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Citation for published version:

Vellodi, K 2017, 'Hallucinating Art History: Brain-Eye: New Histories of Modern Painting, by Eric Alliez, with Jean-Clet Martin. ', *Art History*, vol. 40, no. 1, pp. 220-224. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8365.12299>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1111/1467-8365.12299](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8365.12299)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Art History

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HYSTERICISING ART HISTORY

Brain-Eye: New Histories of Modern Painting, by Eric Alliez, with Jean-Clet Martin. Trans. Robin Mackay. Rowman & Littlefield International, 2015, 472pp., Hdbk £90.00; pbk £29.95

For those sceptics of the chronological accounts of modern painting as the natural successor to Romanticism, or for those tired with the still-pervasive modernist narratives of formalism and aesthetic purism, Eric Alliez's formidable and highly original book may well provide the stimulation they have been waiting for.

The *Brain-Eye* (the translation of the 2007 French text) presents us with a Deleuzian rewriting of the history of Modern Painting. It pivots on five painters: Delacroix, Manet, Seurat, Gauguin and Cezanne. Alliez's aim is not to write a new history, and indeed, these five, very familiar, modern practices are presented more as coexistent events than successive moments (hence the placement of the chapter on Cezanne after those on Seurat and Gauguin). His aim is rather to 'bring to light a thinking at work in modern painting'(xxi), an 'Aesthetic thought' (xxv) that, it is implied, has hitherto been concealed under reigning hegemonic discourses of modernity, including Clement Greenberg's and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's, who supply the book with its two most prominent targets.

This distinction between painting as a historical object and painting as an event of thought – which might be called the first characteristic of a Deleuzian rewriting of the history of modern painting - is crucial to the book's philosophical tenor. It is important to stress from the outset that what is designated here as 'painting' has nothing to do with the purifying essentialisation of a specific medium. Whence we find Alliez, firstly, continually confronting painting to the problem of a photography that displaces painting's interiority, and secondly, orienting his analyses not only to works of art but to the dense and heady clusters of critics,

historians, philosophers, and scientists that constituted the trans-pictorial worlds within which the five painters worked. Rejecting in this way any analysis of painting ‘on its own terms’, painting is instead invested as the vector for a (very Deleuzian) staging of a philosophical problem – that of the eruption of the sensible into thought that the work of art, as a ‘being of sensation’ rather than a medium-specific manifestation, may condition, and the consequences of this aesthetic function for the thought of modernity. ‘Art’ thus emerges here not as an object for a thinking supplied by philosophy, whether Deleuze’s or anyone else’s, nor indeed for a thinking supplied by Art History – which Alliez contends ‘is no less timid than philosophy when it comes to any mention of painter’s ‘thinking’”(xxiii). Art does not even ‘express’ the thoughts of its maker – a contention that Delacroix himself, the first painter in Alliez’s genealogy (but *not* its ‘forerunner’(99)), had described as foolish.ⁱ Rather, for Alliez art functions as the ‘outside’ *within* philosophy, introducing a ‘play’ into ‘its customary habits of thought’ through its construction in the sensible (xxi).

And it is on this *playful* register that the reader should best approach this book – viewing it not as a work of art history, nor a work of philosophy, nor even as a mediation between the two (‘for today both these disciplines have become generally subservient to a hysterically antiquarian history as evidenced by their accelerated fossilisation’ xxii) but as a performance of writing that displaces engagement with disciplinary findings, and attempts to give fresh expression to the work that painting enacts.

Such a project of writing a Deleuzian counter-history of modern painting has never before been undertaken. This is perhaps intriguing, given that its possibility was pointed to by Deleuze himself in his 1981 *Francis Bacon. Logic of Sensation* when the philosopher placed Bacon within a strange, deformed lineage that encompassed Egyptian bas-relief, Byzantine painting, and the work of, amongst others, Giotto, Michelangelo and Velasquez. With indubitable zest, Alliez takes up and affirms the conceptual possibilities that remain under-

articulated in Deleuze's own work, whilst forging nuanced and detailed engagements with the history of painting that Deleuze makes no attempt to embark upon.

As such, Alliez emerges through this book (and indeed in every other book he has written) as a true 'apprentice' of Deleuze (who, of course, was in fact his teacher in reality), in the precise sense in which the latter understands philosophical apprenticeship: that is, as the abandonment of fidelity for a creative deformation that transfigures the work of the teacher so as to render it unrecognisable whilst casting it anew on a new plane. Indeed, the name of Deleuze features only very rarely in Alliez's text, and we are never presented with explications or exegeses of Deleuze's thought. We encounter instead the somewhat unexpected extraction of a subterranean Deleuzian thread within a familiar historical sequence, one that obscures the name of Deleuze within a panoply of other names not usually associated with him (Goethe, Taine, Chevreul, Baudelaire, Blanc, Gautier, Fenelon, De Piles...). Thus, whilst the book puts to work many of the definitive characteristics of Deleuze's philosophy of art – the idea of 'constructivism' as a differential genesis, the displacement of the logic of the visible by a logic of sensation, the displacement of aesthetic formalism with an ontology of forces, the obscuring of interpretation with the force of production; the critique of the Image, of History, of Representation – it performs, rather than explicitly declares these. We sense, rather than come to know, Deleuze, learning his philosophy through Alliez's affective restaging of his fertile concepts. This is achieved through an inimitable, at times bizarre, style that fully accedes to Deleuze's invocation for writing to enact thought through 'speeds and slownesses', displacing any hymns to essence or meaning with the delirious revelation of passage.

As indicated by its title, the leading concept of the book is the 'Brain-Eye', a concept that emerges in Deleuze and Guattari's *What is Philosophy?* in the context of their critique of both rationalist and empiricist philosophies of the Subject, and the phenomenological

complicity of eye and mind. Painting thinks through a Brain-Eye, which is to say through a ‘denaturalisation and cerebralisation’ of the eye that frees it ‘from its role as a fixed organ and from its representational function’ in a process that bypasses the organic structures of the Subject and his lived perceptions, and which, concomitantly, liberates painting from its historical (that is, by the logic of this book, ‘pre-modern’) naturalism. Hippolyte Taine’s notion of ‘hallucination’ (which displaces ‘perception’ as the source of artistic work) and Goethe’s theory of colours supply the main sources for Alliez’s substantiation of this conception.

Indeed, the figure of Goethe, albeit a “Goethe against type” (that is, an ‘anti-classical’ Goethe), supplies the shimmering source and horizon of the thinking that each of Alliez’s painters will be understood to, in their different ways, enact. The book opens with this Goethe, experimentally searching for the psycho-physiological field of the sensory in a ‘living nature’ that involves the ‘living plane of the eye’, whilst exceeding the pole of the ‘subject’ (xxiv, 4). Alliez reminds us of the alternative this Goethe poses to Newton: the latter with his ‘mechanistic’ account of colour that analytically deduces colour from the decomposition of white light and detaches it from the organ of the visible, in contrast to the former for whom colour is an event within the eye that ‘brings it forth’, the inauguration of a visibility that has no necessary relation to the everyday visible world, and that ‘troubles appearances’ with its material differentiation of the sensible (p23). Thus the chapter delineates, via Goethe, a scientific image of thought as differentiated, materialist, coloristic and embodied (in a radically *impersonal* way), which will be used to frame the subsequent analyses of the five painters, each of whom will also emerge ‘against type’, through the filter of different, but closely interrelated, problems: for Delacroix, this is the ‘true hallucination of colour’; for Manet, it is the question of the plane; for Seurat, it is the ‘spectral element’ of a ‘science-art’; for Gauguin, it is ‘symbolism and decorative abstraction’, for Cezanne it is a

construction irreducible to the 'Impressionism projected onto his work by the phenomenology of art' (xxv).

Wrested from his designation as the embodiment of French Romanticism, Delacroix is presented as a post-Romantic painter who surpasses Romantic 'melancholy' with a 'vertigo of colour' through which 'expressive forces' displace "descriptive terms" and impart to painting a thickness 'more hallucinated than sensed' (p67,72). Wrested from the (post-Baudelairian) designation as a 'Painter of Modern Life', that is, as a painter applauded for his capture of the real in all its transitory being – as well as from Mallarme's attribution to him of the title of bearer of a 'new Impressionism', Manet is presented by Alliez, via the intuitions of George Bataille, as an impersonal colourist who attacks the narrativity and realist economy of the image through 'cuts' to the plane, and the violence of his brush. Wrested from the characterisation of his work (inaugurated by Signac) as 'neo-impressionist' - a designation that merely extends the (for Alliez, impoverished) identification of modern painting with the 'pictorial essence' which Impressionism unleashed - Seurat is presented as an anachronistic painter steeped in 'sterile science', one who signals the end of painting's auratic quality through a 'photo-graphic machine-eye' (90), a mechanical practice that inaugurates a scientific aesthetic of colour which displaces the incorporation of colour within any modernist purist teleology. Wrested from his reduction to a 'symbolist', Gauguin is presented as a decorative colourist, engaging the flattened aesthetic of Japanesque cloissonism in his own, idiosyncratic version of constructivism (293). Finally, wrested from his classification by Merleau-Pontyian phenomenology as a painter of lived sensations in the service of the visible, Cezanne is presented a constructivist who erects his motif via the destruction of the image (and of the images of the motifs he creates), and a colouring modulation of relations. Mont Saint-Victoire constantly differs from itself.

There is a scintillating power of innovation to these readings. The exposure of the relations between science and art in the 19th century through the lens of the problem of hallucination and other psycho-physiological theories is fascinating, as is the revelation of an obscure genealogy of 19th century French art criticism that is used to support the distinction of painting's coloristic thought from literature's use of language to articulate 'heterogeneous significations' (97). There are many moments of real brilliance in the analyses of individual works: for example, the reading of the 'extra' asparagus in Manet's *Bunch of Asparagus*, 1880 as a sign of an aesthetic supplement to the participation of painting in a modern commercial exchange.

The problem is that the reader has to work extremely hard to extract the unorthodox sense and logic of Alliez's complex project. His style – labyrinthine and fast-paced, circuitous and oblique – demands inordinate levels of energy to follow. Of course, this itself would not be cause for criticism; after all, as readers are we not obliged to work to place ourselves within the unique territory of a singular voice, and extract the ease that is concealed to an ordinary point of view? And is not, furthermore, the disorienting impact of Alliez's style indicative of its vehemently *practical* character, its staging of the effects it speaks of through an affective prose? This risk, and experiment, is to be admired. However, the relentless complexity of Alliez's language, the breathless, lateral skipping from one concept, term or figure to the next, the unyieldingly long sentences and disarmingly fluid structure, pose a serious challenge to sustained attention and obscure the driving claims. Whilst we cannot imagine the foreclosure of attention effected by Alliez's style to be altogether unintended - consistent as it is with Deleuze and Guattari's own conception of writing as a 'war machine' that forces the reader to think rather than know, and their conception of the book as a rhizomatic arrangement of connections rather than the tree-like development of an

idea - the tenor of its attack must be carefully measured if it is not to deter the reader and undermine the invitation of an engagement.

The book is informed by a staggering breadth of research. A dazzling array of voices are deftly woven together and integrated into the author's own in such a way that appears to undermine the authority of the authoring subject, whilst again exposing what Alliez perceives as a subterranean deleuzian logic within painting's history. But too often in this process, quotes and concepts are used without any sense of the original intent that informed them, uprooted entirely from their context with the seeming consequence of becoming appropriated as neutral material for the imprint of Alliez's own claims. Again, whilst this 'deterritorialisation' of statements is a hallmark of Alliez's creativity, it has the effect of reinstating the sense of authority that the cacophony of voices apparently destabilised. The positive recasting of Huysman's ambiguous evaluation of Cezanne's 'diseased retina', to support the argument for the artist's participation in the inorganic thought regime of the 'Brain-Eye', is a case in point. Thus whilst methodologically we are given the sense that Deleuze emerges as a spectral figure through an empirical engagement with the historical apparatus, it often feels to be the other way round - that Deleuze's presence is assumed *a priori*.

Art History is unavoidably implicated in this assumption. Alliez states from the outset that his subject exceeds the parameters of disciplinary concerns of either Philosophy or Art History. But this doesn't quite hold, since the implicit Deleuzianism of the work reinstates a form of philosophical supremacy over Art History. Comments such as that Seurat presents a 'difficult' to Art History because his practice deals with 'weighty notions of art and science' (190) are troubling from a number of angles, and not least because of the fact that ever since its origins the strongest work at the borders of art history have often scaled the most complex scientific summits. That Alliez also does not engage in any sustained way with the

intellectual advances within the discipline that overlap with his own concerns – with neuro art-history and neuro aesthetics as the obvious examples – also does not sit well, and imparts a certain anachronism to the conception of Brain that he develops.

More worrying perhaps, at least by the measure of Alliez's declared intentions, is that this philosophical supremacy seems to hold sway even over Art. That the book begins not with an artistic practice but with the philosophical figure of (a Deleuzian) Goethe, and that there are no images included of the works of which he speaks of in such great detail, are symptoms of this. Alliez justifies the latter, in a preface, as a deliberate refusal of the principles of 'description' and of 'illustration' whereby art is reduced to the status of philosophy's example, to instead allow the articulation of a 'plastic thought in action' (xvii). This feels disingenuous. The fact is that painting's work is manifested as actual painting, in a material reality given to be seen and felt, and not simply as a 'thought', whether plastic or bearing another image. That it is this material reality – as Alliez himself repeatedly states – that conditions the plastic thought it participates in. No painter in history would ever agree that writing about his work could provide an adequate substitution for his material work!

In conclusion then, the book's achievements are several: above all, it paves the path for a Deleuzian approach to art history, showing how it might be written, the kind of tone it might assume, and the critical displacements it makes. It provides a new philosophy of colour, and reveals how this constructivism of colour, and the logic of sensation that accompanies it, forces a rethinking of the way we understand modern painting. It offers new readings of canonical figures of modernity, that reveals the scientific and trans-pictorial register of their works and wrests them from any purified idea of the modernist form of painting.

The lingering theoretical problem concerns the question of the aesthetic implicated in painting's thought. The claim is that modern painting engages a constructivist aesthetic that circumvents the problems of aesthetic purism: the work of art participates fully in the reality of the sensible whilst effecting a construction that differentiates its work from what is given in the sensible. Alliez's placement of the art work within the scientific apparatus of its time, and in the nexus of criticism, as well as his recasting of colour as a quality that intertwines (without identifying) art and nature, are made towards this end – that is, of depurifying painting and recasting the aesthetic as an impure, heterogeneous regime. But the problem is that in Alliez's analyses of actual paintings, qualities such as colour are attended to as attributes of the painting alone with little or no reference to any reality other than the painterly. In itself of course, modulation is no less 'pure' than modelling. To convince otherwise, more analyses of the interfaces of painting's work with the life of its maker and the life of its times (beyond the intellectual edifice of ideas), that is, with the 'social', would be needed. A similar problem haunted the reception of Deleuze's *Logic of Sensation*, a text that arguably does not accede to the micropolitical, 'diagrammatic' idea of aesthetics outlined by Deleuze and Guattari a year earlier in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Alliez himself has brilliantly developed the latter in other papers: perhaps we might have seen more of that register of thought in the current text.

ⁱ Eugene Delacroix *Journal* 6th October 1822.