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Issue Five

Bullfighting, Sex and Sensation

Hélène Frichot

The investigation that follows will flex in four directions, backwards and forwards, along the elastic thread that ties the event of the bullfight to sex and thence a warm spill of sensation. In order to enter the fray that is the bullfight, I will appropriate a term from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari by way of which each of the four thrusts I advance, or fights I present, can be read as *asignifying ruptures* [1]. With this concept we are encouraged to question the integrity of signification. By breaching the threshold of signification there results a momentary loss of the senses, at which point we might take the opportunity to search out or invent other modes of making sense. The activity of writing, for instance, as one means of experimenting with sense, "has nothing to do with signifying. It has to do with surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come" [2]. Though the bullfight is organised by way of its own particular codes of operation and signification, much is also left to chance and the unexpected [3]. With this emphasis on unexpected novelty in mind, I ask you to consider this paper as an arena in which four bullfights will be conducted. The twists and turns of the trope of the bullfight will be surveyed across four different textual terrains in order to explore the effects that result in bringing these terrains into the vicinity of each other. As such, I will touch upon the work of Georges Bataille, Friedrich Nietzsche, Francis Bacon and Michel Leiris. As Nietzsche has suggested, using the tauromachic trope, to enter into a "frightful and dangerous" enterprise does not necessarily enable the capture of an enraged bull [4]; at the outset we cannot necessarily be assured of what will eventuate with the outcome. Furthermore, that the bull is always vanquished merely holds to the dictates of good and common sense, conventions that, in this arena, are only tenuously maintained. It is instead the event that surfaces as an incorporeal bloc of sensation, exploding in the midst of the spectacle, that this paper determines to pursue.

I follow throughout the Ariadne thread offered by Deleuze in that I rely on a number of his concepts to traverse the "terrain of truth." As Michel Leiris relates, this is the bullfighting term for the site of combat in which bullfighter and bull, *torero* and *toro*, are to be found clinched in a perilous embrace [5]. After Deleuze, I wish to ask, what is it that shimmers above the site of this battle or, in what way can such an event be figured as an asignifying rupture? In brief, the asignifying rupture is a moment of embrace and withdrawal, making it apt to the dance of the *torero* and *toro*. It is composed of a minimum of two parts that conjoin or become juxtaposed in a frenzy that approaches a state of mutual dissolution. This fleeting conjunction might be mapped or rapidly surveyed, but it resists the organisational grasp of good sense, and the predictable assumptions and identifications of common sense. It is what Deleuze and Guattari describe as "an experimentation in contact with the real" [6] that resists the order of signification. It is, for instance, the first burst of the bull breaking into the arena, the explosive meeting place between it, the matador and the cheering crowds. It cannot be captured by the cool accounts of the attendant *aficionados* who pride themselves on their knowledge of the tauromachic craft [7]. Maintaining the aloof eye of criticism, such experts are unable to forget themselves in the midst of the event. Instead, the asignifying rupture procures a momentary loss of the senses and the bifurcation of

sense. "What would be the purpose," asks Deleuze, "of rising from the domain of truth to the domain of sense...?" [8] This would be to assume that truth could be neatly denoted, manifested or signified by sense, which, among other things, would effectively occlude the intensity of the battle, rupture or event that is unfolding. The events presented herein have little to do with a distinction between the true and the false. To further explicate the figure of the asignifying rupture, which requires that we rethink the domain of sense, I will at once enter the arena for the first fight, though I must point out that no fight is to be given priority over another. Instead, it is their contiguous arrangement that will entertain us here.

Thus we arrive at the first event, that scene laid bare beneath the sharp blades of a bursting Madrid sun, where the narrator of Bataille's *Histoire de l'Oeil* [9] describes the *corrida*. Witness the bull and the spangle-dressed, firmthighed young matador committed to their bloody circuit. Recall, in this scenedepicted by Bataille, three spectators clutched hotly amidst a crowd of thousands of Spaniards and others, in anticipation, not only of the good fight, but of the salt scent of sex. The heroine, a true Salome, has been handed the gift of a pair of peeled testicles, retrieved from the last slaughtered bull. They are placed side by side on a platter in such a way that the narrator is compelled to imagine eggs and eyeballs and saucers of milk. Having bitten viciously into one of these globes, the heroine lifts her dress in order to slide the second white sphere between her other set of lips. At this very moment two wet shining spheres become imaginatively conjoined, for the otherwise taciturn bull, now playing in the arena, has taken offence at the matador and speared him through the eye socket with one of his horns. This "volatile juncture" is a *becoming*, or, to borrow an illustration from Deleuze and Guattari, an orchid and a moth mapping themselves onto each other in a reproductive, quasi-sexual display; deterritorialising, reterritorialising and deterritorialising in turn [10]. For just a moment, the open cunt of the heroine cannot be distinguished from the now staring hole cut through the matador's face, eyeball and testicle become indiscernible, and the bull finds that it has punctured its own ball.

The asignifying rupture depicted above procures zones of indiscernibility between all the constituent parts of the narrated event. In the midst of the melee a combination of fleshy parts become detached from the flesh and the interchange of touching–touched results in what Deleuze calls a being of sensation or an incorporeal entity. It is no longer a matter of the intertwining and interpenetration of hard and soft parts, it is the event itself that begins to tremble. The asignifying rupture puts into action a relay of intensities or acute moments that rise above the combination of bodily parts. A little death, Simone's orgasm, is mapped across a more serious and irreversible death, that of the matador. This spill of sensation is nothing to laugh about. As Deleuze and Guattari have themselves admitted, the line of flight, that trajectory which carries the asignifying rupture, can, on occasion, emit the odour of death [11]. From the outset it is important to note, after Bataille, the uncomfortable proximity between sex and death. How, then, might sense and sensation escape this dire entanglement?

To assuage the disturbing spectacle of the above event, I will now introduce the second bullfight. Here I address Deleuze's passing citation of a bullfight as lent to him, in a painterly way, by Bacon. Deleuze addresses Bacon's work by searching after that moment in which the figure breaks away from the figurative and sensation is achieved in all its non–representational gore. Deleuze writes, "the aim of art is to wrest the percept from perceptions of objects and the states of a perceiving subject, to wrest the affect from affections as the transition from one state to another: to extract a bloc of sensations, a pure being of sensations" [12]. He then goes on to suggest that this constitutes not only the work of the artist, but that of the writer, the musician and the architect. The absence of the philosopher in the above list suggests that another task altogether has been reserved for her. Where the artist manifests blocs of sensation in order that the work is preserved or made to stand on its own, the philosopher creates concepts, which similarly depart on a trajectory of independence. Deleuze superimposes his work as philosopher upon the work of Bacon the artist. Though these two planes, the former of immanence the latter of composition, touch upon each other, Deleuze insists that they are irreducible [13].

In pursuit of the logic of sensation, where the philosopher, Deleuze, might be said to greet and conjoin briefly with the artist, Bacon, the former posits the notion of figure against that of figuration. Where figure is conceived as the direct relation of form to sensation, figuration is the stultification of form, the operation whereby form merely stands in place of the absent object that it is supposed to represent. Bacon's bullfights display the movement of bodily deformation and fleshy zones of indiscernibility that escape the facticity of experiencing flesh. Nevertheless, Deleuze pauses for a moment to question whether the bullfight is, after all, too dramatic, "a scene of horror," which "reintroduces a story to be told" [14]. With the reintroduction of narrative the figure is reified as figuration, as a something to be represented, that is, the figure enters the realm of signification. In this turn toward representation that which is impeded is the "direct action upon the nervous system" [15] which sensation would otherwise procure.

What is Deleuze's great objection to representation, which is present throughout his entire *oeuvre*? Is it that representation is the harbinger of death? The form that is the word, for instance, as Hegel has suggested and Maurice Blanchot has reiterated, announces the death of the thing it replaces. Blanchot writes, "For me to say, 'This Woman' I must take her flesh and blood reality away from her, cause her to be absent, annihilate her" [16]. Yet the above still participates in the long history of the illusion of representation that so appalls Deleuze [17]. The compulsion toward representation is the overwhelming desire to render some identity between word and thing, but between the flesh and blood woman and our naming of her as such there subsists another entity that Deleuze would prefer to pursue. It is a matter of untying the knots of representation, which are determined to secure an identification between word and thing, concept and thinking subject, and so on, for these are merely attempts to tame the force of difference [18]. That which Deleuze wants to celebrate, alongside the creation of concepts or the production of sense, is sensation, which he gives as the meeting place between things and thought, where difference continues to shimmer [19]. Sensation, which sets the form into motion, participates in the surging forth of all the differential elements of life despite the persistent proximity of death.

Bacon's paintings exemplify the movement of sensation rendered in spasms. His two renditions of the bullfight not only blur *torero* and *toro*, bullfighter and bull, but engage this affective exchange with a background condition. The background of flat uniform colour or *aplat*, rises to the surface of the canvas to meet the circuit of broken lines or *tons rompus* that mark out the coupling of bull and bullfighter. Deleuze describes this oscillation of figure and ground, "*like a passage from the finite to the infinite*, but also from territory to deterritorialisation" [20]. This movement is at once, paradoxically, rendered strangely immobile. The spasms that shudder across Bacon's canvases are augmented by his habit of constructing series and triptychs, wherein the repetition of the intermingling of figure and ground generate shifting differences, some more violent than others.

Bacon's two studies of a bullfight create a series; we are obliged to read one canvas alongside the other. As Deleuze points out, where Bacon's first study frames an aroused crowd inscribed upon the canvas inside a vertical panel, the second study obliterates these spectators. Deleuze insists that whatever the occasion of arousal, the distinction between spectator and event is of less interest than the possibility of travelling the passage or thrust between sensing and sensed, between the finite and the infinite. It follows that a dichotomy between bullfight and spectator is dissolved. Deleuze writes "*I become insensation, and something happens through sensation*" [21]. The spectator, or spectators of Bacon's first study enter the painting by losing their sharp relief against the background. The spectators become conjoined with the action of the fight, dissolving into the *aplat*, the infinite background of flat uniform colour, which in turn rises up in the broken and twisting lines of the almost indistinguishable forms of man and beast. Spectators are not left untouched at the periphery of the "terrain of truth", the *corrida*, or, for that matter, the painting, but are entangled, deterritorialised and reterritorialised, in turn, amidst the event or *hecceity* at hand.

As Deleuze suggests in *Difference and Repetition*: "it is a question of producing within the work a movement capable of affecting the mind outside of all representation; it is a

question of making movement itself a work ... of inventing vibrations, rotations, whirlings, gravitations, dances or leaps which directly touch the mind " [22]. Hence, with Bacon's bullfights, "we hear the hoofbeats of the animal " [23]. We make direct contact with the rhythm that writhes beneath all the senses and this rhythm might be designated as life. The mind by way of the rhythm of sensation is seemingly touched without mediation. What's more, Deleuze willfully dissolves the differentiation of mind and brain, virtual and material: "the brain is the *mind* itself " [24], he says, but the brain and its irreversible loss of cells is also "a set of little deaths that put constant death within us " [25]. These little deaths, a series of rhythmic orgasmic spasms, are like those that escape from Simone during the first bullfight. Again, we sense the faint odour of death that riddles the vibrations of life.

The rhythmic celebration of life reverberates insistently with a Nietzschean song, or rather, the Dionysian dithyramb, that wild hymn that accompanies the exploits of Bacchus. With this association I arrive at the third bullfight. This thread will lead us down the passages of Daedalus's labyrinth, where the Minotaur, poised at that indecisive juncture between man and bull will, according to Deleuze, conjoin with the lovely Ariadne to beget a monstrous offspring: Nietzsche's *Übermensch* or Overman. In effect, Deleuze conflates the figure of the Minotaur and Dionysus. Following Nietzsche's advances, Deleuze figures the bull as Dionysus, a creative artist "surging forth with life " [26]. It is important to note, though I cannot at this time follow this particular tributary of thought, that life is exactly that in which Deleuze's immaculate conception of creative philosophy is compelled to partake. As for the labyrinth, it might be considered an arena where the thrusts, circuits and passages of the bullfight at first seem petrified or overdetermined. It is a territory that houses a terrifying beast, which the hero, Theseus desires to vanquish or transcend, but this beast, according to Deleuze, is life.

The myth of the Minotaur, with which we are familiar, depicts Theseus, "thanks to the help of Ariadne " [27], retracing his steps through the labyrinth by rewinding the thread that he had laid. Theseus makes sense of the Labyrinth, which otherwise addles the senses or all sense of direction. He stakes a claim and forges a swathe of territory, he reterritorialises that which would otherwise deterritorialise and then he cruelly abandons his lover, Ariadne. It is Bacchus or Dionysus the bull who subsequently comes to the aid of Ariadne and celebrates her exploits by deterritorialising her crown into the night sky as a constellation of stars. Byway of these shining lights navigators might once have oriented or reterritorialised themselves. And so, with this series of events that continue to proliferate, we have a movement backwards and forwards between signification and asignifying ruptures. This is what Deleuze has called a *vis elástica*: the imposition and decomposition of territory in the movements of territorialisation, deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation, the figure-ground confusion between the finite and the infinite, the explanation of movement by way of the elasticity of sensation [28].

At such an elastic juncture the philosopher's plane of immanence and the artist's plane of composition appear to touch or intermingle. On the one hand Deleuze delineates the conceptual becoming, that is, the philosophical creation of concepts, which follow the trajectory upon which "the common event itself eludes what is " [29]. Here sense is caused to move backwards and forwards, entering into the domain of paradox. On the other hand, he delineates the sensory becoming that is related to art: "the action by which something or someone is ceaselessly becoming-other (while continuing to be what they are) " [30]. He insists that these varieties of becoming are not the same, and yet it is possible to witness both of them at work along the same passage or line of flight. One might almost begin to suspect that Deleuze himself trips over the tangle of threads as he finds his way through the labyrinth of sense and sensation. With one false step the bull could gore out his eye and render him senseless.

Finally, we arrive at the last bullfight, where I will introduce the autobiographer extraordinaire, Michel Leiris, who was born in April, "under the jurisdiction of two signs: the Ram and the Bull " [31]. The erotic act, for Leiris, is tied inextricably to the circuits, thrusts, passages and trajectories of the *corrida*. Across the pages of *L'Age d'Homme* (Manhood), the embrace of bull and matador is depicted as a gesturology "performed on the brink of death and in order to inflict death " [32]. What Leiris seems to promise is

a multiplicity of little deaths, wherein man and beast become enwrapped. The figure of woman, as it occurs across this autobiographical–cum–auto–affective scene, tends to be associated, paradoxically, with sharpened weapons that pierce, as though in homage to the horns of the bull. Nevertheless, no straightforward ascription of gender fixes the roles of the two parties clinched together in the arena.

Leiris divulges his own quavering identifications with the *toro* and *torero* as follows: "When I go to a bullfight, I tend to identify myself with either the bull at the moment the sword is plunged into its body, or with the matador who risks being killed (perhaps emasculated?) by a thrust of the horn at the very moment he most clearly affirms his virility " [33]. The spectator, Leiris, enters the arena, questioning his sexuality and rupturing the boundaries of his body in a spasm that conjoins with the other incorporeal entities at play. He suffers, or so he relates, "a seizure whose outcome I can never know " [34]. This constitutes, for the writer, the absurdity of the proximity of death. Reading Leiris, Blanchot locates this fear in the fact that "we cannot experience the reality of death" [35] and the unreality of death holds us quavering in an indeterminate state between life and its other.

Leiris also insists that the seizure of death bears an analogy to the sexual spasm, both inflict upon the subject "the collapse of all the faculties" [36] and are thus suggestive of a return to chaos. Still, it is only from the diminutivedeath, with which the orgasm is identified, that we are granted re–entry to life. Unlike death proper, the sexual spasm is an assignifying rupture that allows a return. Most crucial to Leiris's fascination in the bullfight is his suggestion that by writing in the confessional mode of auto–biography, he suffers the mortal risks of the matador. It is as though he desires the fatal penetration of the horn, which would result in the effusion of his erstwhile inner, hidden world into the world at large. The act of writing becomes bound up with an erotics and where, in the midst of this delirium of exposure, Blanchot insists death is inextricably interwoven, Deleuze turns instead to "a possibility of life " [37]. One is compelled to ask: Can either perspective be accepted without the other?

Leiris is well aware that the activity of writing places him in no real danger of being gored, that he is threatened merely by the "shadow of a horn " [38]. This is not to suggest that the literary task for Leiris cannot be considered an engagement rife with peril. In much the same way that the *torero* is obliged to attend to what Leiris denominates as the "tauromachic" code [39], the writer suggests that he too must proceed according to certain rules. Should his scrutinising exactitude slacken for just a moment, his task, which is to "gather [his] life into a single solid block " [40], will slip from his grasp. This task, as it turns out, can never arrive at a point of culmination, for the writer, though riddled with an infinite series of little deaths, will not be able to narrate his own demise.

Four times I have visited the bullfightfigured as event or assignifying rupture. Finally, in the midst of the dance that cuts its trajectory through the "terrain of truth," the dire matter of life or death itself becomes a rupture that resists signification. With this statement, I lead myself into one of the many junctions that riddle the labyrinth. It is not possible here to take a final definitive step, for to state, in exact terms, the sense of the term life is as preemptive as attempting to grasp the sense of death. Sense, according to Deleuze, is that which is expressed, it is a fourth dimension or an open field that is presupposed by the determinations of denotation, manifestation and signification. Residing neither on the side of the object nor on the side of those words that are gathered into a proposition that is directed toward the object, the threshold of sense is stretched taut and bifurcated. This is not to suggest that sense snaps in two, rather, it oscillates backwards and forwards. Deleuze is insistent that, unlike good sense, sense travels in more than one direction. And what of the "assignifying features" [41] of sensation? It must be noted that sensation can also be located at the meeting place between things and thought, and so there persists not only an oscillation of sense but also of sensation. It is not a matter of identifying the constraints of life or the interruption of death with the strictures of good and common sense, but of being prepared to stretch out on the threshold that shimmers in between.

It cannot be denied that the culmination of every bullfight results, at some point, in the demise of the bull. Even if the matador is fatally gored in the heat of the battle, the bull will eventually be lead to its slaughter. Perhaps, then, as Deleuze has pondered, the drama of the bullfight tells a tale that is too well worn. The oscillation of sense congeals in the anticipation and horror of bloodshed. Despite the above, it is too easy to forget that each event of the bullfight brings with it a very particular concatenation of parts. Though I visit four such events, I cannot claim to have personally experienced the thrills of the *corrida*. Still, and this may well be an illegitimate step, could this experience not be obtained after a different fashion? Deleuze and Guattari speculate upon whether it is possible to use drugs without actually taking drugs, which is to suggest that a lack of experience should not preclude one's construction and augmentation of conceptual and sensory becomings [42]. The ongoing practice of creative construction is exactly a "question of life and death," enabling the philosopher, artist, writer, bullfighter and bull to play out any number of scenarios and cause them to circulate [43]. In fits and starts, according to an array of speeds and slownesses, the simultaneous distinction and intermingling of sensation and sense proceed. As Bataille suggests, life, and its intimate proximity to death "is the tumultuous movement that bursts forth and consumes itself" [44], an asignifying rupture extraordinaire.

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York: Columbia University press,1994).

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[19] Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 202.

[20] Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 180.

[21] Deleuze, "Painting and Sensation," p.187.

[22] Deleuze, *Repetition and Difference*, p. 8.

[23] Deleuze, "Painting and Sensation," p.192.

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[30] Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*.

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[32] Leiris, *Manhood*, p. 42.

[33] Leiris, *Manhood*, p. 42.

[34] Leiris, *Manhood*, p. 50.

[35] Blanchot, "Glances Beyond the Grave," *On Leiris*, Yale French Studies, no. 81 (Connecticut: Yale University, 1992),p. 159.

[36] Leiris, *Manhood*, p. 51.

[37] Deleuze, "Literature and Life," trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco, *Critical Inquiry* 23 (Winter, 1997), p. 229.

[38] The quote is from Blanchot, but Leiris, in his own words, does in fact register that it is, rather, the "shadow of a bull's horn" he wishes to introduce into the literary work. Leiris, *Manhood*,p. 154. Blanchot, "Glances Beyond the Grave," p. 154. See also Allan Stoekl,"Leiris's Unwritten Autobiography," *Politics Writing, Mutilation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

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[40] Leiris, *Manhood*, p. 162.

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