

The viscosity of duration: Painterly surface and the phenomenology of time in the London paintings of Frank Auerbach

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Abstract

This article aims to examine our perceptions of temporality in painterly surface and investigate the relationship between subjective perceptions of temporality and emotional 'affect' in encounters with painting. Frank Auerbach's London paintings are taken as examples of 'painterly' surface with which to consider the elastic temporality of painting. At the centre of this investigation are the engaged and embodied artist and the engaged spectator, encountering the 'strangeness' of painterly surface as an intense experience, offering an enhanced sense of lived temporality: both caught in a circuit defined by Merleau-Ponty: '[f]or painters, the world will always be yet to be painted...'.

Keywords

painting

temporality

affect

perception

cityscapes

Auerbach

Merleau-Ponty

Cixous

T. J. Clark, in his 2015 catalogue essay for Frank Auerbach at Tate Britain, writes of Auerbach's work as: '... a strange thing – a shock, a scandal, a leap into being, a "getting

in the way” of our normal fabric of vision’ (Clark 2015: 9). Auerbach’s paintings are made through a process of constant revision and reworking. Their ‘painterly’ surfaces manifest figural elements that emerge slowly as the spectator looks. They engage us in complex operations of temporality and perception. There is a sense of displacement and the longer you gaze, the more you see. This process of temporal unfolding is ‘strange’. In another essay, some 25 years earlier, Mel Gooding described: ‘... the extraordinary strangeness of these paintings of Auerbach, their compelling actuality as charged and energetic objects’ (1990: 2). Both writers echo philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s assertion that ‘[o]nly one emotion is possible for this painter: the feeling of strangeness’ (2004: 281).

Auerbach’s London pictures are taken here as examples of ‘painterly’ surface with which to consider temporality, ‘affect’ and spectator experience in painting. The ‘strangeness’ of encounters with Auerbach’s paintings will be examined in an attempt to expand our understanding of how subjective perceptions of temporality connect with emotional ‘affect’. This article also considers why the passing of time may become ‘elastic’ in the perception of the spectator encountering ‘painterly’ surface. How can we begin to understand what is passing in these moments? And how may these phenomena relate to perceptions of time and space for the painter engaged in studio practice? Addressing these questions may highlight the liberating potential of such encounters and engagements for an expanded sense of lived temporality as painters and spectators.

This investigation begins with one particular dynamic encounter with a ‘Camden’ painting: *To The Studios* (1979–80, Figure 1), a subject re-visited by Auerbach many times. According to long-term Auerbach portrait sitter, Catherine Lampert, the ‘To the Studios’ pictures were begun by Auerbach in the late 1970s in a ‘state of anxiety’ (Lampert 2015: 171) as he feared ejection by the council from his studio space. The scene of these

paintings is described here by critic Robert Hughes: '[t]he spindly looking Victorian villa with a high narrow entrance on the left, to the right the stained concrete of some 60s flats [...] and an alley in between' (1990: 214).

In 2004, at Tate Britain, I was drawn to spend a longtime with this picture: a profoundly emotional and unsettling experience, but also an engagement with the nature of time in the paint surface and the beginnings of an attempt to unravel some of the temporal operations of painting.

I will reflect here on the temporal nature of 'painterly' surface in the light of phenomenology: the late essays of Maurice Merleau-Ponty: 'Eye and mind' (1993) and 'The visible and the invisible' (1968) that propose painting as a form of metaphysics and also a way of understanding how we see. Taking Auerbach's paintings as 'experimental' I will make observations based on close readings of paintings using reflective and analytical material from Deleuze on painting and cinema, Lyotard on painting and Hélène Cixous on relations between writing and painting.

As 'painterly' is rather a slippery, ambiguous term, used differently in a number of contexts, I will present a definition for this article. I understand 'painterly' painting to reveal the gestures, movements and rhythms made by painters across time: the embodied processes of painting made visible as manual mark-making. Such surfaces have areas of *tons rompus*, residues of erasure and overlapping spatial arrangements of tone and colour. Brush-strokes responding to the shapes and forms of sources have not been completely blended into an illusionistic smooth surface, but left to form new visual phenomena. As such, Auerbach's cityscapes may also be considered 'figural': indicating works with referents in the phenomenological world and possibly 'figurative'

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characteristics, which avoid being illustrative or narrative. Here, 'figural' builds on Lyotard's use of the term (2011) to indicate that which goes beyond discursive/rational representation in flat, linguistic narrative form. Although the works discussed have sources in the world, their 'figural' nature exposes some temporal operations, processes and 'affects' in painting.

With the concept of the 'figural' Lyotard offers a critique of what he perceives as post-structuralist philosophy's limitations in focusing on 'text' and on representational concepts whilst suppressing peripheral temporal or sensory modes. He posits the 'figural' as that which exceeds representation: a force that haunts the text and disrupts the rational. 'Figural' as a concept developed in *Discours/Figure* (2011) builds on the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty rather than conventional semiotics, acknowledging embodied perception and *seeing* in particular. Lyotard reminds us that: 'one does not read or understand a picture' (2011: 4). Painting is not predictable, but an experimental, investigative, even speculative *process*, described here by Lyotard as he suggests that:

... the point is to begin, or try to begin by depositing a 'first' touch of colour, let another one come along, then another nuance, letting them associate through a demand which is their own and which has to be felt... (1991: 141)

Francis Bacon's paintings of heads, also figural and concerned with temporality, 'resemble' the visible temporal slippage of long photographic exposures (Robinson 2010: 223). This article, however, seeks to move beyond notions of 'resemblance', making use rather of conceptual devices such as 'frame' and 'plane' and focusing on perception and on works that foreground 'painterly' construction. In Auerbach's London paintings, constructed from *plein air* drawings, residues of graphic activity are easily identifiable. He has continuously

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documented the streets and buildings surrounding his studio since the 1950s, making drawings in the early morning that form the basis of new paintings. William Feaver describes Auerbach working in an area:

... bounded by Chalk Farm and Kentish Town to the north, the Euston Road to the south, Regent's Park and Primrose Hill to the west, and to the east the rail termini of King's Cross and St Pancras.

As his morning drawings:

... maintain the pace, feeding spontaneity into the day-to-day business in the studio. A sense of animation prevails. (Feaver 2009: 4)

The other key strand in Auerbach's practice is the painting of portrait heads, working repetitively, with the same weekly sitters over a period of many years. Attention here, however, is focused on 'To the Studios' series of works (1977–95), 'Camden' cityscapes and earlier 'building site' works (1952–1962).¹¹ Other paintings exhibiting this type of 'painterly' surface include works by Francis Bacon (1962), Joan Eardley (1963), Peter Lanyon (1960) and Peter Doig (1998). Considering temporality in 'post-medium' works by Gerhard Richter and Luc Tuymans, on the other hand, we find photographically mediated moments translated in much thinner paint surfaces. Whilst these might reveal equally compelling painterly phenomenology, I have opted for a clearly defined group of Auerbachs that have a particular affect with prolonged viewing.

In my encounter with *To the Studios, 1979–80*, I experienced a sense of vertiginous 'falling' whilst looking closely at the surface and was conscious of the architecture of the

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picture somehow altering, reassembling itself under my gaze as I stepped away, feeling almost as if the dynamic lines, broken tones, colour contrasts and edges within the picture plane would allow a kind of parallax effect: if I moved my head to the side, I might be able to see behind the painted structures. This sense of being tilted off balance came with a shift in my perceptions of time passing: the time it took for the details of the buildings to emerge seemed stretched and distorted, also affected by my viewing distance from the picture's layered surface. After the initial, sudden jolt, I felt as though time was passing more slowly than usual, beyond my gaze. As I left the picture behind, there was a sense of returning to the world with a sense of heightened vision, as in an altered state. T. J. Clark describes his own intense encounter with an Auerbach:

... as close as I've ever been to the primal scene of modern art: the experience of making (or if you're a viewer, seeing) something that is truly senseless and preposterous as it comes into being, unknown and unidentifiable, and therefore [...] a glimpse of freedom. (2015: 9)

This 'glimpse of freedom' is central to what I am seeking to grasp here: painting's potential to liberate us from everyday temporality and I will go on to look at how French feminist writer Hélène Cixous' desire to 'write like a painter' (1991) may help us to understand the strangeness of time experienced in painterly surface and how temporally unsettling painting can be. As she writes of Rembrandt:

... he always paints what escapes us: what has just happened, what is going to happen, and which traverses us suddenly, pierces us, turns us upside down escapes beyond the painting, beyond thought, and leaves us there panting, suspended, grazed. (Cixous 1998: 13)

In this passage, we can perhaps see a link with Auerbach's documented fascination with Rembrandt's paintings whilst he was making the London building sites. William Feaver describes: '... a merger in near monochrome between what he saw in the building sites and what he could see in Rembrandt' (2009:13).² Cixous goes on to describe how in drawing: '... we start out avidly, we're going to lose ourselves' (Cixous 1998: 21) and I would argue that the morning drawings that begin the process of Auerbach's city paintings are sojourns in the strange time of intense looking that we experience in turn in the paintings.

Auerbach's London paintings, however, are not sketches. They have long periods of intense labour embedded in them. According to the display caption for this version of *To the Studios*: '[o]ver nine months, Auerbach repeatedly scraped down and repainted the surface until the final image was achieved' (Tate 2004). Auerbach has said: 'I find myself a slow painter' (Auerbach in Feaver 2009: 233). If we look long enough, these paintings achieve something like the: '... sense of an emerging order, of [...] an object in the act of appearing, organising itself before our eyes' that Merleau-Ponty describes in the work of Cézanne (2004: 278).

To the Studios 1979–80 (Figure 1) is a picture that fills the immediate field of vision. Painted in oil on canvas, it is one of about thirty documented paintings based on sketches made from a similar point of view. The space depicted is the alleyway between a large, Victorian house on the left and a modernist block of flats on the right. We see the staircase and banister leading to the flats to the right of the path. The remainder of the picture is taken up with less clearly defined marks, indicating structures: fence, gate, shed, rooftop. The whole has the sense of a shanty town dwelling, a tumbledown place between

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buildings, outside proper architecture and overlooked in the cityscape. It seems these ramshackle structures may fall at any moment. Buildings should stay put, not move, but these ones do. The 'real' buildings in Camden are solid brick. The painted ones seem like wood or some flimsy corrugated material: put-up jobs, bleak shed-like places from an earlier time. The way the paint has been put down has made a world: unsteady and enormously complex. Considering 'affect' in this distinctive architecture, we are surrounded by the skin of the paint. In the 'fact' of the present painting, colours draw us in and then push back.

The uprights of the banister and horizontal, openwork stairs are placed with long, definite straight lines that look like single brush-marks. Some of these 'structural' lines do not support anything or indicate solid architectural elements. They are mostly painted in greyish browns with areas of mixed tone, indicating the presence of more than one colour on the brush or application tool. Behind the staircase on the right of the picture, there is an area of pink/blue, broken, spread paint that stretches away to the distance. The richly blue central area has fewer straight lines and leads further in. Planes receding behind the uprights are darker: indistinct in places. Architectural/structural lines form the sides and roof of the lean-to structure on the left of the path, the gate and visible buildings behind. At the left, the wood struts of the barred gate are apparently single, directional strokes of paint. Behind this on the roof of the lean-to, the paint indicates a small chimney, but is indistinct, mobile. The sky, visible along the top of the picture, recedes behind the buildings, painted in a bleak, cool yellow. The horizontal edge of rooftops against the sky is broken and looks as if it has been made and then moved: over-painted. There are duller, blueish greys and purple at the back, close to the skyline. The small shed/tower structure on top of another building stands out, painted with strong, horizontal strokes. The lower ones in red push out towards the viewer.

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Figure 1: Frank Auerbach (1979-80), To the Studios, oil on canvas, 1232 x 1026 mm. ©Tate, London 2015, © Frank Auerbach, courtesy Marlborough Fine Art.

Moving forward again, there are warmer tones of orange and yellow, a zigzag of blueish broken tone, then disrupted pinkish-grey extending to the path and wall areas, closer to the front. The path: the ground closest to the front is the brightest area in the picture, intensely yellow. The warmest tone is to the left of and slightly below centre: a triangular, orange shape with a patch of fairly cool green within it. The play of light is there and gone. These areas of broken tone draw the eye in a way that makes the architecture of the whole picture cohere: a space to inhabit. There is no single viewpoint from which to describe the scene. The place emerges. Paint is applied in many different ways, as documented, for example, by Lampert, Gooding and Spender³: streaked, scraped, worked into, laid down in definite straight lines, overlaid on to or cutting across planes, leaving the area behind to recede. As I look again, I can feel this place, move around in it, be present as the elements emerge and the paint connects with my sense of 'inner' time.

This encounter was not by any means an isolated experience, but it was one that led to further investigation. Initially, I sought greater understanding of visual perception and psychologies of vision, for example: 'seeing' as distinct from 'looking', how physical movements alter the mental processing of colours (Livingstone 2002) and how intense looking may relate to a kind of heightened vision, as in an 'altered state'. Reflecting on the encounter, 'time' emerged as a key factor. Artists deconstruct their visual experience in order to draw or paint. This painting had been made by the painter looking and marking in succession: leaving residues of physical presence open: potentials for our brains to compose figures from. Marks have been erased and put back differently. They do not depict a single 'cartesian' perspective, but a 'mobile gaze', as proposed by Merleau-Ponty in 'Eye and mind' (1993: 354). As spectator, I encounter the desire of the painter to make the painted space work and the diverse temporalities of the work's construction: the

unsettling affects of someone else's seeing. I am taken back in time to places I have not been. The unity of vision that my brain uses to navigate the three dimensional world is confronted with its deconstruction in paint.

Auerbach's working process has been described by Carlisle:

[L]aying the ultimate version of the composition over the scraped-off remains of so many predecessors demands six or seven hours of intense activity. (2001: 100)

and Lampert:

[V]ery rapidly laying down fresh marks into just-made marks, angrily or eagerly scraping off areas, leaves an end layer of wet paint perhaps a few millimetres in depth. Sometimes the surface is flattish and packed; sometimes there are blobs, rutted strokes and marbled blends of colours. (2001: 20)

Auerbach's building site paintings from the period 1952–62 are amongst his earliest city paintings. Arguably, these works demonstrate the emergence of pictorial elements across time even more forcefully than later Camden pictures. They document reconstructions of the bomb-shattered London street-scape recovering in the aftermath of war. Central London sites include the Shell building on Southbank and several works from Oxford Street, including four small, painted sketches and two large pictures with very similar compositions: *Oxford Street Building Site I* (Auerbach 1959–60) and *Oxford Street Building Site II* (Auerbach 1960). The first of these, a good example of temporal emergence, was made at a time when Auerbach was working with ochres, earth colours and extremely thick, densely applied paint.

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Figure 2: Frank Auerbach (1959-60), Oxford Street Building Site I, oil on board, 1981 x 1537 mm. ©Tate, London 2015, © Frank Auerbach, courtesy Marlborough Fine Art.

On first viewing, the surface appears impossibly complex, impenetrable and difficult to 'read'. As with *To the Studios*, however, on spending several minutes looking, forms emerge and there is a sense of being in communication with a place and time, with a 'fact'. The red, coiled rope at bottom left recedes and, beyond this, it is possible to make out horizontal planes on which figures, building materials and equipment materialize under our gaze. The limited palette emphasizes the actual mark making and paint application as temporal phenomena. Film theorist, André Bazin suggests that: '... time in a painting, so far as the notion applies, develops geologically in depth...' (1967: 165) The 'deep' surface of this work is described by Robert Hughes:

... the directions and vectors of the drawings working fully in the thickness of paint. Wide continuous tracks of the brush leave clearly defined raised edges in the paint around them, so that details seem inlaid [...] The linear scaffolding of such pictures, heaving itself out of their dense paste, predicts a line of development in Auerbach's art towards drawn forms that are both free and not free – the hooking brushstrokes that convey such muscular energy. (1990: 85)

Hughes' identification of drawn elements in Auerbach's work sheds an important light on graphic gesture and temporality:

... both drawing and painting are records of an activity that unfolds in time. An essential part of the effect of early Auerbachs [...] their time-bound quality: deposit after deposit of paint, silted there on the surface, gravelly and static [...] But though the paint implies time [...] nobody can disentangle from this substance the order and sequence of its arrival there. Finished painting tends to cover its traces. Whereas drawing, in its apparent impulsiveness, seems more open: scanning it, you can

guess at the sequence of the network of marks [...] enter the story of its construction.

(Hughes 1990: 195)

For Hughes, Auerbach absorbs the 'graphic energy' (Hughes 1990: 165) of drawn elements into the painterly practice. As spectators, we experience the kinetic effects of reworking in these paintings: '[t]he eye, in reading them, is never still; the brush-marks hectically urge it along, along the contours and round the back of forms' (Hughes 1990: 204).

Auerbach, drawing on the street like Baudelaire's *flâneur*: a 'kaleidoscope endowed with consciousness' (Baudelaire 1992: 400), makes location sketches with fast, repetitive glances, later built into the paintings: often erased completely and reconstructed, but the energy of drawing still lives. He has described a sense of 'time slipping away' at the centre of his work and a striving after 'fact'. Poet Stephen Spender describes this as: 'a point of overlapping of internal with external likeness, within a surrounding unlikeness' (1982: 5). In the later *To the Studios – 1990–91* (Auerbach 1990–91), we find this 'fact' arranged following chaos. Again, there is potential motion, the perceived 'parallax' effect. This picture has a brighter palette: red and green horizontal strokes for the steps of the house on the left, light blue sky and a pervasive atmosphere of transparency, lightness. We may struggle to connect painted surfaces with recognizable form, but subsequently move to another plane, another landscape, reached through time. These phenomena are at work in several Camden paintings, notably the Mornington Crescent pictures between 1987 and 2006, including *Chimney in Mornington Crescent – Winter Morning* (Auerbach 1991).⁴

When we look at a painting and encounter a ridge of paint, an area of broken tone or lines drawn through a colour field, we inevitably strive to compose them into something

coherent: a recognizable phenomenon in the world. In the early morning, awake, but still partially in a dream state, there are fragmented moments when our vision is uncertain. Possibly in these moments, we are more aware of our own perceptual processes: forming the objects grasped by our conscious selves. In phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty proposes that painting may reveal much about our visuo-perceptual experience. Perhaps then, all of us, engaged with painting or not, move through the world and encounter our lives rather as 'painters'. Given all the sensations and movements in our bodies at any given time, we cannot recall the entirety of our experiences through memory. We could film in slow motion, from many different angles, to examine these imperceptible instants, but we cannot replay our subjective experience, what it feels like inside our embodied selves.

Perhaps encounters with 'painterly' surface allow us to glimpse a kind of 'replay' or temporal unfolding as the act of looking pushes us into an expanded register of image processing: even into what is usually described as an altered state. A significantly altered, 'elastic' sense of time⁵ is a well-documented phenomenon in drug-induced or meditative altered states of consciousness in which we may think many hours have gone past, but find it was only a matter of seconds. Arguably, distorted time sense induced by the intense looking of the painter or spectator may contribute towards the powerful *emotional* force when we encounter a ridge of broken tone or colour field and try to make it into something new, even something as apparently mundane as a London house.

A film 'frame' is a sliver of time, condensed. If we move with a camera in a tracking shot, we are both capturing 'frames' within whatever analogue or digital device we are using and passing through many 'planes' of temporal perception as we move. The impossibility, with even the most advanced technologies, of reproducing human perceptual experience, highlights the significance of painting as a uniquely affective experience. Thinking of

painting as a phenomenon that combines 'frame' and 'plane' may offer insights into 'affect' in encounters with 'painterly' surface. Paintings such as Auerbach's perhaps confront us with marks made in different temporal registers, with diverse rates and rhythms. Trying to follow painted marks that trace forms, speed across planes, move slowly, or jump, we cross frame lines and encounter impossible rhythms that stop, start, stutter and refuse seamless continuity.

Experimental film/video can also reveal planes slicing through space and time: mobile sections, potentially manifesting non-illusory phenomena, as their indexical operations engage with manifestations of temporality, bypassing conventional semiotics and verbal language, potentially having visceral, emotional affect: rhythms engage us and break off, disrupting our habitual modes of experiencing time.⁶ Some deconstructive film experiments then may perhaps elucidate operations of temporality, perception and 'affect' in painting by 'expanding' the moment and throwing us into unexpected time registers.

Encountering painterly surface, we 'fall' into another temporality, responding in our own inner time-scape, where the expanse of a painting is spread out for us and it leads to different experiences that circulate wordlessly until we can make them coalesce. Merleau-Ponty suggests that '[t]he painter, whatever he is, while he is painting, practices a magical theory of vision' (1993: 298). Lyotard extends Merleau-Ponty's proposal from 'Cezanne's doubt' (2004) of painting as philosophy, thus a practice and phenomenon that may reveal the nature of the world including arguably temporality, when he points to: '... the judgement made by the painter-researcher and his peers on the success obtained by the work of art in relation to what is really at stake: to make seen what makes one see and not what is visible' (Lyotard 1991: 102). He also identifies the different *times* of painting, citing a 'time of production' distinct from other temporal spaces:

... between the time it takes the painter to paint the picture (time of 'production'), the time required to look at and understand the work (time of 'consumption'), the time to which the work refers (a moment, a scene, a situation, a sequence of events: the time of the diegetic referent, of the story told by the picture), the time it takes to reach the viewer once it has been 'created' (the time of circulation) and finally, perhaps, the time the painting is. (Lyotard 1991: 78)

Lyotard's insights into painting may then elucidate the 'feeling' of time we get from Auerbach's city works. Studio practice entails intense looking and thus arguably, temporal and rhythmic disturbance that may, through physical action on matter, manifest in painterly surface. Subjective perceptions of temporality in spectator encounters then would alter so that time unfolds in an experience quite distinct from clock time, induced by open 'painterly' surfaces such as Auerbach's, where painterly marks are not resolved into fixed forms.

In Merleau-Ponty's reflections on the chiasmic intertwining of seer and seen and the embodied subject inside the spectacle as a 'thing amongst things', we find the perceiving body 'being-in-the-world' and 'becoming' (1993: 354). We also find an optimism about the potentiality of painting as a process able to elucidate our perceiving selves: revealing aspects of human experience that '... could not be given to us as ideas except in a carnal experience'. In 'Eye and mind', Merleau-Ponty says of painting: '[t]he eye lives in this texture as a man lives in his house' (1969: 150).

Merleau-Ponty posits painting as philosophy: '... any theory of painting is a metaphysics' (2004: 303). In this phenomenology, painting touches on tensions between the visible and

the invisible: the embodied subject 'drawing from this world' in an unbounded process that takes any amount of time. Painterly operations contribute towards our visuo-perceptual grasp of the world and our place in it: physical and metaphysical (Merleau-Ponty 1969). If we acknowledge the primacy of images in the formation of consciousness and affective experience, then our emotions are arguably bound up with the nature of our perceptual apparatus. They are also largely pre-linguistic. The semiotics of reading, encountering words as signs, will often place these embodied emotional responses at a distance, hence the very great difficulties in making language describe emotionally charged encounters with painting.

The point here is that painting affects us directly in a different temporal and perceptual register than spoken or written language. This space of 'affect' is highlighted in Hélène Cixous⁷ intense engagement with the interface between language and sight: and we can draw on her writings as she explores her desire to 'write like a painter' in our examination of strange temporality in Auerbach's city pictures. 'I want the beforehand of a book' she says in *Stigmata* (Cixous 1998: 20) as she writes of drawing in the night as a graphic, nonlinear act and in a circular motion, her work seems to go before language in making language describe the experience of bringing through her thoughts and desires into the world on the page. Cixous renders language painterly even as she seeks to grasp what painting does with us, what it does with our senses, what it can do with our sensation of living in time. She acknowledges the strange temporality of painting:

[o]ne does not paint yesterday, one does not even paint today, one paints tomorrow, one paints what will be, one paints 'the imminence of'. (Cixous 1991: 113)

For Cixous, writing is in the dark, inside Cézanne's apple germinating into visible presence

in the world. Auerbach explores this inner space for painting: 'I wanted to make a painting that, when you saw it, would be like touching something in the dark [...]' (Hughes 1990: 86). Both speak of the 'love' required by painting. Cixous says: '[h]ow much greater a love for painting than for oneself!' (Cixous 1991: 125) and Auerbach of the 'kind of love' required to paint repeatedly to move beyond ego into the not yet painted: erasing in order to reconstruct a painting out of that yearning.

Cixous' desire to write 'like a painter' suggests 'painterly' surface as a plane of correspondence, acting like Freud's 'mystic writing pad' (2005): traits of temporality over erasures, a palimpsest of sensation connecting directly with the desiring subject, recognizing the limitations of language in conveying the fluid affects of painting from a painter's perspective. The 'painterly' writing plane would be *malerisch*, haptic and diverse. We would experience it in time as film fragments and in space as permeable architecture: new dimensions. Engaging with its surfaces from different angles, with broken tones, now here, now there, our self-conscious presence would shift and be made again. In the paint/writing space, precision and imperfections would be held together in ambiguity. Inscribed by hand on the page, the written word would correspond with the painted mark: an unpredictable gesture manifesting the mobile, embodied physicality of painting, connecting with the minute time of flesh, nerves, neurochemistry and body rhythms.

The affect of the painted mark, however, is more like a sound: outside time, taking no time at all, with no verbal parallel, no likeness. The painted mark is a shot across time that does not stand still. So, to write like a painter and believe, one's words must allow the eye to pass over lightly, with light, to hover, focus and stop, to go back, to reiterate but not repeat, as marks that can resound and flow in a surface that permits entry at different levels: a diverse, shifting temporal surface. To write like a painter: with gestural marks, in layers,

leaving visible evidence of erasure, at differing rates, making time elastic, space expanded: to work lightly and reach across with the mobile gaze from the dark inside, out to the horizon. As Hélène Cixous says: '... perhaps what I like about painting is its mad speed' (1991: 111). I would propose that the nature of paint in Auerbach's London pictures, such as *Mornington Crescent Early Morning 1992-93* (Auerbach 1992-93), affects the spectator beyond language and beyond metaphor, not figurative but figural: operating directly on the nervous system. Beth Harland describes how we can see painting as: '... the bringing together of an external view and an internal, subjective experience, in the world of the picture' (2013: 8) and Cixous' attempts though the practice of writing to expand on painterly phenomena may help us to grasp the ways in which experiences of painting as painter *and* spectator affect us by engaging our visual perceptual processes in strange, dissonant temporal space.

Painting then operates outside of language and 'painterly' works away from conventional, pictorial narrative. I would propose that it is painting's 'strange' temporality that prevents it from being conventionally linguistic or narrative. Something of the fluid semiotics required to grasp 'affect' and in 'painterly' surface may be found in Roland Barthes' distinction between 'studium' and 'punctum' in his work on photography: *Camera Lucida* (1984), Barthes distinguishes between his cool responses to what is directly represented in a photograph and the more directly visceral 'affect' of certain photographic images. 'Studium' refers to descriptive factors such as '... the figures, the faces, the gestures, the settings, the actions', whereas: 'Punctum' '... will break, or punctuate, the studium'. He asserts that, whereas: '... the studium is ultimately always coded, the punctum is not...' (Barthes 1984: 51). 'Punctum' in a photograph may relate to recognition and specific memory retrieval for the spectator: processes that are arguably, emotionally charged and

temporal. Although photography and painting are very different phenomena, perhaps something like 'punctum' operates in 'figural' painting.

Auerbach's painterly cityscapes emerge slowly and their temporal density affects us.

Turning to Deleuze on affective elements in Bacon's paintings:

... these marks, these traits, are irrational, involuntary, accidental, free, random. They are nonrepresentative, nonillustrative, nonnarrative. They are no longer either significant or signifiers: they are signifying traits. They are traits of sensation, but of confused sensations [...] above all, they are manual traits. (Deleuze 2003: 71)

we are reminded that the painter has been physically present. Describing 'sensation' for the spectator, Deleuze says:

[a]s a spectator, I experience the sensation only by entering the painting, by reaching the unity of the sensing and the sensed. (2003: 35)

The sensation of being tilted off balance in encounters with Auerbach paintings may be described as 'fall'. This is the term Deleuze adopts to denote sensations resulting from the expression of tensions, experienced by the artist. 'Fall' is: '... what is most alive in the sensation, that through which the sensation is experienced as living' (Deleuze 2003: 81).

Temporal operations are elusive, perhaps even impossible to grasp. Yet temporality is embedded in our perceptual processes. Most of us navigate the world through seeing and what we are able to see is determined by distance and reflected light: always looking back. The fragments that we see have always already slipped away. Paintings are not instant,

captured 'all at once'; they have been made across time. I am proposing here that insights gained from considering temporality and 'affect' in painting may be of value more widely: informing our understanding of seeing and subjectivity.

Auerbach endeavours to make a new 'fact' (Spender 1982: 5), not thin, fixed 'frames'. A painter's performative actions in time: their gestures and movements create the architecture of 'painterly' surface. We experience tensions in paintings resulting from the painter's temporal experience in the world. Marks, lines and erasures emerge from the lived, dynamic experience of the painting body, present in the studio or drawing on site: the mobile world encountered perceptually as a multiplicity of 'planes' in rapid succession. They also correspond with the painter's internal, psychic and sensory dynamics: with memory and projection. In the complex relations between psychic architecture, physicality and paint process, painters juxtapose diverse, irregular temporalities. Thus, 'painterly' surfaces hold impossible rhythms for the spectator and present time 'strangely'. Perhaps encountering this 'strangeness' may shift our habitual modes of experiencing time.

[a]nd we are so slow. Life is so rapid. (Cixous 1991: 111)

'Reading' the London paintings of Frank Auerbach is described by Isabel Carlisle as: '... an energetic experience, while colours prompt the unfolding of memories in the mind's eye' (Carlisle 2001: 100). These works engage the spectator on many levels. Arguably, they demonstrate many of the complex characteristics and operations of painting and enable us to explore: affect, subjectivity, painting process, visual perception and temporality. The visual architecture of painting may make explicit our perceptual processes, considered both philosophically. Our grasp of how painting relates to our temporally inflected subjectivity may be elucidated by Merleau-Ponty's propositions about

painting as a metaphysics and by Deleuze's work on 'forces' and 'sensations' in painting that make it clear that the slippery, multifaceted phenomenon of our embodied subjectivity is closely intertwined with our experience of living through time. Painterly works unsettle the time we live by and in doing; thus, they may offer insights into perception, temporality and subjectivity and enable us to momentarily inhabit an expanded and potentially liberating mode of being in the world. I am proposing here that encounters with 'painterly' surfaces and Auerbach's cityscapes in particular alter our perceptions of time as we re-live the painter's time and place. I have seen *To the Studios 1979–80* several times in the intervening decade: most recently in the Tate retrospective and have to report an undiminished sensory experience of 'strange' time.

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Dr Anne Robinson's experimental practice is focused on the perception and politics of time passing and encompasses painting, film and sound. She has a practice-led Ph.D.: 'The elusive digital frame and the elasticity of time in painting', and currently teaches at

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Middlesex University. Her recent works include *Inside Out Blues* in Marseilles and *Thrashing in the Static*, shown at CGP, Objectifs, Singapore, Deptford X and Folkestone. She participated in psi20 in Shanghai and 'Fluid Sounds' at University of Copenhagen (2015), followed by an audio paper in *Seismograf* journal. Curatorial projects include 'Over Time' (2014) and 'Supernormal' festival (2012–16). www.annerobinsonartwork.org

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Notes

¹ Auerbach's earliest 'city' paintings were shown at *Frank Auerbach, London Building Sites 1952–62*, at the Courtauld Gallery in London, 16 October 2009–17 January 2010. The catalogue (Wright 2009) contains several examples of works with exceptionally dense surfaces that 'unfold' over time with prolonged viewing. Further Camden Town pictures, including the *to The Studios* painting discussed here, were included in the major retrospective: *Frank Auerbach* at Tate Britain, 9 October 2015–13 March 2016.

² This connection is also made by Auerbach in conversation with Barnaby Wright, curator of 'Frank Auerbach London Building Sites 1952–62' at the Courtauld, where he speaks of the truthfulness of Rembrandt and in Amsterdam in 2013, the Rijksmuseum placed Auerbach paintings alongside Rembrandt in a show entitled 'Raw Truth'. Commentators, including Lampert (2015: 80), have connected this 'raw truth' in Auerbach's work with his position as a young Jewish refugee, painting a bomb-blasted London in the wake of World War II having arrived on the Kindertransports in 1939 and shortly afterwards losing his

entire family in the Nazi concentration camps – this despite Auerbach’s own reluctance for many years to speak about his traumatic losses publicly in connection with his art.

³ Auerbach exhibits with the Marlborough Gallery and the gallery catalogues for exhibitions in 1968, 1976, 1982, 1990 and 1994 have provided a useful source of reproductions and commentary.

⁴ Feaver (2009) has a complete catalogue of Auerbach’s works, apart from works on paper smaller than 559 × 762 mm. Other notable examples of Camden Town paintings are: *The Camden Theatre 1976* (1976), *Mornington Crescent Early Morning 1992–93* (1992–93), *To the Studio 1977* (1977) and *To the Studios, 1982–83* (1982–83).

⁵ Time distortion in ASCs is indicated in more recent work in experimental psychology ‘[t]ime awareness may be significantly affected’ (Vaitl et al. 2005: 100). Also, neuroscientist Antonio Damasio cites some instances that diverge from the frequency or forward motion of brain activity in regular image processing: daydreaming, vertigo or the ingestion of hallucogenic drugs that ‘... produce illogical continuities of images’ (2010: 71).

⁶ This is expanded in the work of Peter Gidal, whose concept: ‘structural materialist film’: posits film as a: ‘material piece of time’ (1976).

⁷ Cixous makes reference to Auerbach in her book *Coming to Writing* (1991).