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Figure. Image and democratic perversion in Deleuze's thought

Introduction

According to Deleuze, every concept has components, it is a multiplicity. The concept of Figure, for example, as it is presented in *Francis Bacon – Logic of Sensation*, has three internal components: fact, field, and sensation. Isolate the Figure is the primary requirement to avoid the figurative, that is, the relationship of an image to an object that it is supposed to illustrate. The Figure must stick to isolation, to its self-positing *fact*. The rest of the painting is occupied by a vast *field* of bright, uniform, and motionless colour all around the Figure, forming a system of two immediately adjacent sectors lying on the same plane. Finally, freed from all the demands of figuration, the Figure consists of the real, physical, and effective states it passes through, which are transmitted directly, without the detour of conveying a story: it is a sensible form, a body, experienced as sustaining a *sensation*. The most important thing is that the closure achieved by the coexistence of these three components within the Figure is accompanied by a possibility of opening it to a different concept, that is, in going beyond the referential quality of a *lived body*, always already dependent on the sovereign position of an I, an ego, tightened by the lace of the self, the concept of body without organs. Like hypertext, “every concept will branch off toward other concepts that are differently composed but that constitute other regions of the same plane, answer to problems that can be connected to each other, and participate in a co-creation”¹.

This perpetual state of digression from one concept to another is central to Deleuze's project, to his “philosophy-cinema”² as he describes it in his author's note to the Italian translation of *Logic of Sense*. It is some-

¹ QP 24.

² G. Deleuze, *Logica del Senso*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 1975, p. 294.

thing little emphasized in the context of Deleuzian studies. The dominant hermeneutical position favours the affirmation of cinema as philosophy, whereas Deleuze is interested in the affirmation of philosophy as cinema³. As noted by Jean-Luc Nancy, Deleuze's thought "is a cinema-thought in the sense that it has its own order and screen, its own singular plane of presentation, construction, displacement and dramatization of concepts (for Deleuze the word concept means *mise-en-cinéma*)"⁴. This article is primarily interested in the displacements of the Figure, in its potential for bridges that provide links to other concepts. Following *Francis Bacon: Logic of Sensation* and *Cinema 1 – The Image-Movement*, I will closely examine the connections between Figure and concepts like image, body without organs, absolute memory, perversion, becoming or democracy. My contention is that the concept of Figure marks a philosophical and an aesthetic ungrounding not only of the image, but of existence itself, with important political implications.

1. An Image, an Icon

On the first page of the essay on Bacon, Deleuze describes the Figure as "an Image, an Icon"⁵. The word *Icon* will appear later, in Chapter 13, in the context of Peirce's theory. The semiologist, Deleuze observes, "defined icons by similitude, and symbols by a conventional rule", but he acknowledged that "pure icons range far beyond qualitative similitude"⁶. We must therefore distinguish between icon and

³ John E. Drabinski comes close to my concern when he asks, with reference to Deleuze and Godard: "Can philosophy be a kind of cinema?" Yet, the question is almost immediately inverted: "Now, let's pause and consider what's really at stake in cinema as a kind of philosophy" (see J. E. Drabinski, *Philosophy as a Kind of Cinema: Introducing Godard and Philosophy*, in "Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy" 18 (2), 2010, pp. 3, 4). The Greek term κίνησις is different from φορά. The latter designates a movement of translation, the former an alteration, a change, thus having a temporal meaning. Deleuze clearly distinguishes between these two aspects of movement: on one hand, that which happens between objects or parts; on the other hand, that which expresses the "duration" (*durée*) or the whole, time itself (see C1). It is precisely in this latter sense that his concept of concept is cinematic. As Daniel W. Smith rightly points out: "this, then, is the initial answer to the problem of the incessant 'becoming' of Deleuze's concepts: the aim of Deleuze's analytic of concepts is to introduce the pure form of time into concepts, in the form of what he calls 'continuous variation' or 'pure variability'" (see D. W. Smith, *On the nature of concepts*, in "Parallax", 18:1, 2011, p. 67). Indeed, philosophy as cinema.

⁴ J.-L. Nancy, *Le Différence parallèle. Deleuze e Derrida*, Verona, Ombre Corte, 2008, pp. 15-16.

⁵ FBL 11.

⁶ FBL 109.

pure icon, that is, Icon, with a capital I. The terms of this distinction concern the similitude that the Icon materializes, a non-qualitative similitude.

How can we understand a similitude that exceeds referentiality? The word εἰκών, as is well known, is one of the words for “image” in the extensive Greek vocabulary. Like the verbs ἔϊσκω and εἰκάζω, “to assimilate”, and the adjective ἴκελος, “similar”, εἰκών relates to the Indo-European theme *weik-*, which indicates a relationship of conformity. The Hellenist Suzanne Saïd provides us with decisive elements for better understanding the nature of this conformity. In *Deux noms de l'image en grec ancien: idole et icône*, Saïd suggests that, despite the common origin of εἶδωλον and εἰκών, both coming from the same root, *wei-*, “only εἶδωλον by its origin belongs to the order of the visible, because it is formed from the theme *weid-*, which expresses the idea of seeing (this theme, which gave rise to the Latin *video*, is found in Greek in the verb ἰδέειν, “to see”, and in the noun εἶδος, which applies primarily to visible appearance)”⁷. This etymological context helps us clarify the difference between the words and enables us to oppose εἶδωλον, as “the copy of the sensible appearance”, to εἰκών, as “the transposition of the essence”⁸.

This is something crucial for Deleuze. The Icon that his Figure is, let us quote from *Logic of Sensation*, is no “primary resemblance”⁹, it has no discernible model to preserve. The Figure demands a more complex evaluation, “a more profound resemblance”¹⁰. It does not render an ideal visibility; it renders visible forces that are not themselves visible, elementary forces like pressure, inertia, weight, attraction, gravitation, and germination.

What interests me is that, for Deleuze, the distinction between εἶδωλον and εἰκών, qualitative and non-qualitative similitude, becomes not so much a distinction, a non-relation between opposite terms, but a disjunctive synthesis that causes each term to pass into the other following an order of reciprocal implication that does not resolve itself in any manner, that is, an internal, perennial struggle within the image itself: one half wants to ground or to model itself on its own prototype by means of qualitative similitude, the other has an ungrounded pretension: to exceed any referential quality.

⁷ S. Saïd, *Deux noms de l'image en grec ancien: idole et icône*, in « Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres », 131 année, N. 2, 1987, p. 310.

⁸ Ivi, p. 311.

⁹ FBLS 109.

¹⁰ FBLS 148.

To dismantle the organic life of things

The hypothesis that I seek to corroborate is that this disjunctive synthesis is an integral part not only of the concept of the image but also of the concept of death, thus connecting them. The Figure is the conceptual locus of their mutual ontological implication, which leads to a reversal of our understanding of both.

“Classical representation”, Deleuze observes, “takes the accident as its object, but it incorporates the accident into an optical organization that makes it something well-grounded”¹¹, perfectly adequate to the Idea as the ground which possesses in first place. When it comes to representation, we must therefore distinguish between the grounded and the ground. There is a difference, as Plato reminds us, between the “represented object”, the εἶδωλον to which we referred earlier, and the “object in itself”. Note the following passage from the *Sophist*: “Well, Stranger, in that case what can we say an image is (εἶδωλον ἂν φαῖμεν εἶναι), except another such thing fashioned in the likeness of the true one?”¹². According to Plato, this distinction is based on the essential lack of the εἶδωλον: it is a “lifeless image (εἶδωλον ἄψυχον)”¹³. Therefore, the concept is first applied to a dead body: “corpses are images of the dead” (εἶδωλα εἶναι τὰ τῶν νεκρῶν σώματα)¹⁴.

Through the concept of “organism”, Deleuze envisions a similar essential link between a certain kind of image and a lifeless body. If representation is related to an object, he explains, “this relation is derived from the form of representation; if this object is the organism and organization, it is because representation is first of all organic in itself, it expresses the organic life of man as subject”¹⁵. In Deleuzian terms, however, organic life is not exactly life, but its crystallization in a stable form, and therefore the end of life. Bacon’s bodies, on the contrary, express the most bizarre and intense kind of life: “no mouth. No tongue. No teeth. No larynx. No esophagus. No belly. No anus. It is a whole nonorganic life, for the organism is not life, it is what imprisons life”¹⁶.

To preserve the vitality of a body we must destroy not the organs but that organization of the organs that we call an organism. “The Figure”, Deleuze writes, “is the body without organs (dismantle (*défaire*) the or-

¹¹ FBLS 118.

¹² Plato, *Sophist*, in “Platonis Opera Tomus I – Tetralogias I-II”, ed. by E.A Duke, W. F. Hicken, w. s. m. Nicoll, D. B. Robinson, J. C. G. Strachan, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995, p. 422.

¹³ Plato, *Leges*, in “Platonis Opera Tomus V – Tetralogia IX”, ed. by I. Burnet, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1907, p. 830.

¹⁴ Ivi, p. 959.

¹⁵ FBLS 118.

¹⁶ FBLS 48.

ganism in favor of the body)"¹⁷. It is an interminable task. Note, precisely in this sense, the following passage from *A Thousand Plateaus*: "the body without organs is never yours or mine. It is always *a* body. It is no more projective than it is regressive. It is an involution, but always a contemporary, creative involution"¹⁸. Such a body is nobody's own or *lived body*, but the persistency of the body in and as an interval position. "To involute", Deleuze explains, "is to be between, in the middle, adjacent", and to be so perpetually.

We must understand the proliferation that goes hand in hand with the dissolution of all consistency, stability, and identifiable collectedness in a form "but that is at the same time accompanied by its continuous development"¹⁹. This development, however, has nothing to do with the creation of a new form, the most recent form, always already predetermined by chronological time; rather, it as to do with the dis-enclosure of form, the introduction of a pure form of time into the body and as a body: "a wave with a variable amplitude flows through the body without organs; it traces zones and levels on this body according to the variations of its amplitude. [...] This is one way of introducing time into the painting, and there is a great force of time in Bacon, time itself is being painted"²⁰.

The decisive element of this involution is indeed its perpetuality. Hence the imperative of carefully distinguishing it from a pure plane of abolition: "Dismantling the organism has never meant killing yourself, but rather opening the body to connections"²¹, that is, to an entire de-territorialization, the radical and unconditional hospitality of the body towards an event that disorganizes it.

Tempus mortis

Despite its incompatibility with any form of self-annihilation, the movement that the philosopher is trying to grasp must be thought through a certain concept of death, or, rather, implies a complete re-semanticization of the concept of death. In a way, it is as if Deleuze faulted Plato for not having placed the essence of death high enough, by confining it to a lifeless body. We must give death a different body: "the body without organs is the model of death."²² This means that death can no longer be reduced to an objective determination, that is, as "the qualitative and

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ MP 203.

¹⁹ FBLS 331.

²⁰ FBLS 49-50.

²¹ MP 198.

²² AO. 393.

quantitative return of the living to inanimate matter”²³. Death, Deleuze writes, “occurs in life and for life, in every passage or becoming, in every intensity as passage or becoming”²⁴.

In this sense, life is characterized by death; it is its greatest stimulus, a permanent drive²⁵ that disrupt the organism and allows for transformation. Francis Bacon, Deleuze explains, renders visible the action of invisible forces that model the Figure. The first of these forces, the one that all the others repeat, is death. In Bacon’s famous portrait, Pope Innocence X screams at death, not before or about death (which would be to reduce death to a visible spectacle): “Life screams *at* death, but death is no longer this all-too-visible thing that makes us faint; it is this invisible force that life detects, flushes out, and makes visible through the scream”²⁶.

If the Figure is the body without organs (its perpetual task of dismantling the organism), its death has indeed nothing to do with the corpse that Plato identifies as lying at the core of the image conceived as εἶδωλον. The Figure, that is, “an Icon”, mobilizes an entirely different death. It is a question of time, of two distinct temporalities. A corpse is a chronothesis, a definitive position in a timeframe determined by successivity. The body without organs inscribes itself in the time of Αἰών, in implicating the possibility of having been repeated, and to be repeated to infinity, death’s eternal return.

There is an essential relationship between eternal return and this other death²⁷, in so far as the eternal return does not cause everything to come back, but, on the contrary, “affirm only the excessive and the unequal, the interminable and the incessant, the formless as the product of the most extreme formality”²⁸. Death is therefore the logic that conceives repetition on the bases of the different characterized as a permanent revolution²⁹, each time “a new gift of the new”³⁰.

²³ DR 147.

²⁴ AO 394.

²⁵ For Deleuze, there is something equivalent to the death drive, but this does not operate according to an entropic principle as we find in Freud’s model, but rather through the emergence of intensities into the field of representation. See P. Montebello, *L’instinct de mort chez Deleuze. La controverse avec la psychanalyse*, in “Doispontos, vol. 8, n. 2, 2011, p.18; H. Somers-Hall, *Freud’s Third Synthesis: The Death Drive*, in “Deleuze’s Difference and Repetition”, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2013, pp. 94-96;

²⁶ FBL 62.

²⁷ Deleuze borrows from Blanchot’s idea of a “double death”, one is personal and the other impersonal. See DR 148-149, p. 333; LS 174-178; AO 393-397. On death according to Blanchot see *L’espace littéraire*, Gallimard, Paris, 1955.

²⁸ DR 151.

²⁹ A point also developed in J. Williams, *Gilles Deleuze’s philosophy of time*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2011, pp. 118-124.

³⁰ C1 185.

The word “new” should not be understood in a historically relative way. In Greek the word νέος is different from the word καινός. The first means “most recent” and is a chronological marker. The later means “without precedent”, “unanticipated”, “strange”, hence the superlative τὸ καινότερον, what is “strangest”, “uncanniest”, not temporarily, but essentially. Death gifts us the “new” as what is strangest, calling forth “forces which are not the forces of recognition, today or tomorrow, but the powers of a completely other model, from an unrecognized and unrecognizable *terra incognita*”³¹. Through death there is no corpse to be recognized, but the disruption of identities, the eternal differentiation of a body without organs.

This persistence of the new is the most essential trait of the Figure. In *Figura*, Auerbach suggests that the earliest occurrence of the word can be found in the following passage from Terence's *The Eunuch*: “[Parmeno] Well, what about this girl of yours? [Chremes] A quite unusual face (*nova figura oris*)”³² According to Auerbach, this original correspondence between “*figura*” and “*nova*” is perhaps nothing more than an accident; “but even if accidental, it is significant, for the notion of renewal, the changing aspect of the permanent, runs through the whole history of the word”³³. The Figure forever remains “what appears anew (*neu Erscheinende*)”³⁴, that is, not as something else, or in the place of something else, an Idea, a Model, but what simply appears, emerges, each time for the first time.

Deleuze preserves this injunction of initiality in and as Figure; it lies at the heart of his logic of sensation, as Anne Sauvagnargues has also noted: “to establish the function of painting through the empirical inventory of the appearance of the Figure in Bacon”³⁵. Interminable death is the source of this “extraordinary vitality”³⁶ of the Figure, as the persistence of an invisible force of disorganization that life captures and makes visible, introducing time into the painting.

2. The immemorial memory of the Figure

In one of the few studies entirely devoted to the nature of the Deleuzian concept of Figure, Pierre Montebello claims that “the body without

³¹ DR 177.

³² P. Terentius, *The Woman of Andros, The Self-Tormentor, The Eunuch*, Harvard University Press, Harvard, 2010, p. 346.

³³ E. Auerbach, *Figura*, in “Mimesis und Figura”, Brill | Wilhelm Fink, 2018, p. 122.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ A. Sauvagnargues, *L'art comme symptomatologie, capture de forces et image. Littérature, peinture et cinéma chez Deleuze*, in Noëlle Batt (Ed), *Forces-figures. Faire sentir les forces insensibles*, PUV, Paris, 2007, p.49.

³⁶ FBLS 50.

organs that art creates for us is pure Amnesia”³⁷. Montebello’s argumentation is governed by a series of categorical oppositions. Deleuze, he says, “makes a division that could not be clearer”³⁸, that is, between the body without organs and the organism, presence and representation, life and lived experience, amnesia and memory, real and phantom, personal and impersonal, and above all between Figure and figuration. Ubaldo Fadini also relies on these well-established oppositional limits. We must decide: “Figure or figuration”³⁹. The same can be said of Lorna Collins. Deleuze’s aim, she observes, is “to break with representation”⁴⁰.

Yet Deleuze’s thinking is much more complex than that. “It is facile”, he writes, “to oppose the Figural to the figurative”⁴¹. Art proceeds not by oppositions but by zones of indetermination. The Figure and the figurative “exist in a very complex inner relationship”⁴², Deleuze explains; there is a continuous collapse between the two. Figuration cannot be completely eliminated; something of it is always preserved, and so the task of the Figure is “perpetually renewed with every painting, with every moment of every painting”⁴³.

The same is true of the opposition between memory and amnesia, or the immemorial. Deleuze is primarily interested in the essential possibility of contamination between these categories. Impersonal death as this “great force of time”, aionic time, disorganizing the Figure, is crucial for understanding this contamination. Death is the imminence of what has always already taken place: “no one ever dies, but has always just died and is always going to die”⁴⁴. This means that death is the perseverance in and as Figure of a time that is without a present and always returning.

In *Difference and Repetition* Deleuze invokes an “immemorial Memory” or “pure past”, that is, a past which itself was never present. “If *Matière et Mémoire* is a great book”, he writes, “it is perhaps because Bergson profoundly explored the domain of this transcendental synthesis of a pure past and discovered all its constitutive paradoxes”⁴⁵. The transcendental synthesis bears upon this pure past from the threefold point of view of contemporaneity, coexistence, and pre-existence: “Each past is contemporaneous

³⁷ P. Montebello, *Qu’est-ce qu’une figure esthétique chez Deleuze?*, in *Puissances de l’image*, Editions Universitaires de Dijon, Dijon, 2007.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ U. Fadini, *Figure nel Tempo: A partire da Deleuze/Bacon*, Ombre Corte, Verona, 2003, p. 17.

⁴⁰ L. Collins, *Sensations Spill a Deluge over the Figure*, “Deleuze Studies”, 2(1), 2008, pp. 51.

⁴¹ FBL 91.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ LS 80.

⁴⁵ DR 110.

with the present it was, the whole past coexists with the present in relation to which it is past, but the pure element of the past in general pre-exists the passing present"⁴⁶. It is of central importance to preserve the irreducibility of the pure past to any present which passes in representation. What is represented is always the present, as present past, present present, or present future. "But it is through the pure past that time unfolds like this in representation"⁴⁷. There is thus an absolute temporal element, an in-itself of time playing the role of ground, the final ground of the passage of time.

This always anterior ground is necessarily incompatible with a principle that can be identified and endlessly repeated. It is an "irreducible ground which continues to act under the apparent equilibrium of representation"⁴⁸. Hence Deleuze's decisive explanation: "we cannot accept that the grounded remains the same as it was before, the same as when it was not grounded, when it had not passed the test of grounding"⁴⁹. Such a test consists of the following: the ground "relates what it grounds to that which is truly groundless"⁵⁰, that is, always already suspending conformity: "to ground is to metamorphose"⁵¹.

According to Deleuze, memory is the ground par excellence, in so far as it precipitates time into universal ungrounding, as it is a more ancient and still newer memory, turned like a promise towards the future, and causing only the future to return. This memory must not be confused with a mechanical faculty, the exercise of reappropriation of the lived experience by an individual, for it is always already pre-occupied by a past which has never been present and will never allow itself to be reanimated in the interiority of consciousness. There is no recognizable line separating memory from amnesia, as Montebello argues, but indiscernibility, a hybrid of memory and amnesia, an amnesic memory: "not that brief memory that comes afterwards and is the opposite of forgetting, but the 'absolute memory' which doubles the present and the outside and is one with forgetting, since it is itself endlessly forgotten and reconstituted"⁵².

The persistence of death as an ever-returning force liberating intensive differences, that is, the non-organic vitality of the body without organs, introduces time, "the centuries of an Αἰών"⁵³, as we have seen, into Bacon's Figure. As this pure form of time, death constitutes the immemorial of an absolute Memory that stays with traces, forces, precisely elementary

⁴⁶ DR 111-112.

⁴⁷ DR 112.

⁴⁸ DR 52.

⁴⁹ DR 200.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² F 115.

⁵³ FBLS 81.

forces, “which are nothing other than the forces of the future”⁵⁴. These are traces which themselves never occupy the form of presence, always inadequate to itself and to the same, and that always remain, as it were, to come: traces of the future as the specific power of Memory.

Traces. Akira Kurosawa's *Kagemusha*

In *Cinema 1*, Deleuze explicitly suggests the coupling of Figure and a certain conception of the trace as sign. According to him, filmmakers like Hawks and Kurosawa were able to invent a deforming form (*forme à deformation*) capable of disorganizing an ideal visuality that gives form to action: “We call the sign of such deformations, transformations or transmutations *Figure*”⁵⁵.

Deleuze's analysis of Kurosawa's *Kagemusha* entails a great development of this vocabulary of the sign (Gr. σῆμα, sign, mark, token), specially with recourse to the term *empreint*, which means “impression”, but also “sign”, “trace”, “vestige”, or “footprint”, and which is used by Deleuze as a *terminus technicus* to indicate the enigmatic link between situation and action.

In *Kagemusha* the double must absorb everything surrounding the master, he must himself become impression and pass through the various situations (the women, the small child, and above all the horse). [...] the double has to absorb all the givens of the question that only the master knows, ‘fast as the wind, silent as the forest, terrible as fire, immobile as the mountain’. This is not a description of the master; it is the enigma whose response he possesses and carries off. Far from making imitation of him easier, it is this which makes it superhuman or secures for it a cosmic relevance.⁵⁶

It is not the case that the doubling forms a purely self-reflective circle that does not point to anything outside of itself. The double, that is, the Figure, must become the impression, the trace of an enigma, to double an enigma, a trace, the outside itself. There is a hallucinatory theme of doubles and doubling in Deleuze's reading of Kurosawa that transforms imitation. A sign does not imitate its cause or its model; It gives a sign, indicating that something or someone has passed by, but not what or who has passed by, anything or anyone whatsoever, but not in any way whatsoever: anything or anyone as a trace.

This means not that the double renounces imitation, μίμησις, but that it gives μίμησις a cosmic relevance. This cosmos, however, must not be confused with a closed set. Sets are always sets of identifiable parts: “the

⁵⁴ FBLS 61.

⁵⁵ C1 243-244.

⁵⁶ C1 259.

women, the child, the horse". The cosmos creates itself in a virtual dimension without parts, "like that which carries along the set of one qualitative state to another, like the pure ceaseless becoming which passes through these states"⁵⁷. Not only is it not a closed set, but it is that by virtue of which a set is never completely closed. It is time itself.

It is impossible to imitate the virtual existence of a forever changing cosmos without completely rethinking imitation itself. There is no place here for a passive μίμησις that is receptive to forms, no exemplary prototype from which the double can smoothly derive, but only an endless circulation based on a hyperbolic of the doubling: "it is not a doubling of the One, it is a redoubling of the Other. It is not a reproduction of the Same, but a repetition of the Different"⁵⁸. This circulation turns the absence of proper qualities, of the primacy of an original model and of the origin itself, into its opposite, an excess of transformations, it doubles becoming creative forces, elementary forces beyond the organic, such as "fire" or "wind", as suggested above.

Μίμησις must not imitate its self-sameness any longer. Its model is no longer the model of the Same, but of the Other: "not an other (*autrui*), but something wholly other than the other (*tout-autre qu'autrui*). Not a replica, but a Double"⁵⁹, each time an absolute singularity. Resemblance subsists, "but resemblance is said of the internalization of difference, and identity of the Different as primary power"⁶⁰.

This logic is meticulously repeated in the essay on Bacon, where the philosopher distinguishes not between resemblance and dissimilarity, but between primary or figurative resemblance and a deeper, more powerful resemblance, a "new resemblance"⁶¹ as the power of the Different as model. It is the power of producing an effect. But this is not intended in a causal sense. It presupposes no potentiality, and it never exists *per transitum de potentia ad actum*. It is discharged and divested of all sovereignty. "It is intended rather in the sense of a 'sign'"⁶². The Double operationalizes a process of signalization, of disguising, where, behind each sign, each trace, there is yet another. This process is the eternal return, the endless return of the bottomless abyss analysed above, which can no longer be conjured away: "everything has lost its sense, everything becomes simulacra and vestige"⁶³. The process of signalization does not indicate a way towards a Sense; it is the sensible traced or tracing, the becoming of forces, as its

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ F 105.

⁵⁹ F 368.

⁶⁰ F 303.

⁶¹ FBLS 113.

⁶² LS 304.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

very sense. Here we have a threefold determination of the sign as irreducible to language, sensible and producing an effect, allowing for the logic of sensation that Deleuze envisages with Bacon, and which corresponds to a departure from the logic of sense that he introduced in 1969.

Perversion and democracy

This process of signalization is the effect of a redoubling (of the model) of the Other, and its product, the Double, the Figure itself, is conformity to itself as the self of an always other, or a Non-self. Such a process, Deleuze explains, implies “an essential perversion or a deviation”⁶⁴. But it is a “strange perversion”, he says, “not one of those of which Freud spoke”⁶⁵, that is, a negative perversion, the perversion of the norm, and thus abnormal and pathological. Perversion must not simply revert to the norm without effectively twisting free of its underlying structure. It must pervert itself, freeing itself from all referentiality. “Perversion”, writes David Lapoujade, “is an essential operation in Deleuze”⁶⁶. It consists neither in negating, nor even in destroying, but rather “in doubling, redoubling and displacing, like some sort of gigantic folding method” that explains, namely, “the intense torsion of the Figures in Bacon”⁶⁷.

This gesture poses a political problem. There is a formidable body of work on Deleuze’s multiple accounts of perversion, but it is rarely read as a political category, and when it is, as in the important contributions by Kazarian⁶⁸, MacCormack⁶⁹ and Heron⁷⁰, it remains oblivious to the Aristotelian dimension of this debate.

Deleuze’s attempt to conceptualize a perversion without a stable norm to pervert places us at the center of Aristotle’s discussion of democracy. In the *Politics*, the Stagirite names three “rightly formed” (ὀρθὰς) political regimes and as many perversions or deviations (παρεκβάσεις). The right forms of government rule with a view to the common interest, the perversions are directed to the personal advantage of their leaders. Each of these groups is organized according to a specific hierarchy. On the side of the right forms, “royalty” (βασιλεία) is the first, a type of monarchical

⁶⁴ LS 296.

⁶⁵ LS. 353.

⁶⁶ D. Lapoujade, *Deleuze, Les Mouvements Aberrants*, Minuit, Paris, 2014, p. 11.

⁶⁷ Ivi, pp. 129, 10.

⁶⁸ See E. P. Kazarian, *Deleuze, Perversion, and Politics*, in “International Studies in Philosophy”, 30, 1, 1998, pp. 91-106.

⁶⁹ P. MacCormack, *Perversion: Transgressive sexuality and becoming-monster*, in “Thirdspace: A Journal of Feminist Theory & Culture”, 3(2), 2004.

⁷⁰ K. Heron, *Toying with the law: Deleuze, Lacan and the promise of perversion*, “European Journal of Political Theory”, 0 (0), 2022, pp. 1-21.

government which looks to the common interest. Secondly, there is “aristocracy” (ἀριστοκρατία), the rule of the best in the name of what is best for the state. Finally, “when the plurality (πλήθος) govern the city with a view to the common advantage, the form of government is called by the generic name common to all constitutions – πολιτεία”⁷¹. It’s a question of probability: it is possible for one man, or a few, to excel in virtue, but as the number increases it becomes more difficult to attain perfection.

On the side of deviant forms, Aristotle identifies “tyranny” (τυραννίς), the despotic perversion of monarchical government, “oligarchy” (ὀλιγαρχία), the government of and for the few, the corruption of the best, and “democracy” (δημοκρατία), “when the plurality governs in its private interest”⁷².

Democracy occupies a peculiar position with respect to the others, and there are at least two reasons for this. First, there is no proper name for its corresponding “rightly formed” political regime. Πολιτεία is a “generic name” (κοινὸν ὄνομα) for any sort of constitution, which amounts to saying that there is no absolute paradigm, whether constitutive or constitutional, no εἶδος, no idea of democracy, no democratic ideal⁷³. Second, it is difficult to understand exactly what the distinction between the common and the particular interest could be in the case of democracy. With royalty and aristocracy, the distinction between the one, or the few, and the many immediately opens up the possibility of a particular interest coming into opposition with a common interest. In the case of democracy, however, where the particular interest that defines the perversion and the common interest coincide in the interest of the “plurality”, it is harder to grasp this difference.

Aristotle tries to solve this difficulty by identifying a tendency in democracy to reduce the plurality to an avatar, that is, that of the poor. Under these circumstances, the concept of the plurality as the defining locus of power in democracy is paradoxically both inclusive and exclusive: inclusively, the plurality is all people, but exclusively it is the people as opposed to something else – the rich, the elite, the nobility. So, there is no difference in principle between democratic and oligarchic regimes. Both govern on behalf of a particular interest. Whether the sovereign body is small or large in number is an accidental attribute: “numerical differences do not lead to political differences”⁷⁴.

Democracy’s ideal conformity with itself, that is, with the poor who wield κράτος within it, presupposes its oligarchic degradation. As noted by Geof-

⁷¹ Aristotle, *Aristotelis Politica*, ed. by W. D. Ross, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1957, p. 80.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ This is emphasized in J. Derrida, *Voyous*, Galilée, Paris, 2003, pp. 61-65.

⁷⁴ Aristotle, *Aristotelis Politica*, cit., p. 82.

frey Bennington, “this paradoxical tendency of democracy to collapse away from itself as it gets closer to itself means [...] that the end of democracy is the end of democracy”⁷⁵. Hence the antidote for democracy’s tendency toward conformity with a totalizing figure of itself, would be a kind of holding back, a preservation of itself by not attempting to realize itself absolutely, a democracy devoid of sameness and ipseity, that which from within defies the proper, the it-self, the selfsameness of the same. “Democracy”, Bennington concludes, “can therefore only be ‘itself’ by holding itself short of its apparent *telos*, can only *succeed by failing*”⁷⁶, that is, committing itself to perversion, not to something “rightly formed”, but to a deviant form, or, rather, to a “deforming form”, to the Deleuzian Figure itself.

Further, according to a logic that Aristotle does not entirely control, only this democratic commitment to perversion and to transformation, to plurality, does justice to the πόλις to which he aspires. A city, he says, “by its nature, is a plurality (πλήθος). If it becomes more of a unit, it will first become a household instead of a city, and then an individual instead of a household”⁷⁷. To the city belongs an irreducible element of dispersive and variegated plurality, undermining from the beginning the possibility of identifying the city with a unit. This means that the city is always already contaminated by democracy, insofar as democracy designates the essential plurality that lies at the heart of the city.

From a Deleuzian perspective, the main problem with Aristotle’s concept of plurality is that it is based on a difference in kind: “not only does a city consist of a multitude of human beings”, but “it consists of human beings differing in kind (εἶδει διαφερόντων)”⁷⁸. This means that plurality is not ever going to be a plurality, strictly irreducible to the unity of the individual, to unity in general, but a multiplicity of atomic elements. According to Deleuze, “difference in kind meets all the requirements of a harmonious concept and an organic representation”, and, as such, “is all but worthless”: in Aristotle, he observes, “we never discover a *differenciator of difference*”⁷⁹. The question of plurality should be that of the individual’s differing from itself, being in difference with itself. And this is precisely what Deleuze forces us to think, to do: to place the Aristotelian πλήθος not between individuals but within the individual, at its core.

In *Cinema 2*, for example, Deleuze writes the following of Orson Welles: “Since Welles has a strong personality, we forget that his con-

⁷⁵ G. Bennington, *Scatter 2. Politics in Deconstruction*, Fordham University Press, New York, 2021, p. 200.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Aristotle, *Aristotelis Politica*, cit., p. 27.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ DR 48.

stant theme, precisely as a result of this personality, is to be a person no longer”⁸⁰. This vanishing of the person is explicitly developed, Deleuze explains, in Welles unfinished film project *The Dreamers*. The purpose of the film, he says, was to shoot the scene where the heroine proclaims, “I will no longer be a person, Marcus, from now on I will always be several (*plusieurs*)”⁸¹. Welles’s characters or forms are now valid, Deleuze further observes, “only as transformations of each other”, an irreducible plurality, that is, as Figure(s).

As Paul Patton observes, democracy does not play a central role in Deleuze’s philosophy⁸². But there are, I believe, decisive indications of what is at issue in and as democracy. In *What is Philosophy?* Deleuze and Guattari suggest that “the immense relative deterritorialization of world capitalism needs to be reterritorialized on the modern national State, which finds an outcome in democracy, the new society of ‘brothers’, the capitalist version of the society of friends”⁸³. This does not, however, allow us to deduce an anti-democratic bias in Deleuze’s thought, as Thoburn⁸⁴, Mengue⁸⁵ and Stivale⁸⁶ do, for a few pages later Deleuze remarks that the answer is not to renounce democracy but to call for “a becoming democratic that is not the same as what States of law are, or even a becoming-Greek that is not the same as what the Greeks were”⁸⁷. Democracy is not a form of government, a state-form that can be mechanically repeated, or rather stabilized, according to the Athenian model, but becoming itself, insofar as we understand that “becoming produces nothing other than itself”⁸⁸. It is a question of time, of introducing time, “the centuries of an Aion”, into democracy, giving it the task of being forever obligated to the persistence of a past which never was present. It is of crucial importance to distinguish between the Greeks and what the Greeks were, that is, between democracy essential commitment to perversion, forever stretching variation beyond all formal limits, and the historical manifestation of democracy on Attic soil, between “the part of the event which is realized and accomplished”, and “the part of the event which cannot realize its accomplishment”⁸⁹.

⁸⁰ C2 189.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² See P. Patton, *Deleuzian Concepts: Philosophy, Colonization, Politics*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2004, p. 161.

⁸³ QP 94.

⁸⁴ N. Thoburn, *Deleuze, Marx and Politics*, Routledge, London, 2003, p. 142.

⁸⁵ P. Mengue, *Deleuze et la Question de la Démocratie*, L’Harmattan, Paris, 2003, p. 103.

⁸⁶ J. C. Stivale, *Gilles Deleuze’s ABCs: The Folds of Friendship*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2008, p. 82.

⁸⁷ QP 108.

⁸⁸ MP 291.

⁸⁹ LS 178.

Deleuze understands democracy as “the pure event of democracy”⁹⁰, that is, independently of its spatio-temporal actualizations, “as something yet to come and always already past according to the line of the Αἰών”⁹¹. The eventness of democracy disrupts the teleological achievement of democracy itself. This is not a renunciation of some fuller version of democracy but the acknowledgment that democracy is marked by an internal unachievability and cannot but fail to contain within itself an always untimely transformative supplement, perversion itself, which is nothing other than “the diabolical powers of the to come knocking at the door”⁹².

Conclusion

This article has argued that the Deleuzian concept of Figure is to be understood not as grounded in the repetition structures of organic representations but as the expression of an inorganic field of forces, “forces of disruption and transgression of good form”⁹³, as noted by Ronald Bogue. Further, we saw that this transgression, always insufficient and future, destined to endlessly begin anew, is to be understood in terms of death’s eternal return, insofar as death designates a universal structure of experience that cannot be reduced to the reality of a last instant, “what never ceases and never finishes happening in every becoming”⁹⁴. As long as it harnesses this disruptive force of death’s eternal return, the Figure takes hold of life, of “the will to life rejoicing in its own inexhaustibility through the sacrifice of its highest types”⁹⁵. This sacrifice of a decisive *τύπος* in-forming the Figure, that is, its interminable combat against referentiality, is its most significant trait. Perversion consists precisely in this combat, designating not only an aesthetic process, a common ground (which grounds only on the basis of its abyssal character) for the arts, but existence itself, taking on a specifically political signification: democracy’s commitment to becoming, to the Figure itself.

⁹⁰ P. Patton, *Becoming democratic*, in “Deleuze and Politics”, ed. by I. Buchanan, N. Thornburn Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2006, p. 180.

⁹¹ LS 172.

⁹² FBLS 61.

⁹³ R. Bogue, *Gilles Deleuze: The Aesthetics of Force*, “Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology”, 24:1, 1993, p. 62.

⁹⁴ AO 395.

⁹⁵ F. Nietzsche, *Ecce homo*, in “Sämtliche Werke Band 6”: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag de Gruyter, München, 1999, p. 312.

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Image and democratic perversion in Deleuze's thought

L'obiettivo di questo articolo è fornire una lettura approfondita della complessa descrizione di Deleuze sul concetto di Figura in *Francis Bacon: Logica della Sensazione* e in *Cinema 1: Immagine-movimento*. Nella prima parte, intendo mostrare come il lavoro teorico di Deleuze sulla Figura implica un'ampia discussione del vocabolario greco dell'immagine. La Figura, sostiene, è "un'Immagine, un'Icona", cioè, non un εἶδωλον ma un εἰκὼν, non la riproduzione di una visualità ideale ma il rendere visibili forze che non sono visibili di per sé, non una questione di produrre un corpo senza vita, un cadavere, come nel resoconto platonico dell'immagine, ma di un corpo senza organi che funge da modello per una morte diversa, una morte impersonale inscritta nel tempo di Αἰὼν, implicando la possibilità di essere stato ripetuto e di essere ripetuto all'infinito, liberando differenze intensive in ogni occasione. Nella seconda parte, sostengo che questa interiorizzazione della morte in e come Figura, che coinvolge un evento di trasformazione sempre ricorrente, comporta un ripensamento completo della *mimesis*, che non è più la produzione della somiglianza, l'imposizione trascendentale della forma e della stabilità, ma il raddoppio della trasformazione, del tempo aionico stesso. Deleuze chiama questo impegno mimetico verso la trasformazione "perversione". Concludo concentrandomi sulle implicazioni politiche di questa perversione, sostenendo che essa informa il resoconto di Deleuze sulla democrazia come divenire-democratico, riprendendo un'idea già presente nella *Politica* di Aristotele.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Figura, Immagine, Morte, Perversione, Democrazia

Image and democratic perversion in Deleuze's thought

The aim of this paper is to provide a close reading of Deleuze's complex account of the concept of Figure in *Francis Bacon: Logique de la Sensation* and in *Cinéma 1: L'image-mouvement*. In the first part, I show that Deleuze's theoretical work on the Figure implies an extensive discussion of the Greek vocabulary of the image. The Figure, he argues, is "an Image, an Icon", that is, not an εἶδωλον but an εἰκὼν, not the reproduction of an ideal visuality but the rendering visible of forces that are not themselves visible, not a matter of producing a lifeless body, a corpse, as in Plato's account of the image, but of a body without organs, which serves as a model for a different death, an impersonal death inscribed in the time of Αἰὼν, in implicating the possibility of having been repeated and of being repeated to infinity, all in liberating intensive differences on each occasion.

In the second part, I argue that this internalization of death in and as Figure, involving an ever-returning event of transformation, entails a complete rethinking of *mimesis*, that is, no longer the production of resemblance, the transcendental imposition of form and stability, but the doubling of transformation, of aionic time itself. Deleuze calls this mimetic commitment to transformation “perversion”. I conclude by focusing on the political implications of this perversion, arguing that it informs Deleuze's account of democracy as becoming-democratic, taking on an idea already at work in Aristotle's *Politics*.

KEYWORDS: Figure, Image, Death, Perversion, Democracy