¹ but via sensation itself, rather than symbolically, via a code. As in Bacon's accounts, in his interviews, this resemblance is clearly distinct from the *initial* appearance of similarity, the arena of recognition; but if this is still *resemblance*, can this really occur without *some* implicit recourse to 'recognition'? Could one sensation be experienced as similar to another without implicitly drawing on established meanings even while transforming them, not being merely a mechanical application of them? And if the concept of 'figure' is to be of use, then it must exist in *some* relation to the (problematical) basis of representation in recognition, even if it also challenges this.

We are now in a position to move towards an assessment of the plausibility of a Deleuzian aesthetics of sensation. We can summarize Deleuze's position as follows. An aesthetics of sensation must take its distance from the banalities of everyday life. We live in a world of taken-for-granted, commonsense assumptions, which Kant's critical philosophy uncritically accepts as a 'harmony of the faculties'. This 'common sense' is a framework of recognition, permitting identification and continuity, and it is on this basis that codes of representation are based.⁶² These become all the more elaborate and dangerous – dangerously persuasive, dangerously pervasive – in the era of mass media reproduction. In this context, 'sensationalism' is a mediated, intensified version of the clichés of everyday repetition, made startling and dramatic, apparently 'new', through this magic of the media. In order to avoid all this, 'we', as artists or audience, must return to the *intensity* of sensation itself, as experience; it is this that the artist transmits, or must endeavour to transmit.

We have already seen that there are grounds for questioning the plausibility of the first part of this, the underlying critique of representation and recognition, at least to the extent that this involves the possibility of eliminating these categories altogether. But, beyond this aspect, it is important to unpack the second part of the argument, and see that there is actually a dual critique mounted by Deleuze here: a critique of the sensational, and a critique of cliché. He himself tends to fuse them. Thus, writing of Bacon, he claims: 'The violence of sensation is opposed to the violence of the represented (the sensational, the

cliché'); and 'Sensation is the opposite of the facile and the ready-made, the cliché, but also of the "sensational"...'⁶³ The implication here is that the sensational, ostensibly in opposition to the everyday world of routine, repetition, and cliché, is actually part and parcel of that world: the sensational is dramatized, eye-catching cliché.

Up to a point, this is indeed a useful insight, but clearly the role of 'cliché' here needs further examination. If, for Deleuze, intensity and sensation are closely connected, it has to be said that there is also an intensity to his own engagement with cliché. Here, indeed, we seem to reach the panic-stricken, paranoid-hysterical core of this High Modernist aesthetic. All around, Deleuze is menaced by the threat, the perils, of cliché. It is endlessly, obsessively, denounced: Chapter 11 of the Bacon book consists of little else. 'We are besieged by photographs that are illustrations, by newspapers that are narrations, by cinema-images, by television-images. There are psychic clichés just as there are physical clichés – ready-made perceptions, memories, phantasms.'⁶⁴ Indeed, clichés have always already invaded the canvas: the artist has to go to extraordinary lengths to wipe them away, chase them off, expel them, using 'free marks' and chance to disrupt the ever-present risk of the figurative.⁶⁵ In this nightmare world, 'even the reactions against clichés are actually creating clichés ...' Indeed so, one might respond; for in the context of this modernist tradition that Deleuze himself espouses, the attempt to escape cliché via shock – including the shock of 'sensation' – has itself become cliché, a tired repetition. Poor Deleuze: 'The fight against clichés is a terrible thing.'⁶⁶ All these horrors; it is enough to make one scream ... But that, too, would be a cliché ...

Considering this, one might firstly observe the characteristically modernist assimilation of the relatively undifferentiated, the ordinary, the everyday, to the world of cliché, banality and superficiality, so that the everyday is presented as always already stigmatized, as it were, with an implicit disparagement of the mundane, of the cyclical, relatively repetitive aspects of life. Thus Jacques Rancière can complain that Deleuze is 'too indebted to the modernist dramaturgy of the sublime break.'⁶⁷ And one can see how Deleuze is led to this. On the face of it, after all, there are real continuities between 'sensation' and 'sensationalism'; drawing as he does on the late nineteenth-century literature, where the physiological, the psychological and the media-related senses are closely linked, Deleuze seems aware of this himself. But clearly, this is a threat to his aspiration to found an unpolluted aesthetics. The way out, then, is to assimilate 'sensationalism' to the rejected world of cliché and everyday recognition.

The problem is that this rather desperate move runs up against the objection

that sensationalism, too, seems to make the same move as Deleuzian sensation; it, too, defines itself at least partly *against* the everyday world of everyday continuity and ordinariness. To be sensational is to be extraordinary, vivid, intense, *different* ... Surely *both* these moves need to be questioned. We have seen that the very distinction between the 'everyday' and the 'sensation(al)' is contextual, relative; they are mutually constitutive. As for the sensational, one can of course agree with Deleuze that it is never as 'sensational' as it seems, since it draws to some extent on existing cultural resources, existing representational canons; but we have seen reason to believe this to be true of Deleuzian 'sensation' also. Can one really put the sensation into sensation without implicitly putting the sensational in as well? Isn't there an essential continuity here? In the cultural experience of the modern, 'sensation' occupies a precarious place between cliché and the everyday on the one hand, and the sensational, on the other; or, one could equally well say that it encompasses, slides into and across, *both* these zones. Tentative, provisional distinctions can be made; but there can be no sense in trying to make a strict distinction between 'sensation' and 'sensationalism'. Everything we have seen in this discussion suggests that they overlap, run into each other, subvert and replenish each other; ultimately, they inhabit each other.

Deleuze plays on the double meaning of *cliché* in French, as stereotyped thinking and as snapshot: both are 'born out of an instantaneous act that requires little effort and that results in a freezing of reality into a reified image', as Polan summarizes it. This is illuminating; one can indeed see connections here, reminding us of the essential continuity between the mediated culture of sensation and the immediacy of everyday sensation as such, just as it suggests the intensity of focus that can render *both* of them 'sensational'. It is all very well for Deleuze, as expounded here by Polan, to denounce 'the photographic cliché, in which the seeing goes too quickly past the photo to a represented world',⁶⁸ but this is the whole point and nature of the culture of sensation: the sensation works precisely *through* this speed, this assimilation, this instantaneity of the circuit of sensation as a feature of modern experience. It is entirely understandable – and may well be laudable – that the modern artist who is particularly aware of this, and sensitive to it, might want to differentiate his art from this dimension, give it some autonomy in order to explore the art of his art, and thus *not* have it reducible to the sensational moment of the circuit; but the artist can only do this against precisely this background, one that cannot ultimately be transcended or evaded, even if it can be transformed, transfigured. The artist is both *against* and *within* this culture, and that paradox suggests both the possibilities and the limitations of his task.

We can now consider the wider implications of this. After all, part of the hold of a 'culture of consumption' is precisely due to the fact that it is also a 'culture of sensation'; each helps to drive the other, and no High Modernist or elitist bemoaning of the fact, or yearning for 'true' sensation, makes one iota of difference, or contributes to our understanding of this intriguing phenomenon. The result, in Deleuze, is an aesthetic theory that gives a welcome centrality to themes of embodiment, intensity and sensation, but is ultimately narrow and flawed through presenting an inadequate theorization of the relation between sensation and representation, whether in the arts or popular culture, and through excluding whole swathes of cultural experience from its purview. And these exclusions and purifications even enter into the analysis of art itself, narrowly defined: much of it turns out to be corrupted by cliché, narrative, illustration, sensationalism ... Thus an aesthetic justification for Art seems to have had the consequence that the category itself has shrunk alarmingly in its range of application. This outcome seems all the more disappointing in that, as shown in earlier sections, sensation can serve as a linkage between these apparently separate areas of 'high' and 'low' culture. In popular culture, sensation offers one of life's pleasures: the thrill, the novelty of excitement. 'Sensation' is a proof of life itself, an embodiment or dramatization of life. Such sensations can be pleasurable or painful, exciting or tiring; they are certainly intense, visceral, engaging. They may indeed be emotionally draining. And all this can be just as true of our engagement with art, whether as artists or as audience: 'sensation' cannot be used as the basis for a thorough demarcation of what can at best be separated by tentative, shifting boundaries, little more than differing emphases within a broad notion of the aesthetic.

Let us take, for another example, the issue of 'deformation', raised above. If it is true that, for artists, 'mere' appearance has to be transformed in being rendered as 'art', and in the case of Bacon, among others, it can be said to be thereby 'deformed' into art, is this not also true, in a sense, of the fate of appearance and everyday narrative in sensationalism? The mere appearance, the phenomenal 'truth', is 'deformed', through media techniques of abbreviation and exaggeration, into a 'sensational' truth, a truth of mediated experience, that can be as distinctive and provocative as any work of art. The point is not to argue that these are identical, but that they are sufficiently close, as variants of a pattern, to allow for an underlying continuity of cultural interpretation, rather than for this to be closed off by the uncritical reproduction of the hoary old dichotomy of 'art' and 'mass culture'. In their differing ways, both Poe and Bacon may be better guides to the tensions that occur *between* these, yet

within this common problematic – particularly tensions between presence and representation – than Deleuze himself, valuable though his insights into the aesthetics of sensation undoubtedly are. Ironically, much of Deleuze's language of sensation in the context of art draws implicitly on these continuities, and the sense of 'sensation' as an experience that is prior to its own classification in evaluative terms, yet this insight is not developed. He is torn between giving us an analysis of sensation using a theoretical framework that would include both the narrower and the broader senses of the term, and remaining uncritically within one of these, thereby trapped into reproducing a limited and limiting, elitist model; and it is the latter that tends to win out.

Finally, let us remember and recover the radical cutting edge to modernism, often obscured by the concerns with methodological purity. Let us take another painter, Lily, struggling with her painting in *To the Lighthouse*. Virginia Woolf tells us: 'Phrases came. Visions came. Beautiful pictures. Beautiful phrases. But what she wished to get hold of was that very jar on the nerves, the thing itself before it has been made anything.'⁶⁹ Here, Woolf describes perfectly the challenge of the creative ideal, of capturing the very moment, the very 'feel', of sensation-in-itself. But how is this to be interpreted? Traditionally, there would be an emphasis on the quality of the sensation, its fusion of moral and aesthetic ideals, transformed into art. Not just any old sensation will do; there is an implicit hierarchy of experiences. On the face of it, modernism breaks decisively with this. The radicalism of modernism is the implication that experience simply *is* experience; there are no experiences that are *the* experiences that constitute the 'proper' subject matter for art or literature. In principle, *any* sensation is available to be transformed into art. This democratic insight, as it were, the potential universality of this experience of sensation, confirms the relativism of the distinction between the 'mundane' and the 'sensational'. Hence, again, the essential parallel here, whereby art and sensationalism both emerge from a background that they simultaneously constitute as such. The 'sensation' – whether as basis of art or sensationalism – simply *is* the mundane, but experienced as a challenge, with intensity and focus. And in either case, this experience then has to be 'worked up', into art or the media sensation. The fundamental aesthetic structure in place here is the same, whatever the other differences.

And there are differences, of course. If we return to the phrase 'intensity and focus', we know Deleuze tells us much about the former, but perhaps we also need to consider the latter. If we focus on focus, this idea of *awareness* as an aspect of sensation, then this could mark a significant difference of degree between art, as an immediately *reflective* grasp of sensation, a turn towards consciousness

and self-consciousness *in* experience, and the 'sensational experience', in which the immersion in the immediacy of impact means that the aspect of reflective awareness is secondary, relatively undeveloped. The challenge for a cultural aesthetics is to theorize these two dimensions, or poles, of the experience of sensation – the relation between sensation as immersion/embodiment and as awareness/reflection – *without* allowing these to emerge as mutually exclusive, and identifying aesthetics with the concerns of one rather than the other. *Both* dimensions will be present, in varying ways, and to varying extents, in *both* art, conventionally defined, and popular culture. This challenge would, as we have implied, involve theorizing the figural in relation to the dynamic of presence and representation that runs through these two dimensions – a challenge that would be well worth meeting. Indeed, we can recall Pater here, for it could be that he comes close to meeting the challenge, even if he himself retains a characteristic primary allegiance to elite art. At the same time, his emphasis on the passing moment invites further consideration: we might, perhaps paradoxically, want to deepen this by trying to open up the possibility of a field or space of sensation. But we can best do this by moving on, into a brief consideration of a painter whose relentless abstraction seems to mark quite a contrast with Bacon.

The web of sensation

The early paintings of Bridget Riley provide some of the most arresting and eye-catching images of the 1960s. The patterned or broken black and white stripes, pyramids, circles and cones, producing sensations of shimmering or twisting movement, of lines shifting to and fro, provoked an inability to focus and a range of distortions, flickerings and dazzling effects in the visual field; indeed, some spectators complained of feeling dizzy, that the paintings made their eyes hurt.

By 1965, with these images reproduced on mugs, wallpaper, furnishings and clothes, even high fashion, Riley – a conventional modernist in such matters – was denouncing this 'explosion of commercialism' and 'hysterical sensation-alism'.⁷⁰ In her study of Riley's art in the context of its time, Frances Follin writes that her pictures:

... carried with them a multiplicity of meanings and associations that were so bound up with the concerns of the period that they produced a sensation of immediate recognition in their audience which was visually compelling then, and which has made them evocative of the period ever since.⁷¹

Bridget Riley, *Current* (1964) New York, Museum of Modern Art

It is easy to see how this can encompass the dimension of cultural investment and magnification that we refer to as ‘sensationalism’, just as this provides further evidence of the difficulty, even the impossibility, of any hard and fast excision of this cultural potential from an aesthetics of sensation wedded to the purity of art. Indeed, Riley’s own reflections on her work can help us understand this.

Let us take another of these early paintings. It was initially to be called *Discharge*, ‘with the idea of arrows, say, being discharged in your face as you looked at it’, but – perhaps troubled by the evident hint of violence here – she settled on *Static*, in the sense of ‘a field of static electricity’, inducing ‘visual prickles’ from a ‘sparkling texture’. The idea for the painting originated from a drive up a mountain on a hot day in which a vast expanse of shale was encountered at the summit, experienced as visually confusing: was this ‘shimmering

shale' near or far, flat or round? Getting out of the car intensified the sensation, and into her mind came images of 'a mass of tiny glittering units like a rain of arrows'.⁷²

Such experiences, felt deeply enough, are the stuff of artistic creativity, but never in any predictable fashion. Always willing enough to use the language of 'sensation' to characterize her artistic preoccupations, Riley writes:

... if sensation alone is the yardstick, then the painting has to be a place that allows for the relatively independent workings of sensation. Although in the objective world sensations are always prompted by something or other, they are not necessarily bound to whatever may trigger them off. They have a life of their own, as every painter knows when he is working: they change, but not in any logical way ...

Bridget Riley, *Static 1* (1966) New York, Coll. Hannelore B. Schulhof

Once again, we encounter the idea of disjunctions and disconnections in these circuits of sensation, the way in which causes do not produce predictable effects. 'Disruption, friction, sudden ease and deceptively smooth passages all play an important part in the web of sensation,' she claims.⁷³ There is, nonetheless, a sense of shared patterns or homologies underlying it all, patterns obscurely felt *and* recognized by the painter, since this is in some sense a transfigured product of her experience. The 'shimmering shale' on the mountain appears to bear no relation to the dots on the canvas, yet the sensations of the one, produced by the hazy movements of light and shadow, the dazzle of sunlight, on the shale, manifest in this obscurely patterned overall effect, is mapped into the patterned effects of the relation between the spots on the canvas, and thus in the sensations experienced by the painter and the spectator. One might add here that if, at a quick glance, one seems to see identical dots in straight lines in the painting, this is wrong on both counts: moving physically *in relation to* the picture, and *around in* the picture, brings out the sensation of waves and the differential impact of scale and level. Feeling, as sensation, operates as mediator between sight and the forces and energies of the world, just as the *way* this works seems to depend on these presupposed or virtual shared patterns, enabling us to refer to a 'web' of sensation, or a field that links painter, painting and spectator, just as it relates object, painting and painter. Memories of past sensations thus come to have some sort of 'correspondence' with those in the painting, but it is indirect; the 'shine' in a painting, for example, is not the 'original' shine (of hair, water or whatever), but something the painter produces on the surface of the canvas.⁷⁴

In elaborating this idea of a web or field of sensation, we can begin by noting that the use of words like 'texture' indicates that we are in a sensory world, that perception is always *embodied*. Riley endorses Merleau-Ponty's claim that 'to look at an object is to inhabit it,'⁷⁵ and observes that colour sensation involves not only shimmering and glittering but also dullness and brilliance, buoyancy, density and softness, all 'sensory relationships' that engage us through movement, orientation and response. 'For me,' she writes, 'nature is not landscape, but the dynamism of visual forces,' event rather than appearance, and her pictures convey 'the free play of visual forces' within a 'controlled structure'. These forces and energies cannot be *seen* by the eye; they have to be *felt*, sensed, as rhythm or movement – and these can really only be sensed in their passing. Repetition and rhythm are at the root of movement, and since there can be no movement without stasis, no change without a constant, this provides both the challenge to the painter, and the solution: 'If you can bring the two together in an image you have a dynamic, something that is not descriptive

of movement but which gives the sensation of it.' Sensation, then, arises from the contrast, which may, and typically does, involve a pattern of *repeated* contrasts. In painting, '*contrast* is the basic relationship',⁷⁶ although it may take very subtle forms. For example, Riley suggests that the energy of colour is not released by direct opposition, rather by instability, 'a freely floating flux': a slight influence from a neighbouring colour sends the colour off-balance, releasing energy, and it is particularly along borders, edges, between colours and shapes, that this effect is most intense.⁷⁷

This web, or field, is defined fundamentally through *depth*, 'the primary spatial dimension' in perception. This has two aspects: the space between the picture plane and the spectator, which is where the painting 'takes place'; and the 'interior space' of the painting, a layered, shallow depth.⁷⁸ This 'pictorial space' is 'made up of the contrasts and the different planes which colours adopt on the canvas', so that the paintings offer 'a space which invites and accommodates a certain group of sensations'. Space is 'grounded in colour organisation',⁷⁹ so that colour planes can take up different positions in space, advancing or receding, having different weights, and thereby bringing about a field of forces; indeed, recessing colours or pushing them forwards can produce the sense of rhythm. Riley distinguishes this sense of space both from traditional perspective and from the more modern fashion of presenting the painting as two-dimensional, describing both approaches as 'geometric'. And here, there is a significant disagreement with Greenberg's modernism. For him, the core of modern painting is the acceptance of the limitations of the medium: 'the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of the pigment'.⁸⁰ For Riley, the effect of this is to reduce picture-plane to physical surface, medium to means; the medium *as a whole* is the relationship between these means and the painter.⁸¹ This reminds us of Op art's challenge to modernism 'in its insistence on the bodily character of perception and therefore of aesthetic appreciation', as Follin puts it.

Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of Riley's own 'fields of sensation' is the way they systematically disrupt the eye's ability to settle. As Follin suggests, 'there is no point at which the viewer can stand and perceive a static entity. The image is always both "here" and "there", sliding between points of focus'.⁸² Riley confirms this: 'There is seldom a single focal point in my paintings',⁸³ although 'multi-focal' rather than 'unfocused' would be the more accurate term. So: 'What you focus on is *not* what you see. One looks *here* and colour is *there*'.⁸⁴ She adds that 'Focusing isn't just an optical activity, it is also a mental one'. The sensational field is the field of overall *awareness*, a sensory, not a purely visual

dimension, a field across which sensations ‘play’, flickering and shimmering, disrupting and disturbing, a field of contrasts, tensions and nuances that produce the sensational effect through this very decentring, this inability to stop the flow, the movement, the evanescent effects. Light that dazzles, dissolves focus, like standing in a field of energy. What she claims of Mondrian could also be applied to her: ‘the colour weights and planes ... provoke relationships that concentrate or diffuse attention’. Riley inserts her paintings in the very diffusion of experience, in a field of scattering; the sensational becomes the concentration *of* and *in* the scattering, not its antithesis. And in positioning herself here, she reminds us that sensation ‘is as much inside me as it is “out there” in the work’,⁸⁵ and this would clearly be as true of the spectator. It is crucial, then, that we find *ourselves* located here, as part of the field.

This tells us not just about the *effects* of sensation, but also about its *construction*. We encounter here a series of situations that can be mapped on to each other: the original experience, the later sensation induced or experienced by the artist in painting, and the sensation produced in the viewer. Each involves a break, a discontinuity, between the physical energies of the world, and sight, in which it is feeling, sensation itself, with no determinate meaning – indeed, fundamentally with no ‘meaning’ at all – that mediates the gap, through sensing rhythm and movement, but can do so because it is already *implicitly* there, in the pattern of relations, just as sensation is there as outcome, as effect. What is distinctive in this particular interpretation is how sensation becomes a function of the *field*, not just a matter of startling or eye-catching shocks, even suggesting the possibility that that this might be the basis of sensation in its more obviously dramatic forms. If we break the ‘field’ down, retrospectively or analytically, into its ‘scatterings’, it can be seen also as a synthetic process: it can be built up, built towards, so that at some point a painting ‘released a perceptual experience that flooded the whole’, as Riley puts it, of her own activity in painting, or perhaps the field can be seen to ‘accommodate the sensation it solicits’.⁸⁶

Finally, though, we can see that questions of meaning are still present. If we look at a painting by Titian, with a mythological subject, Riley points out that there is ‘a gap between the mythic illusion which one can “read” and the immediacy of the sensations one experiences ...’; and this ‘between’ is a matter of relationships, rather than elements, signs or symbols, since it is here that Titian creates his ‘intangible web’ of sensations in the painting.⁸⁷ This gap, then, incorporates a horizontal or reflexive dimension, a reminder that sense-making may, in this context, be indissolubly linked to sensation-making but is not reducible to it. Hence meanings and memories come into play at all stages

of these circuits of sensation, from the original experience, mediated through memories and meanings, personal and cultural, through to the problematic 'recognition' by the painter in the emergent work, to the attempts to 'make sense' of it, of *its* impact and *their* feelings, by spectators. Similarly, 'focusing' points both ways: towards sensation, and towards mind, through a relation to consciousness. All this entails that sensation, then, can be seen to grow out of an existing hinterland, or produce its own, through the very process by which it emerges *as* sensation; and this 'hinterland' is necessarily one of experiences always already impregnated with a cultural dimension.

In principle, then, it is hardly surprising if Riley's own work creates its own challenges of meaning and interpretation, being associated, for example, with crises of perception in the culture of the 1960s, including the hallucinatory effects of drug experimentation, along with the visual challenges of the spectacle of the city experienced through modern technology, such as the car windscreen at night.⁸⁸ Ultimately, the homology between sensation and its hinterland, its background of relative un-feeling, of experiential 'anaesthesia', and sensation-alism and *its* hinterland, as the everyday, the ordinary, illustrates the difficulty of securing any hard and fast distinction between them. In Riley's case, this is further overlaid by the homology between the tension between diffusion and concentration in her work, and that in the modern world more generally – something which indeed she seems to notice, intriguingly commenting that the problem of focusing could be related to the loss of certainties, of central values, that characterize the modern age.⁸⁹ And this is an area where Riley's work points us forward to later chapters of this book, to the necessity, in particular, to explore the relations between conscious focusing and diffuse awareness and the constitution of the 'field of sensation' as a feature both of everyday experience and of art and media forms, such as, most notably, cinema, where these themes become particularly central.