A Note on Deleuze and Renaissance Art

Javier Benzal de Dios

“Perspective is much more than a secret technique for imitating a reality... It is the invention of a world dominated and possessed through and through.” These inimical words by Maurice Merleau-Ponty encapsulate a customary philosophical position, as explicit and implicit references to early modern culture by critical theorists and continental philosophers lead to an uninviting and even sinister picture (251). Because of its emphasis on the human eye, quantitative spatial relations, and the virtual incising of pictorial space via linear perspective, the Renaissance was cast as a formidable villain in order to uphold modern artistic production (Zorach, “Renaissance Theory” 9). It is an accusatory characterization that in turn empowers linear perspective as a technique that not only dictates a unified visual space on a flat surface, but also stipulates control over nature and urban spaces. The linear system is understood to have cut and hollowed the medieval urban fabric in order to create wide and straight avenues where “the tyranny of the geometrical does not allow for dirt, irregularity or ultimately life” (Schich 33). The disembodied eye of perspective looms. Withdrawn and private, the Renaissance appears as a compelling or enticing adversary, but a bureaucratic administrator of the state machine, instituting universal regulations and a system of surveillance without concern for the specifics of site, life, or dwelling.

The image of the Renaissance as enforcing quantitative spatial relations is palpable in the writings of Gilles Deleuze, though the French philosopher does not appear centrally concerned with the period. Within early modernity, his interests ostensibly remain within the Baroque. In fact, Deleuze often avoids referencing the Renaissance as such, which is even omitted from his more comprehensive accounts of art historical trajectories. When the Renaissance is mentioned, the reader finds a series of critical exchanges with the primacy of optical distance and representation. In A Thousand Plateaus, written in collaboration with Felix Guattari, linear perspective is seen as a striated and hierarchical mode of representation that implements an optical apparatus of social control (495). For Deleuze and Guattari, the constrictions promulgated by perspective are symptomatic of a larger concern with identity and linearity that signifies a departure from Gothic art. In a striking though unflattering interpretation of Giotto’s proto-Renaissance Stigmatization of St. Francis (Fig. 1), the image of Christ is described as a “kite-machine” and a “veritable airplane” that creates a system of power in which both space and body are regularized. The image articulates “the landcapsulation of all milieus” (178; Deleuze, Francis Bacon 10).

The rhetorical effect of such exclusions and criticisms seems unyielding. But despite a discernible aversion towards the Renaissance as a period, one detects in Deleuze’s oeuvre scattered positive engagements with Renaissance artists like Uccello, Michelangelo, Rosso Fiorentino, or Tintoretto. What is more, Deleuze developed the concept of ligne de fuite, which plays a central role in his philosophy. Though commonly translated as “lines of flight,” it is a French technical term associated with linear perspective, literally meaning “receding lines.” Exploring the interstitial gaps in Deleuze’s thought as openings onto Renaissance and contemporary theory, this essay sketches the significance of Deleuze’s engagement with the period, in turn complicating the common understanding of perspective as a hierarchical apparatus of social and visual control. My goal is not to parse Deleuze’s references, but to explore and problematize both how Deleuze saw the Renaissance and how the Renaissance can inform Deleuzian thought.

Un-Demarcating the Renaissance

In retrospect, the Italian Renaissance appears as a predictable choice for a foil, especially given the mid-twentieth-century discourse on Renaissance art, which often emphasized a reductive and teleological notion of the period itself. Stranger still, historiographic interpretations of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century art as a homogenous system of optical and territorial coercion have not dissipated, despite contemporary challenges to pictorial unification, naturalism, the disembodied eye of the viewer, the idea that geometric city planning did not exist in the Middle Ages, the importance of geometric accuracy for artists, and even the validity of the term “Renaissance” itself.1 But the Renaissance that critical theorists and philosophers studied was not our Renaissance, it was one mediated by Heinrich Wölfflin, Erwin Panofsky, Aby Warburg, and Alois Riegler. The influence of Hegel in those writers is quite relevant.

Deleuze’s work evinces an ongoing concern with artistic practices, even though he remained critical to traditional lineages and genealogies. In his works, the Renaissance seems to be pushed to the margins, and even ignored. In his book The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque, the chapter “What is the Baroque?” attempts to find the core characteristics of the period, but Deleuze does not name the Renaissance as a preceding force. In fact, in a brief exchange with Uccello, to which we will return, the painter appears as an isolated entity, neither as an exemplar nor an aberration of his period (34). The omission of the Renaissance is also noticeable in Francis Bacon.
Deleuze’s approach to Baroque art is hardly unexpected: the "élán vital" of curved forms is seen as escaping regularization through turbulent maneuvers. In addition, a prioritization of medieval over fourteenth- and fifteenth-century developments is palpable in his works, as the former is seen to generate a multiplicity that echoes modern interests in destabilization, communal practices, and materiality. Importantly, these points of interest never exist in Deleuze’s work as historically autonomous entities. The second chapter of *The Fold*, for example, summons Paul Klee’s study of curved figures, creating a triangulation between Baroque aesthetics, the modern art of the Bauhaus and, by implication, the medieval workshop practices that inspired the German school.

Such artistic encounters correspond to Deleuze’s core academic endeavors, which began with Spinoza—indeed with Spinoza’s overcoming of Descartes, whom Deleuze calls a man of the Renaissance (*The Fold* 32; *Expressionism* 17). Descartes comes under fire precisely because he remained attached to straight lines (both aesthetic and ontological), consequently ignoring the curvature of both matter and soul. In contrast, *The Fold* creates an alternative lineage, connecting Leibniz, Nietzsche, William and Henry James, and Whitehead. In it, perspective (and perspectivism) creates a multifarious space of perpetual variations, inflections, curvatures, and singularities in which truth is not projected by a subject but in which “the truth of a variation appears to the subject” and where “point of view on a variation now replaces the center of a figure” (21-2).

A rejection of Renaissance philosophy, however, is not as straightforward as it may seem. As Michael Hardt has pointed out, Spinoza’s naturalism, which is so important for Deleuze, had its origin in the Renaissance, namely in the work of Giordano Bruno (72). A double-edged sword, naturalism permeates the history of philosophy, from Lucretius to Spinoza, forming a critique of the devaluation of the natural sphere and the triumph of humanistic logic over desire. For Deleuze, naturalism also plays a role in Hume as a force of demystification, much as it will later appear in Nietzsche. At the same time, the emergence of naturalism is seen to correlate, in artistic terms, to the height of pictorial representation—that is, the height of the Aristotelian framework, with its prioritization of seeing and its metaphysics of identity.

Deleuze’s “Renaissance” appears to be comprised of a traditional set: retinal reproduction and spatial structuring. This being said, neither Renaissance nor Baroque are periods or chronological brackets, but a series of interlacing forces and values (Conley 204). Hence, for Deleuze, the Baroque is not a marker aligned with the seventeenth century, but also the “future” Baroque of Henri Michaux and Pierre Boulez, of Stéphane Mallarmé and Simon Hantaï, of “modern Baroque painters” like Paul Klee, Jean Fautrier, or Jean Dubuffet (*The Fold* 33-35). Even within early modernity, the Baroque does not present a departure, circa 1600, from the Renaissance in general and historical terms, but rather a specific departure from the Renaissance’s emphasis on optics, representation, and linear spaces—a departure that is not chronologically bound. In fact, Deleuze singles out Rosso Fiorentino (1494-1540) as taking a simple but decisive
step into the Baroque’s spatial rupture. In his paintings, we find, writes Deleuze, the autonomy obtained by the unfolding of the depicted fabrics. Through the overflowing, expanding, and contracting dynamism of the fabrics, bodies become distorted and decentralized. Fabric overpowers anatomy. For Deleuze, the Baroque is most easily recognizable in the textile model, which the philosopher describes as creating distending, billowing, and flaring waves (vague gonflant, bouillonnant, juponnant).

The incomparable painters of the Baroque, Deleuze argues, are Tintoretto and El Greco (The Fold 30). It is in the Last Judgment (1562) of the former and the Burial of the Count of Orgaz (1586) of the latter that we observe an unfolding and heterogeneous space. Developing from Wölfflin, Tintoretto’s painting is described not as creating a doubling of space, but as being organized through two vectorial forces (upwards and downwards): in the bottom part, souls trip, lean, and plunge into the folding of matter, while the top part of the painting depicts the “folds of fire” reanimating the bodies and communicating through them a “vertigo of the heights” or a “dizziness from on high” (vertige du haut). It is then not the depiction of two spaces that exists in Tintoretto (or El Greco), but an ever-expanding unfolding and folding-in of forces. Unlike the static and firm “Renaissance” space, this “Baroque” space presents a system of interrelated tensions and compressions. Taking the expanding principle of difference in Heidegger’s Zwiefalt—which Deleuze calls an “ideal fold” that differentiates and self-differentiates—Deleuze reflects on André Scala’s analyses of two potential sources for Heidegger’s concept. The first source is the “Greek fold” of Parmenides: being and non-being drawn into one another. The second, and more relevant to this essay, is a method of projection, explicated in Panofsky’s study of Albrecht Dürer’s system, in which the projected shape of a solid on paper can be cut and folded in order to form a three-dimensional mode (259). The number of sixteenth-century artists appearing at key points of Deleuze’s arguments increases, and brushing aside his Renaissance interests becomes increasingly problematic. Meanwhile, by avoiding a delineation of the Renaissance as such, Deleuze subverts what is for him a core Renaissance paradigm, the linear segmentation of time and space.

Line and Territory

In the scholarship, the Renaissance eye often becomes a static lens, detached from duration: Norman Bryson writes that Renaissance artists operated “from a vantage-point outside the mobility of duration, in an eternal moment of disclosed presence” (94). Vision becomes a theoretical concern for modern interpretations of the Renaissance inasmuch as the visual field comes to be structured, though linear perspective, into a series of orthogonal lines that aim at maintaining unity and equality. For Deleuze and Guattari, this visual, unified structure leads to territorialization as we engage in a movement “that ceases to be directional, becoming dimensional instead” (347). The linearity of single point perspective is understood as creating striated spaces, which are differentiated from smooth spaces. Whereas striation creates a homogenous space, smooth space is defined by a heterogeneous multiplicity. Striated space corresponds to logos, quantity, and Euclidian space; smooth space corresponds to nomos or unwritten law, quality, and Riemannian geometry. Striated spaces are visual; smooth spaces, haptic. In this assessment, striated space comes under criticism, as it presents a partitioned field in which motion disappears, and Becoming triumphs over becoming. It is in this sense that the Albertian perspectival space is socially and politically criticized, especially as it is connected to Descartes. In linear perspective, the viewer understands the pictorial field by processing distances. And by keeping distances, it is possible to keep at distance “the forces of chaos knocking at my door” (320). Deleuze sees here the aesthetics of late sixteenth-century dance as representative of this expression of distance, avoiding the unquantifiable, chaotic surplus that emerges from physical contact, and thus seeking regularization.

The linear emerges as mediating the aesthetic construction of space and the sociopolitical spacing: the interplay between art and space, on the one hand, and place and territory on the other. Space is not understood as space but rather as a linear constitution of the visual field or the optical conquest of space. Here we witness linear perspective’s putative assault against materiality as a technical means to manage anarchic forces both pictorially and socially. Dorothea Olkowski sums up this criticism: “It is easy to see that the fixed and proportional determinations of Aristotelian hierarchies correlate very well with the fixed and proportional determinations of objectified perspectival representations” (24). The assumption is that pictorial inscription correlates to social inscription, and that, therefore, linear perspective is itself a system of control promulgating a forced humanization of the natural space.

It is true, one cannot forget Alberti’s renewal of Protagoras’s famous dictum: man is the measure of all things. The linear appears as intrinsically attached to the human project. This is the significance of line in Hegel’s Aesthetics, which emphasizes the importance of the moment, in the Persian theological narrative, in which Jamshid marks the earth with a dagger (329-30). A political and aesthetic act, it is at this moment that earth becomes inscribed. As these carved lines can be measured, the possibility of a quantitative relationship with the land and with space becomes possible. With the line on the earth there, too, comes to exist a border, a territoriality that ought to be defended, a “here” and a “there,” an inside
and an outside, as well as the possibility of social gathering.6 Heidegger, we may recall, also argues that space, after Galileo and Newton, comes to be in relation to the dominion and need for control of the modern man (Die Kuest 6). In Heidegger, space uncovers the conditions of possibility of freedom in relation to truth, distances, and directions, but is also the means to the creation of administrative and political subdivision, die Möglichkeit von Gegenenden (Bemerkungen 13). To a certain extent, Deleuze and Guattari would agree. In A Thousand Plateaus, the origin of art also is integrated in spatial separation and control—it creates frameworks but it also presents the conditions of possibility for their fragmentation. In this last sense, it is possible to discover a way out from the conflation of space and violence, which, as Henri Lefebvre points out, permeates both Hegelian discourse and its critics (279). Perhaps perspective never stood a chance.

A Thousand Plateaus emphasizes and interlaces Gothic architecture and the art of Paul Klee. Gothic construction is praised for its bottom-to-top construction, the material importance of cutting stone over a priori architectural designs, and the presence of dynamic lines and variation instead of fixed form. Paul Klee is also commended, as the artist stands against the Hegelian and Cartesian Bauhaus of Kandinsky. Specifically, Deleuze and Guattari are concerned with Klee’s technique, which they detach from any concern with substance or spirit, as such an emphasis would make Klee’s oeuvre “somewhat Hegelian” (342). Gothic art and modern art appear as models of what Deleuze and Guattari called “nomad art,” a mode of art that contrasts with a striated mode of art—the latter articulating a constant need for orientation and the constitution of a central perspective (the challenge to orientation may here articulate a direct response to Heidegger). The juxtaposition of Renaissance art and Paul Klee as presented by Deleuze and Guattari certainly does not leave Renaissance art triumphant. It is Klee, the artisan who renders visible rather than reproducing the visible, that is praised. It is Klee who offers a multiplication of lines. Earth appears as deterriorialized, de-facialized. In comparison, painters of the Renaissance seem obsessed with visual reproduction.

Saint Francis

In A Thousand Plateaus, the Renaissance appears as heir to Byzantine art because of its separation of the visual from the haptic: “the optical makes striation tighter and more perfect” and it stipulates an imperialistic mode of thought where space is conquered (495). Also in this book, Deleuze and Guattari engage with the transition from Byzantine to Renaissance art, as the eye becomes an epistemological foundation, and the face of Christ reinforces an apparatus of systematic representation. The image of St. Francis receiving the stigmata, which Deleuze and Guattari classify under the Catholic image production mode, is understood to have been produced by “the most prodigious strokes of madness” (178). Deleuze and Guattari’s analysis of this image can be summarized as follows: over the white barren landscape, there is a black-blue hole upon which “a crucified Christ turned-kite-machine sends stigmata to St Francis by rays” (178). This process is the facialization of the body of the saint—that is, the simulacrum process in which the body of the saint becomes the image of the body of Christ. The strings projecting the stigmata are also the strings that Francis uses to pull the divine kite” (178).

Christianity is a sign that facializes in all directions: it presents a coordinated arrangement, remapping and simplifying reality into an equivalence or a tautology. Faciality is a central concept in A Thousand Plateaus. The face is presented as a centralizing entity and as a means of homogeneous differentiation in hierarchies. The face in Francis Bacon is described as “a structured, spatial organization” (20). In political terms, faciality for Deleuze and Guattari is both Christian and capitalistic. Faciality is a means of cultural and ethnic oppression: the face defines what can and cannot appear, and it determines all possible significiation and subjectification. In the paintings of Saint Francis, we find a direct representation of identity. The marks of Christ become the marks of Saint Francis. Jesus Christ, Deleuze and Guattari propose, invented the facialization of the entire body. Given a concrete instantiation, the faciality machine rejects or accepts: it is an “either…or” structure rather than an “and… and.” In the Saint Francis image, the saint appears as accepting the divine bestowal, though it is the Saint who sends, in all directions, the image and the message of Christ. Given the pervasive presence of this image in the history of art, it is not only the multiplication within the image, but also of the multiplication of the composition that perpetuates its own message of replication. As Jean Baudrillard put it, “There is, to use Walter Benjamin’s expression, an aura of the simulacrum just as he described an aura of the original” (117).

The image of St. Francis receiving the stigmata is characterized in A Thousand Plateaus as a great madness (le plus grandes folies) that appears on the canvas. But Deleuze and Guattari’s language is less hostile than it may seem. It is an “exultation” (jubilation) that the viewer of Saint Francis encounters—an “unbridled freedom” (liberté effrénée). This is not to say that this madness has intrinsic positive value, but that we can (and must) find the vital rhythms within it. Explaining their theoretical approach towards madness, Deleuze stated, “We are trying to extract from madness the life which it contains, while hating the lunatics who constantly kill life, turn it against itself” (Dialogues II 53). The jubilant madness of Giotto thus di-
verges from the lunacy of the fascists and their “stupid and repugnant” battle cry, “Vive la mort” (Deleuze and Guattari 254).

The image of the kite itself operates (likely unbeknownst to Deleuze and Guattari) as a historical marker. Kites were introduced to Italy by Marco Polo and, in fact, one of the published editions of Polo’s travels actually describes a man-carrying kite (White 70). Such description would later be taken up in Giovanni Battista della Porta’s 1589 Magia naturalis to conceptualize a man flying with huge wings. In the jubilant madness of the Christ-kite, we recognize a reverie of freedom and flying that cuts across time. Deleuze would emphasize the opening of Federico Fellini’s 8½. This sequence presents a dream in which the main character flies from an underground passage and becomes what Deleuze calls a “kite-man” as he soars over a beach, attached to a string. This dream-turned-nightmare ends when the protagonist falls from the air into the sea, abruptly awakening. For Deleuze, Fellini’s 8½ exemplifies the absence of linearity characteristic of dreams, a stepping aside from linear recollection and direct recognition. “The dream is not a metaphor but a series of anamorphoses,” writes Deleuze—a curious word choice given that anamorphosis is a technique conceptually and historically linked to Renaissance perspective. Deleuze’s analysis of the sequence, in fact, recalls his engagement with El Greco and Tintoretto, as he explains dream-images in film as having two poles, one in the direction of the abstract—exemplified by deframings and dissolves—and one towards the material and the concrete through montage (Cinema 2 56).

The dream-space illustrates a movement away from recognition and spatial domination. In contrast, the body of Saint Francis is understood, then, to be inscribed in the same way that artists, following Albertian precepts, inscribe the earth. The Renaissance appears not only as systematization of binaries through inscription, but also as the moment in history in which the face and the landscape emerge as problems. In Deleuze’s terms, the Renaissance can be understood as the moment of facialization par excellence: the rejection of the inhuman, the primitive, the clandestine, and the faceless. The land is inscribed along with the body, and the relationship of faces and space becomes primordial. Such stipulation of a unidirectional system of reference articulates a graphical apparatus of inscription where the possibility of direct translation is assumed. Giotto’s madness becomes regularized. It is here that Mannerism, along with the Baroque’s turn to the fold, presents a rupture with Renaissance space. Deleuze’s fold is a moment of liberation from an epistemology of recognition that has pervaded Western philosophy from Plato to Wittgenstein. The fold is an alternative that escapes a logic of fixed direct exchange. Renaissance depictions based on linearity appear as limiting the conditions of experiences—indeed by creating a limited amount of conditions of experiences, which are given a priori to the viewer.

Just like Saint Francis pulls the image of Christ closer to earth, we can conceptualize how, in Masaccio’s c.1427 Holy Trinity (Fig. 2), the viewer’s eye operates as pulling closer the mystery of the tripartite essence of God, thanks to the conjunction of lines in the vanishing point. Indeed, is not all perspective the construction of a semi-visible kite-system in which space is reeled by the viewer’s eye, which in turn becomes the center of the depicted universe? We may here think about Titian’s late Pietà (Fig. 3). Contemplating this painting, we viewers follow the artist’s self-portrait as Saint Jerome and, imitating his close visual attention, are drawn to the face of Christ. The maneuvers of dissimilation: the viewer approaches the face of Christ, but the face flies, and the viewer is left with the materiality of paint. Late Titian, painting with his bare hands and scrub brushes, in this manner presents a hybrid space, manual yet pictorial.

Linear Perspective and its Viewers

Even if perspective is interpreted as a striated and hierarchical mode of representation, it is important to remember that the relationship between striated and smooth space is not dialectically opposed. One reads in A Thousand Plateaus, “It is less easy to evaluate the creative potentialities of striated space, and how it can simultaneously emerge from the smooth and give everything a whole new impetus” (494). And yet, negative connotations to the concept of striated space remain, as this type of space forms an apparatus that repels “anything that menaces global integration” (494.) When Deleuze and Guattari write that striated space is returned to smooth space (474), or that the smooth space subsists striation (494), an ontological, ethical, and aesthetic priority seem to point out a clear preference between the value of the two types of spaces. Nonetheless, A Thousand Plateaus ends with a definite message that moves away from what can be considered a certain degree of naïveté found in their previous book, the Anti-Oedipus, stating, “never believe that a smooth space will suffice to save us” (500). In A Thousand Plateaus, the brief but intricate section “The Aesthetic Nomad” illustrates the complicated relationship between smooth and striated space. Their relationship involves a rhythmic coming-to-be through each other: “The striated itself may in turn disappear in a catastrophe, opening the way for a new smooth space, and another striated space...” (493).

Perhaps more importantly, a line is a signifier of a change of direction, capable of leading not to homogenous space, but to anomalous, paradoxical, and heterogeneous spatialities. Here the English translation of point de fuite and ligne de fuite as “point of flight” and “lines of flight,”
though philosophically apt, obscures the implicit references to linear perspective, literally meaning “vanishing point” and “receding lines.” The vanishing line articulates a moment of departure: an event that, without orthogonals or grounding, creates an unstable cartography. But a point de fuite is not literally a “vanishing” point: “vanishing,” from the Latin evanescere is a point to disappear into a cleared-out nothingness (from vanus “empty”). Where English uses the word “vanishing,” Romance languages and German use “flight.” A ligne de fuite is a point of escape, a becoming-fugitive—fuite meaning “leak” and “gateway.” Hence, we find a vanishing point already in motion, rather than fixed, and a space that vacillates, pulsates, and constitutes the possibility of freedom.

Heidegger’s 1931-2 course Vom Wesen der Wahrheit: zu Platons Höhle gleichtnis und Theätet engages with the prisoners of Plato’s cave. Plato’s allegory is understood by Heidegger as creating an image whose features lead to unconcealment, and the possibility of the prisoners’ liberation (§3).

It is striking that Heidegger not only chooses to engage with the allegory of the cave as image, but also that he conceptualizes the vanishing point of the image of the cave (Fluchtpunkt des Bildes) as a point of departure, a perforation that opens up the possibility of escape. This is the role of poets, and by extension artists, in José Ortega y Gasset. In Ortega’s ontological aesthetics, art punctures our socio-cultural horizon creating new perspectives and potentialities (864).

The image of points of flight, of holes and punctures, of horizons, spheres, rhythms and territorialities retain their force. A point projects its lines and, with them, a new world. But the genesis of a point is deliberate and intentional, and so it is sensible to ask, who controls that point? Linear perspective is commonly understood to evince a single viewer—a detached eye hovering alone in the perfect position. Perspective is transcendent, atemporal, and disembodied. But Alberti does not spawn an epistemological system, and the line connecting Alberti to Descartes is teleological. Multiplicity is built into linear perspective and Renaissance art in general. Alberti recommended artists to understand the plural nature of viewership: painters should aim to satisfy the opinions of the multitude of viewers (97). As Rebecca Zorach has recently argued, perspective creates a third position obliquely related to art object and viewer, one that “might represent the connection between viewer and work, or yet another observer” (The Passionate Triangle 129). Indeed, despite the common assumption that linear perspective prescribes a single viewer, how many artworks in the Renaissance were actually enjoyed by a solitary individual? The attention, attraction, and opinion of an individual exist in relation to those of others: “Being” is, Nancy points out, “being-with” (96-97).

The humanist and courtly cultures were predicated on dialogue and exchange. Karsten Harries has pointed out that a given perspective implies the potential existence of infinite other points of view (43). As you see others looking, their gaze becomes a focal point in itself; as the gaze of others is met, endless triangulations and relationships emerge. Pondering the importance of sharing one’s aesthetic and intellectual experiences, I am reminded of Petrarch’s famous description of his ascent of Mount Ventoux, and the careful deliberation he gives to finding the perfect companion for his trip. Viewership during the Renaissance was active, communal, flexible, and dynamic. But viewership exists not as the addition of independent gazes or as a series of bridges cementing a connection, to borrow Jean-Luc Nancy’s terms; it is a plural interlacing of composite directionalities (5).

In Francis Bacon, Deleuze names linear perspective as an element that aids the internal organization of the painting, starting a system of “decomposition” and “recomposition” that will be taken up by Impressionism and Cubism (57-58). The process is not, however, a transformation or adaptation of linear systems, but a dynamic deformation. Famously, Francis Bacon praised Picasso for producing figurative paintings that overturned the rules of appearance, “so that form could pass directly from the eye to the stomach without going through the brain” (qtd. in Deleuze, Francis Bacon 38). Bacon’s quote invokes the eye as part of the body: it is an eye that is connected with the stomach. Deleuze wrote, “Painting gives us eyes all over: in the ear, in the stomach, in the lungs” (38) In the Bacon-Deleuze juxtaposition, Picasso creates the condition of possibility for a visceral disintegration. In Deleuzian terms, Bacon defends the primacy of the head over the face.

Ultimately, it is the viewer and not the painter who encourages distance, since “a painting is done at close range, even if it seen from the distance” (Deleuze and Guattari 493). The idea recalls Gombrich’s argument in Art and Illusion that when linear perspective compels us to read the two-dimensional image as a three-dimensional configuration, it is the viewer’s active mental engagement that re-structures the visual field. However compelling a given perspectival space may be, there is a built-in capacity for shifts in attention and hermeneutical disruptions. Renaissance perspective is not prescriptive. Engaging with it differs from becoming a participant in a ritual of legitimation that rejects the possibility of dialogue: tactics of artistic presentation articulate discord and interpretation. Renaissance painting precisely encourages a visual exchange with the medium, and not its dissolution. Again, we can here think of Titian’s Pietà, bringing the viewer closer to the paint, a movement...
mediated by the depicted turning head of Titian himself, who invites us to join his engagement. We move our heads closer, as we find, at close range, his brushstrokes.

The cognitive movement into a three-dimensional configuration need not imply a heterogeneous regime. It is possible to understand organizational elements such as linear perspective as disintegrating. The image of a “kite-machine” and the smile that such interpretation can easily create in the reader is nothing if not playful. The kite, a toy soaring in the air, is not only an image of control, but also one of child-like joy. The artist and the viewer partake in this playful event. Of course, it may be easier for the scholar to ascribe deviations from established rules to renowned artists who appear sufficiently learned and who worked at a time when a technique had been established. Paintings like Raphael’s The Fire in the Borgo present a paradoxical, embodied space that resist visual unification despite the presence of linear perspective. But we have precedents, like the paintings of Carlo Crivelli, whose excess of lines and conscious deviation from a unitary space generates a vibrating pulse impossible to subdue. A line can delimit nothing, describe no contour, and constantly change direction (Deleuze and Guattari 497-8). Even those that seemingly uphold firm and stable grids can dissolve themselves in “catastrophic” events. The capacity to construct is the capacity to disassemble.

Viewing itself is not a unified event. From antiquity to post-structuralism, theorists have emphasized the doubling of vision. Plotinus writes in the *Enneads*, a work later translated by Ficino, “actual seeing is double; take the eye as an example, for it has one object perceived by the sense, and one which is the medium through which the form of its object is perceived, which is itself perceptible to the eye” (v5,7). The doubling between object and viewer is interlaced. Jacques Lacan writes that the lines from the eye to each point of an object interweave a network “in the form of a screen on which we are going to map the image, functioning quite definitely as a thread” (93). This notion recalls Albrecht Dürer’s famous engraving showing a contraption in which the lines of a lute create a transferred image of the lute onto a screen (Fig. 4). But Lacan remains skeptical of the possibility of such object-to-image translation: a realistic reproduction of a thing in space is something about which “one could have many reservations” (92). Reflecting on Merleau-Ponty, he asserts, “In this matter of the visible, everything is a trap” (93). We are reminded of Jacques Derrida, who would later play with “interlacing” and “entrapment” (in French, *le lacet* also meaning “snare”) in his response to Meyer Schapiro’s famous engagement with Heidegger (277). If the visible is a trap for Lacan, it is because the doubling of vision is “manifested to us as a labyrinth” (93). The goal of reconstructing an object on a surface presents the possibility of navigating both vision and the object of vision. The thread of perspective emerges as a guiding tool to navigate the labyrinth: Ariadne’s thread. In *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, Deleuze tackles the imaginary of labyrinths in the German philosopher, for whom Ariadne’s story requires reinterpretation. The thread for Theseus was one of *ressentiment* that contrasts with the labyrinth itself: “from the perspective of the constitution of the eternal return,” writes Deleuze, “the labyrinth is becoming, the affirmation of becoming” (177). But vision is not like a classical labyrinth—the pattern created by the thread directly corresponding to the pattern of the labyrinth itself (Eco 57; Hollier 59). “Alberti’s veil was assumed to correspond to external reality,” according to Rosalind Krauss (10). The interwoven threads are a small selection of dots that do not exhaust all the object-to-eye lines. Correspondence cannot be assumed. Alberti was aware of the problems that emerge from the translation of object in space onto surfaces: avoiding conclusions about optics, he advocates for “sensate wisdom” (*grassa minerva*) and begs that his words “be interpreted solely as those of a painter” (43). The painter understands the impossibility of resolving the labyrinth of embodied perception in which every path is connected with every other one. This is a labyrinth, to extrapolate an observation by Umberto Eco, that has “no center, no periphery, no exit, because it is potentially infinite” (57-58). Painters, by using perspective, accept the limitations of themselves and of the system: Alberti asks to be corrected, not “pecked at by detractors” (40). The Renaissance painter understands the resistance of the material. The painter experiments through trial and error, not to craft the perfect geometric net, but to create an aesthetic product. Discarding the process to isolate the outcome as a systematic framework enforces an abstracting system of interpretation. A purely mathematical hermeneutical prism, after all, can create a hierarchy that takes aesthetic value away from art in order to provide a rationale based in a mathematical notion of logic in which optical legibility means logico-mathematical intelligibility (Lefebvre 298). The painter’s tactical navigation is understood as the creation of a snaring space with a single exit: here, from the vanishing point emerges a thread, at once guiding the viewer’s eyes and trapping the depicted subject with its arrow. Or is it the viewer, controlling and playing with the kite? The geometric dimension, writes Lacan, presents us with a subject that “is caught, manipulated, captured in the field of vision” (92). We may wonder to what extent this subject is captured, or whether the trap is successful at all. In either case, we should not assume that a line or thread is by default a trap, as the interlacing can also untie, making the bond dissolve (Derrida 31).

The interlacing of gazes and perspectival constructions neither delimits nor exhausts the possibilities between and within pictorial and...
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The question is, then, what can Deleuze tell us about Renaissance art? Or, how do we look at Renaissance art having conceptualized the vanishing point not as the center of a control system, but as a point of flight? In the ecstasy of linearity, there are tensions that emerge from the attempt to represent static grounding. In the linear-as-percpective, we stumble upon the impossibility of the ideal, and the gravity of material and embodied space. We can recall Michel de Certeau’s observation, “The surface of this order is everywhere punched and torn open by ellipses, drifts, and leaks of meaning: it is a sieve-order” (107). Even the perspectival devices of Dürer are held up by tension, as the strings are pulled but never completely fixed in place. It is not only through this tension that the body is articulated, but also through the vibration of the strings within the technical apparatus. In the process of striation, the phenomenon of bordering appears. As soon as art begins structuring the visual field, there is a movement within that complicates the organization. Every painter brings forth the history of painting.

In the search for practices that anticipated the Baroque concerns of Fiorentino or Tintoretto, Deleuze engages with Paolo Uccello. This introduces an impulse that has already been deterritorialized. We contemplate not the Uccello of Vasari, but the Uccello of Marcel Schwob’s Vies imaginaires. But this is not Uccello the man. This is Schwob’s Uccello: Uccello the Bird. While Leonardo imagines flying machines, Uccello is already mid-flight. He was a painter who “did not care about the reality of things,” and who was concerned with “their multiplicity and about the infinitude of lines” (134). At this juncture, and somewhat unexpectedly, Deleuze withdraws. Uccello's maneuvers, he writes, remain trapped in inflexible geometric structures (The Fold 38). Here, where Deleuze retreats, I propose to advance in order to acknowledge the fleeing but decisive presence of the painter in Deleuze. There is an intuition there at play that deserves close attention, an idea of form subverting itself, a triumph of line as a point of departure. Deleuze is unable to project Uccello into the Baroque, but he is aware that the painter does not easily fit into his “Renaissance.” The hesitation is in itself rather substantial.

Let us consider Uccello’s famous Battle of San Romano (Fig. 5). The lances on the ground, which apparently have carefully fallen to form a grid, generate an exaggerated striated space, to the point that the lines have magnetic gravity. The inner logic of perspective appears as an infrastructure of both vision and extension. At the same time, in focusing on each individual aspect, and in the careful foreshortening of every single element (the helmet, the fallen soldier), the viewer cannot visually comprehend the picture as a whole. In its detailed approach to linearity, each line is confronted by another line, creating an intensity of sensation that cannot be controlled or made coherent. By making striation a possibility, the Battle of San Romano creates a space that shows the friction between smooth and striation, a space that remains foreign to our visual perceptions, abstract, both flat and three dimensional. It is a space that cannot open a system, despite its seemingly systematic approach. It is a space that remains an anomaly. This is the Uccello who loved perspective, who preferred it to sexual intercourse with his wife (Vasari’s joke). We can call it a stroke of madness, but not a rejection of vitality. One can feel the pulse of life within Uccello’s intense obsession and his resonating lines. There are visceral readings of perspective.

Because of the lack of normative examples, A Thousand Plateaus invites the reader to navigate their own life in search for practices that resonate with Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of nomad art. As a period, the Renaissance does not seem to provide a fertile ground for obvious or clear models. I myself tend to revert to modern practices (such as contact improvisation in contemporary dance) to illustrate Deleuze and Guattari’s aesthetic concepts. And yet, the judgment against the Renaissance and its linear perspective is not easily passed, and negotiating with unclear and less obvious instances remains a productive tactic to explore Deleuze’s thought. Again, “the striated itself may in turn disappear in a ‘catastrophe,’ opening the way for a new smooth space, and another striated space” (Deleuze and Guattari 493). Those words present a possibility to understand the self-subverting capacities of line, and an invitation to study linear perspective not as a regulatory system of control, but also as introducing, through its own internal excess, the possibility of becoming-turbulent.

Notes

1. For a general view of recent challenges of a unitary conceptualization of the period see, e.g., Claire Farago, “The Concept of the Renaissance Today: What is at Stake?” and Jill Burke, “Inventing the High Renaissance, from Winckelmann to Wikipedia.”
2. Deleuze writes: “the question concerning the separation of the arts, their respective autonomy, and their possible hierarchy, loses all importance. For there is a community of the arts, a common problem. In art, and in painting as in music, it is not a matter of reproducing or inventing forms, but of capturing forces. For this reason no art is figurative” (Francis Bacon 56).

3. See also Spier van Tuinen, “Michelangelo, Leibniz and the Serpentine Figure.”

4. See also Stephen Zepke, Art as Abstract Machine and Kamini Vellodi, Tintoretto’s Difference.

5. On the relationship between Alberti and Protagoras’s dictum see Karsten Harries, Infinity and Perspective.

6. “Just as agriculture ends the roving of nomads and gives them secure property in fixed sites, so cemeteries, tombstones, and the cult of the dead unite men and give those who otherwise have no fixed abode, no determinate property, a rallying point and sacred places which they defend and from which they are not willingly torn” (Hegel 651). Deleuze and Guattari reverse this process: “From the most ancient of times, from Neolithic and even Paleolithic times, it is the town that invents agriculture” (481).

7. On this issue, see also Hubert Damisch, The Origin of Perspective.

8. “Fifteenth-century perspective was not a surface-denying illusion of space, but the symbolic form of space as an intelligible coordinate surface pattern. Good illusionist painting not only anchors depth to the plane; it is almost never without built-in devices designed to suspend the illusion, and the potency of these devices depends – like the appreciation of counterpoint or of puns – on the spectator’s ability to register two things in concert, to receive both the illusion and the means of illusion at once” (Steinberg 74).

Works Cited


Figures

Figure 1. Giotto di Bondone, *Stigmatization of St. Francis*, c. 1300. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Figure 2. Masaccio, *Holy Trinity*, 1427. Santa Maria Novella, Florence
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Figure 3. Titian, *Pietà*, c. 1575. Gallerie dell’Accademia, Venice.

Figure 4. Albrecht Dürer, *Man Drawing a Lute*, 1525.

Figure 5. Paolo Uccello, *Battle of San Romano*, c. 1435. National Gallery, London.