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Bacon and the Cartoonist: The Emergence of the Figure through two Opposing Diagrams

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Introduction

This paper is an attempt to find points of compatibility, or at least useful comparison, between two apparently fundamentally opposed depictive practices: that of Francis Bacon as described by Gilles Deleuze in *The Logic of Sensation* (2003), and that of cartoonists. I will begin by outlining the concepts of “figure” and “diagram,” as employed in Deleuze’s book, and comics scholar Thierry Groensteen’s concept of “gridding.” Next, I will introduce an earlier attempt to bring these two practices into relation with one another, and will use the specifics of that article to set out my own account in more detail. We will then consider comics scholar Andrei Molotiu’s concept of “sequential dynamism” before returning to Groensteen’s concept of gridding in order to draw out more connections between this and Bacon’s concept of the diagram. I will conclude with some brief words on my own cartooning practice.

A quick note on terminology is necessary because my art form is burdened with an ill-defined set of clumsy descriptors that carry unwieldy cultural and historical baggage. I make “comics,” a term I use as an umbrella that includes graphic novels, newspaper strips, manga, and *bande dessinée* (Franco-Belgian comics). People who make these sorts of artworks are cartoonists. I follow Simon O’Sullivan (2009) in using “Deleuze-Bacon” as shorthand for “the practice of Francis Bacon as described by Gilles Deleuze.”

Figurative givens, clichés, figures, and the diagram

On the face of it, it is difficult to imagine two depictive practices that are more distant from one another than Bacon’s and the cartoonist’s. Deleuze (2003, 86) tells us that “it is a mistake to think that the painter works on a white surface.”

[INSERT SECTION XX, FIGURE 01 HERE]

Figure 1. John Miers, *Bacon and the Cartoonist*, watercolour on paper, 2014.

The painter is already present in the canvas, which is crowded with what Deleuze calls figurative givens, pictorial clichés. These givens are the accumulated modes of representation and ways of seeing by which we are constantly surrounded. Deleuze-Bacon pays particular attention to photography as a constraining source of pictorial clichés, but the representational habits that are created through centuries of art history are no less of a burden to the painter. The painter's first task then is to remove, even to exorcise, these clichés. And how is this to be done? Deleuze-Bacon says this: "make random marks (lines-traits); scrub, sweep, or wipe the canvas in order to clear out locales or zones (color-patches); throw the paint, from various angles and at various speeds" (Deleuze 2003, 99–100).

Through these acts, which precede painting itself (but belong fully to it), the artist creates what Deleuze-Bacon calls the diagram. The diagram as employed in this particular book differs somewhat from the fundamentally abstract notion of the diagram employed elsewhere in Deleuze's philosophy (Vellodi 2014, 80) in that, in *The Logic of Sensation*, Deleuze is happy to describe the diagrams operating in the practices of different painters in terms of sets of material forms. In Van Gogh's practice, for example, the diagram is identified as "the set of straight and curved hatch marks that raise and lower the ground, twist the trees, [and] make the sky palpitate" (Deleuze 2003, 102).

In Bacon's practice, the diagram is a set of nonrepresentative traits and colour patches. These marks are not yet elements of depiction. At this stage they are asignifying. What they do is clear out the canvas of the clichés and givens, and, second, they create zones of possibility on the canvas. Marks made at this diagramming stage begin to focus the painter's attention on particular areas and suggest depictive gestures that may be made there. For Deleuze-Bacon this struggle in painting is fundamentally a struggle to avoid narrative, to avoid illustration. Depiction that exists in relation to a pre-existing referent or that narrates a story is what Deleuze calls the "figurative." For Deleuze-Bacon the task is to transcend or escape the figurative by creating not a representation that signifies through its employment of existing ways of seeing, but one that creates a sense of presence that is physically felt, that acts directly on the nervous system.

The cartoonist, by contrast, is intensely concerned with narrative and illustration. Indeed, practitioners of this art form are usually pleased when they discover or invent a material form that can be used reliably to signify a character, emotion, or gesture.

Rather than seeking to exorcise the clichés that crowd the drawing surface, the cartoonist's development of his or her own operative diagram can be seen as the creation and embrace of a set of clichés that will then be employed in the serial depictions the cartoonist must create to produce a comic. Thierry Groensteen, in *The System of Comics* (2007, 144), gives the name "gridding" to the initial, pre-pictorial, work that is done by the cartoonist. He describes gridding as "a primary repartition of the narrative material." In this account the narrative material is already present, is necessarily present, and the cartoonist seeks to give this form. Like the intense pre-pictorial work done by the painter, this work, as Groensteen says, is "not necessarily incarnated" (ibid). The very first act of gridding may be, for example, the first idea a cartoonist has about the chapters into which a long narrative may be divided, or, at a smaller scale, gridding may consist in the decision to divide narrative material into a particular sequence of depictions. The emergence of the figure, then, depends on the presence of figurative material. Deleuze-Bacon readily acknowledges that, of course, bodies are pictured within Bacon's paintings. The figure, however, is not wholly contained within these depictions, cannot be extracted from these picturings by a process of decoding established signifying forms.

It is my contention here that in comics the figure arises from images in sequence, from the multiple networked depictions that constitute the comics page. If, for example, you look at the set of six caricatures of Francis Bacon at the bottom-right of figure 1 and imagine these six depictions not to be distinct subjects or figures but to be multiple depictions of a single subject, and if you read these six caricatures as depicting the same subject that is represented at the top-left and centre of the image, then what you have in mind is an idea of human presence that arises from specific picturings but is not contained within any one of them.

While the individual images within comics overwhelmingly tend to embrace and reinforce illustration and narrative, and do so through the deliberate use of a set of figurative givens, it is in the resulting accumulation of networked images that something like the figure can emerge. By characterising the operation of these terms in comics in this way, my account differs significantly from that offered in the only other attempt of which I am aware to connect Deleuze-Bacon with the cartoonist.

The account in question was provided by Pierre Sterckx in his 1986 article "The Magnifying Glass or the Sponge." Sterckx (2014, 139) opens his article with comments that I could very well have used to open this paper: "Theoretically, painting and comics

should be mutually exclusive, and completely averse to each other. The former has constantly eliminated any traces of narration from its hieratically-posed figures, and the latter is obliged to narrate, as clearly and energetically as possible.” However, Sterckx chooses not to address serial depictions, instead arguing that the cartoonist’s diagram is best observed when one examines individual panels in isolation. A key example he employs is the work of Roy Lichtenstein. He argues that by isolating and enlarging individual comics panels and by turning the Ben-Day dots pattern into something approaching geometric abstraction, narrative is removed and the marks that constitute the panel in question can be seen as a collection of asignifying traits. Within comics more specifically, Sterckx highlights two panels from Hergé’s album *The Secret of the Unicorn* (Hergé [1959] 1974), both of which depict states of delirium. In the third panel on page 25, Tintin’s dog Snowy, who has become drunk after sipping some rum left lying around by Captain Haddock, sees two superimposed images of Tintin and Haddock.¹ In the fifth panel on page 27, Haddock has worked himself into such a frenzy in his description of the exploits of one of his ancestors that he is perceived by Tintin as temporarily possessing eight arms.² By presenting scenes that are, if taken literally, incoherent or impossible within the constraints of the narrative being presented, Sterckx argues, these images escape figuration and become figures. I would argue, however, that the figure cannot emerge from a single panel, because this presents us only with the operative set of givens. The space between them is needed to allow the diagram to take its place on the surface.

Sequential dynamism

In recent years interest has grown in abstract comics in both cartooning and comic scholarship. Andrei Molotiu, who we turn to in a moment, has made productive use of this non-standard practice as a means of analysing modes of reading that are fundamental to the form.

Being a relatively young field, comics scholarship has been intensely concerned with what Aaron Meskin (2009) has called “the definitional project”: much ink has been spilled in what is generally now recognised as the fruitless search for a set of formal

¹ Image available at <http://johnmiers.com/wp-content/gallery/bacon-and-the-cartoonist/miers02.jpg>. All of the images cited in this chapter can be viewed as a slideshow at <http://johnmiers.com/bacon-and-the-cartoonist/>

² Image available at <http://johnmiers.com/wp-content/gallery/bacon-and-the-cartoonist/miers03.jpg>.

features that can be reliably used to distinguish comics from other art forms (Witek 2009, 149). Definitions proposed within this project often follow Scott McCloud's (1993) identification of sequential depictions as the defining characteristic of the comics form. As Christian Metz ([1974] 1991, 46) has asserted, it is frequently observed within such discussions that when looking at two juxtaposed pictorial images, "the human mind . . . [is] incapable of not making a connection between two successive images." Deleuze-Bacon makes this observation when discussing the ways in which the use of multiple figures in a painting presents challenges to the painter seeking to escape figuration. Such an account of the way in which narrative meaning is derived from sequential images depends on a two-stage process of decoding. The reader will first identify the potential narrative content of each image by comparing it with an established set of ways of seeing, and then, having converted both images to narrative material, will propose syntagmatic links between the two. Molotiu takes a different approach. He says that comics such as Benoit Joly's *Parcours* (1987)³ that represent movement but not moving bodies show that sequentiality is "independent of represented temporality, and the medium of comics can achieve the former without the latter" (Molotiu 2012, 88). We should not conceive of panels as individual moments in time arranged in sequence, he argues; rather, "our sense of sequence is derived from the graphic forces on the page which carry us across the grid of panels; we see movement but this movement is only noticeable when we take in, visually, more than one panel at a time" (Molotiu 2012, 89). Our sense of sequence or seriality, in this account, is therefore derived directly from the physical marks with which we are presented. This sense is not created by individual attention to each image in a prescribed sequence; rather, it emerges from a physically felt sense of the graphic movement across the page's surface.

Abstract comics like Joly's make this process explicit; however, it is no less difficult to discern in a pictorial sequence such as the chase scene depicted on pages 224–25 of the one-volume edition of Jeff Smith's epic fantasy *Bone* (Smith 2014).⁴ While a great part of the pleasure of reading such a sequence is the way in which Smith's precise depictions allow the reader to observe highly specific movements of bodies in space, the initial sense of movement and presence is received when looking at

³ Image available at <http://johnmiers.com/wp-content/gallery/bacon-and-the-cartoonist/miers04.jpg>.

⁴ Images available at <http://johnmiers.com/wp-content/gallery/bacon-and-the-cartoonist/miers05.jpg>.

the tabular arrangement of panels as a whole, and even once the sequence has been read in detail one can still enjoy the free sense of movement by removing one's attention from any individual depiction and scanning the rhythm of graphic forms with which we are presented.

The term Molotiu gives to this process is “sequential dynamism.” Molotiu relies in particular on the work of artist Steve Ditko, and especially Ditko's depictions of action sequences in Spiderman, to provide examples of its operation. One spread he discusses in detail is pages 15–16 of *Amazing Spider-Man 23* (Lee and Ditko 1965),⁵ in which the serial appearances of Spiderman and his antagonist the Green Goblin create a robust graphic rhythm across the page that is apprehended before any individual image is read. It is this rhythm that gives the viewer the sense of an active figure whose physical exertions carry and construct the sequence. To borrow a phrase from Erin Manning's chapter in the present volume, it is “a mobility that dances before it signifies.” And this rhythm is all the easier to observe because of the bold and consistent colouring and design of the two combatants. In this way we see how the cartoonist's embrace of figurative givens actually enables rather than obstructs the emergence of the figure.

To summarise the foregoing, then, the cartoonist does not seek to escape narrative, illustration, and depictive cliché. Rather, the cartoonist works from pre-existing narrative material, which is repartitioned through a process of gridding, and as he or she moves from this often abstract process to the more elaborated and incarnated processes of breakdown, layout, and finally depiction and design, it is the sequentially dynamic employment of a set of figurative givens that the cartoonist him- or herself has assembled that allows the figure to emerge.

Christianity, superheroism, and privileged zones of probability

There are other, less fundamental aspects of Deleuze-Bacon's description of painting that bear comparison with the work of the cartoonist. Early in *The Logic of Sensation*, Deleuze describes the ways in which Christian art escaped the figurative and presented the figure. He offers, as what he calls an extreme example, El Greco's *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz*,⁶ of which Deleuze (2003, 9) says, “in the lower half, there is indeed a

⁵ Image available at <http://johnmiers.com/wp-content/gallery/bacon-and-the-cartoonist/miers06.jpg>.

⁶ Image available at <http://johnmiers.com/wp-content/gallery/bacon-and-the-cartoonist/miers07.jpg>.

figuration or narration that represents the burial of the count. . . . But in the upper half, where the count is received by Christ, there is a wild liberation, a total emancipation: the Figures are lifted up and elongated, refined without measure, outside all constraint.” The religious sentiment that permeates Christian painting is what in the past has made possible “a liberation of Figures, the emergence of Figures freed from all figuration” (ibid, 10).

In one of the narrative genres most strongly associated with the comics form, that of the superhero, we may observe in the work of some artists a comparable liberation of the figure. In such narratives, religious sentiment is replaced with the expression of power—physical power, of course, but also, in the hands of artists such as Jack Kirby, a more cosmic or abstract power (Hatfield 2012, 58). In a spread such as pages 2–3 of *OMAC (One Man Army Corps)* (Kirby and Berry 1974),⁷ figures are subjected to multiple deformations, even where these deformations take the form of a figurative given already established within the particular artist’s visual lexicon, as in the squared-off foreshortening of the hand at the left edge. As with the examples from Smith and Joly, the feeling of movement expressed through a graphic sequential dynamism precedes the identification of any of the marks on the pages as signifying particular referents.

In an example such as the fight scene presented on page 8 of *Tales of Suspense* 85 (Lee, Kirby, and Giacoia 1967),⁸ the abstract nature of the expression of power that operates in superhero comics is fully evident. The exchange of blows between Captain America and his antagonist Batroc is experienced primarily not as specific impacts of one body upon another, but rather as a set of moments of intensity produced by the collision of opposing forces.

The examination of a page of Kirby’s pencils, before they have been clarified by an inker, makes this operation of forces even more apparent.⁹ Absent Joe Sinnott’s inking, the long central panel in page 19 of *Fantastic Four* 1 (61) (Lee, Kirby and Sinnott 1967) is difficult to read coherently as anything other than an abstract collision of embodied forces.

I mentioned earlier that Bacon’s construction of his diagram through random and asignifying marks creates zones of varying probabilities across the painting surface.

⁷ Images available at <http://johnmiers.com/wp-content/gallery/bacon-and-the-cartoonist/miers08.jpg>.

⁸ Image available <http://johnmiers.com/wp-content/gallery/bacon-and-the-cartoonist/miers09.jpg>.

⁹ Image available at <http://johnmiers.com/wp-content/gallery/bacon-and-the-cartoonist/miers10.jpg>.

Gridding creates and responds to such variations in probability too. Nevertheless, according to Groensteen (2007, 29) these variations are much more prescribed in the case of comics; in particular, there are “places on the page that enjoy . . . a natural privilege, like the upper left hand corner, the geometric center or the lower right hand corner.” He goes on to observe, “numerous artists have assimilated this fact and made, in a more or less systematic manner, key moments of the story coincide with these initial, central, and terminal positions, to ‘rhyme’ the first and last panels of a page” (ibid., 29–30).

The lower right-hand corner of a two-page spread is privileged not only because it marks the end of a semantic unit within the comic as a whole, but also because it prompts a specific physical action on the part of the reader: the turning of the page. We see a notable example in a recto/verso pair of pages from the Tintin adventure *King Ottokar’s Sceptre* (Hergé [1958] 1979). In the final panel of page 15,¹⁰ Tintin is running through a doorway affixed to its frame by hinges on its left side, echoing the position of the book’s binding relative to the page that holds this panel. In the first panel of page 16,¹¹ Tintin has entered the building and is rushing towards a staircase. Here, the reader’s action directly mirrors the action of the door shutting behind Tintin. To reinforce again my overall theme of the figure emerging from a diagram that embraces and emphasises narrative rather than exorcising it, the prescribed movements in this case produce a sensation within the reader that is physically both felt and enacted.

Coda: the figure in my own artistic research

[INSERT SECTION XX, FIGURE 2 HERE]

Figure 2. John Miers, *Starts Out Vague*, watercolour on paper (2015, 1–2).

My own use of comics as an artistic research method also seeks to present a physically felt sense of human presence. The theoretical framework in which *Starts Out Vague*, the comic that forms the practical component of my doctoral thesis, is primarily based is cognitivist approaches to metaphor (for example, Lakoff and Johnson [1980] 2003;

¹⁰ Image available at <http://johnmiers.com/wp-content/gallery/bacon-and-the-cartoonist/miers11.jpg>.

¹¹ Image available at <http://johnmiers.com/wp-content/gallery/bacon-and-the-cartoonist/miers12.jpg>.

Kövecses 2010), which there is not space to discuss here further. Images like those that make up its opening spread (figure 13) do not begin from observational drawing, but rather from my own performance of the movements depicted. To construct these pages I perform these movements repeatedly, attempting to generate something akin to a muscle memory of these movements. I then transfer these movements to a digital three-dimensional model, much as one would pose a wooden artist's mannequin; screenshots of this provide the basis for watercolour drawings that eventually form the completed page. My use of non-standard reading orders depends on the structuring action of sequential dynamism: the graphic rhythm that populates the page, rather than the established habit of reading left to right in rows, is the element that guides the reader's eye.

[INSERT SECTION XX, FIGURE 3 HERE]

Figure 3. Eadweard Muybridge, *Animal Locomotion Plate 442*, collotype, 1887. University of Pennsylvania.

These pages bear some similarity to Eadweard Muybridge's studies of human motion, such as *Animal Locomotion Plate 442* of 1887 (see figure 14). Muybridge is identified by Deleuze-Bacon as a rare photographer who escapes photography's tendency to reduce sensation to a single level. However, Muybridge does not produce a figure because his multiplication of photographic images results only in what Deleuze (2003, 91) describes as a transformation of the cliché, or a mauling of the image. The figurative clichés that operate in Muybridge's sequences are still the clichés that belong to photographs as representative objects that "impose themselves upon sight and rule over the eye completely" (ibid). Where comics, which I identify as a drawing practice that creates narratives (rather than a narrative practice that employs drawings), differ from this is that the clichés in operation are devised and assembled by the hand of the cartoonist and do not rule over sight in this way. The fact that these clichés are created by drawing rather than by being drawn expressions of existing referents is crucial. In a spread like *Starts Out Vague* (Miers 2015, 1–2), the abandonment of established reading orders and the presentation of complementary and contradictory narrative sequences of action emphasise that sequential dynamism, structured through the process of gridding, creates a comics-specific diagram that enables the emergence of the figure.

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