

Benjamin Sprick

Crisis, Cliché – Notes on the State of Emergency

Lecture at the UAL Philosophy Society, London 09.02.2022

(*) In a world of deep crisis, a world without totality and inner connection, what keeps things coherent? If we follow Gilles Deleuze, it is »clichés, nothing else. Nothing but clichés, clichés everywhere...« (*) They are characterised by Deleuze as »ready-made opinions«, as »sensorimotor evasive behaviour« or as »schemata of an affective nature«. There are physical clichés just as there are psychological ones, »prefabricated perceptions, memories, phantasms.« Even virtual clichés proliferate, ones that don't even need to be updated to reproduce themselves.

(*) »According to Bergson,« Deleuze writes in his study *The Time-Image. Cinema 2*, »we never fully perceive the thing or the image; we perceive less and less, namely only what we – out of economic interests, ideological beliefs and psychological needs – are willing to perceive. So we usually only perceive clichés.«

Be it in order not to be overwhelmed by the unbearable, be it in order not to have to constantly question one's own ideological prefiguration, or be it simply in order to remain able to act to some extent – clichés enable orientation in a sphere of universal incoherence. They form the cement between phenomena that are as incomprehensible as their causes are unknown. According to Deleuze, the psychological and physical clichés feed off each other. (*) For even the reactions against the clichés only generate further clichés! »Clichés themselves from that which has freed itself from them.« Quote (*) »Everything is happening again and again in this way, the states, the fatherlands, the families. This is also what made capitalism in its ideology this 'motley painting of all that has been believed.« End of quote.

But if the misery of clichés and the crisis associated with it can be named so exceedingly clearly, why can't it be changed? In Deleuze's words: (*) »What would be an image that is not a cliché?« And what policies would be needed to bring it about? Such questions still seem a bit premature, since the power of clichés is distributed in such a comprehensive way that leads one to believe in a, quote, »powerful concerted organization, in a vast conspiracy that has succeeded in circulating clichés from the outside in and from the inside out?«. End of quote. *Where cliché and crisis become indistinguishable, even figures of ›resistance‹ obviously degenerate into mere knock-offs of themselves.*

(*) [Short parenthesis on this ›knock-off‹ or ›clap-off‹ of the cliché: A cliché is a copy, a deduction of what already exists. In etymological terms, the term is derived from French *cliché*, the substantive past participle of *clicher* (for ›to clap off‹). The term was originally used in letterpress language to refer to the first proof produced by clapping a brush. From here, the use of the word ›cliché‹ to denote a cheap imitation becomes apparent. Moreover a direct etymological path leads from the cliché to the gossip and the clap.‹]

[Pause]

(*) Deleuze's theory of the cliché is located at an interface where the two wings of his study of cinema, *The Movement-Image* and *The Time-Image*, published in the early 1980ies, simultaneously separate from each other as they come into intense contact. This interface is marked by the transition of classical Hollywood cinema to modern post-war cinema, which Deleuze attempts to frame systematically through the thesis of the ›rupture of the sensorimotor bond‹. His thesis states that in the history of cinema, under accelerated conditions, a development is repeated that took place in the history of philosophy over more than two thousand years ›from the Greeks to Kant‹ as a ›revolution‹.

This development concerns the upheaval of the relationship between movement and time or the reversal of a hierarchy that can be discerned between them. Whereas since antiquity time was thought to be dependent on movement and had to subordinate itself to it – as the ›number of movement in relation to the earlier and later‹, as Aristoteles says – with the dawn of modernity the hierarchy changes into its opposite: (*) ›The subordination of time to movement has been reversed, time is no longer the measure of normal movement, it increasingly appears itself and generates paradoxical movements.‹ In this context, a quote from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* becomes a paradigmatic formula: (*) ›The time is out of joint.‹ It says, that time is no longer subject to movement, but movement is subject to time. As long as time remains on its hinges, it is subordinate to extensive movement. It merely shows itself as its measure, interval or number, which must, as it were, help itself to expression through and in the movements. But if time is ›out of joint‹, as Hamlet states, then it begins to produce its own and irregular movements, which are no longer prepared to follow predefined paths.

(*) This is precisely where the cliché has to step in. *It creates connection where continuities that provide security have been broken.* As Deleuze explains, the upheaval of the relationship between movement and time in film history initially resonates in a comprehensive ›crisis of the action image‹ that corresponds, among other things, with the disintegration of narrative continuities in modern post-war cinema. What is meant is a rampant disruption of the links ›between situation and action, action and reaction, stimulus and response‹, in short: a damage

of all sensory-motor connections that had originally constituted the action image. Not only does the action environment of the depicted persons increasingly lose its context. Also, in many cases the pictures no longer refer to a synthetic-organic but to a »particularising situation«. There are still many characters in the film, but their points of contact with each other are increasingly weakened. The actions of the protagonists no longer spring from comprehensible reasons and are accordingly freed from foreseeable consequences. For example in the film *Taxi Driver* of Martin Scorsese or in the *Short Cuts* of Robert Altman. All this is cemented by the common clichés of an era: acoustic or visual slogans, free-floating images, dramaturgical-narrative fits. I summarise: (*) *Clichéd meaning is by definition finished before it can even be filled with content. This is precisely why it can step in at the cinema, where the apriori of any »narrative« has been reduced to absurdity by a tearing down of temporal sequences.*

[Pause]

I would now like to relate what I have said so far to painting.

Deleuze's analyses of Francis Bacon's paintings, published in 1981 under the title *Logique de la sensation* (»Logic of Sensation«) focus, among other things, on the creative process by which a painting is created. Deleuze calls this process *acte de peindre* – an »act of painting«. In the eleventh chapter of the *Logic of Sensation*, entitled »La peinture, avant de peindre...« [The painting, before painting], Deleuze states, longer quote: (*)

It is a mistake to believe that the painter stands before a white surface. The belief in the figurative stems from this error: if the painter stood in front of a white surface, he could depict on it an external object that functions as a model. But this is not the case. *The painter has many things in his head or around him or in his studio. Now, everything he has in his head or around him is already on the canvas, more or less virtual, more or less real, before he begins his work. All that is there on the canvas, as actual or virtual images. So the painter doesn't have a white surface to fill, rather he has to empty it, clean it, purify it.* So he does not paint in order to reproduce on the canvas an object that functions as a model, he paints on already existing images in order to reproduce a painting whose function reverses the relations between model and copy. *End of quote.*

[Kurze Pause]

This immediately announces a painterly »battle against the cliché«, which Deleuze proclaims just as he makes it effective in his own philosophical thinking. »Virtual clichés« and proliferating commonplaces populate the unpainted canvas just as they pre-structure the philosophical notepad before the act of painting or the process of writing has even begun. Quote:(*) »We are surrounded, by photographs that are illustrations, by newspapers that are

narratives, by cinema images, by television images. A whole category of things that can be called ›clichés‹ occupy the screen even before it begins. That's dramatic.« End of quote.

If the painters purge the white canvas – more or less consciously – of virtual clichés and commonplaces, this can amount to a veritable »catastrophe«, according to Deleuze. A »collapse of all figurative realities« then breaks out, which initially threatens to plunge the painterly act into chaos or into a *state of emergency*. (*) Quote from a seminar Deleuze gave in 1982 at the University of Vincennes in Paris under the title *Painting and the Question of Concepts*: »However, one cannot say about this chaos, that it is the opposite of order. Chaos is relative to nothing. It is the opposite of nothing, it is relative to nothing, it occupies everything. And so from the outset it calls into question all logical thinking about chaos. Chaos has no opposite. How do you get out of chaos when you put it to yourself?« End of Quote.

Deleuze's answer in relation to painting, in which he refers to a formulation by Bacon, is: by creating a diagram. For Deleuze the diagram is indeed chaos, but it is also the seed of order and rhythm. It is a violent chaos in relation to figurative realities, but a germ of rhythm in relation to the new order of painting.

(*) Quote: »As you can see, the diagram is the purification zone that simultaneously creates a catastrophe in the painting, that is, that erases all previous clichés, including the virtual ones. It takes everything away in a catastrophe and it is the diagram [...] from which the figure will emerge. What Bacon calls the figure. Can the word diagram help us? Yes, in a way, because I would say: let's call diagram, following Bacon, this double concept [...] of a germinal catastrophe or a germinal chaos.« End of quote.

[Pause]

Let's look at an example. (*) In Bacon's 1976 painting *Figure at a washbasin*, one sees a compressed figure full of kinetic energy curving over a washbasin whose drainage pipe opens up a circular arena. This protrudes into the pictorial off, just as it seems to lead into the monochrome background into which the figure obviously wants to escape, which is additionally indicated by an indexical white arrow, a ›pointer‹. The dynamic overall movement of the painting, its temporal process, obviously pushes into the drainage opening of the washbasin, from which kinetic energy seems at the same time to act back. The opening is too obviously small to allow a way out into the off. The figure created by Bacon cannot disappear from the stage of its painterly re-representation because the preconditions for this are not given.

The painting follows a kind of scheme according to which – according to Deleuze – many of Bacon's paintings are constructed. It involves three different elements that are as divergent as

they are coexistent: **First**, a space or surrounding space, what is usually called a ›background‹: a large, monochrome coloured surface that appears very static and on which objects are found that are then present in a naïve-figurative way (here: the scraps of newspaper?). **The second element** is a place for a figure, an arena or a round in which movement can occur. **And thirdly**, the figure itself, whose carnal materiality is emphasised.

It is also remarkable in *Figure at a washbasin* that the figure does not stand randomly in space, but has an explicit place that is in a certain way dynamically assigned to it by the space (for example, through the curved curve of the pipe). The other dynamic component of the picture leads in the opposite direction. It leads from the figure, the curved body, to the space, which it tries to open up.

Deleuze says that this is a force in the body with which it strives to abolish the difference, the isolation from space, and to get out into space. The body is not deformed under an external force, but deforms itself, wants to get out of itself through an opening that is offered to it in that place. In the case of the waking pool, it seems too small to allow such an opening.

I come to the end: (*) *What Bacon stages here on a large canvas is a painterly state of exception in which cliché and crisis intersect. The ever-same circularity of the round arena in which the fragments of symbolic representation have accumulated prevents contact with a ›real outside, which leaves the subject stagnating in a repetition of the ever-same cramp that is as uninterrupted as it is hopeless. »The state of emergency« that the image speaks of in the inside and the outside has thus, to pick up on a famous turn of Walter Benjamin's, »become the rule« in Bacon's work as well.*

(*) I am curious now, about your questions and have formulated three questions myself.

- I. What could be the actuality of Bacon's painterly act?
- II. To what extent do cliché and crisis diverge today, to what extent do they become indistinguishable?
- III. Is Deleuze's perspective too pessimistic?
- IV.

(*) Thank you for your attention.