

Zips: Experimental Lines of Flight

Although Barnett Newman's own explanation for his paintings and sculptures seems to border on an older quasi-Kantian conception of the possible/real duality, there is an alternative, more nuanced way to read his work: as a process of marking off thresholds of intensive fields that is called Deleuzian diagrammatics.¹ In many of Newman's paintings, such as *Vir Heroicus Sublimus* [[link](#)], the fields of colors and the pulsating zips that sear through these vast landscapes can be seen as intensive sensations pushing away from philosophical and artistic domains that cling to images of thought rooted in models of recognition and binarism. Rather than resorting to such a strict dualistic logic of supplementarity—an unfortunate implication of the Kantian dualism already mentioned—Newman uses the vertical lines he called “zips” as figural tools to call up an outside that is only an outside of an inside, an outside that lacks hierarchical order, an outside that is full of rumbling multiplicities of creation present by their very irreconcilability with representational thinking and painting. We will see, then, that a Deleuzian ontological version of the intensive register aptly accounts for the philosophical status of Newman's zips.

Newman's paintings by no means follow a traditional confining logic, but actually mark off a place from which to cross given boundaries, to confuse standard orders, to subvert a logic of supplementarity. If it seems that Newman still maintains these dualities, this is only a diagrammatic technique for their very subversion. Newman utilizes the available hierarchies in order to discover a line of escape that leads back to the creative outside, to the indeterminate ground that allows for the very possibility for determination, to the virtual (non)place of originary impulses that are pure vectorial movements of speed and direction. It is here that Deleuze will be of assistance. Moreover, it is only in this very attenuated sense, I contend, that the notion of transcendence can enter.² Transcendence should be taken strictly according to its etymology, that is, as a stepping or reaching (ascending) beyond or across (trans). Even more so, given that immanence is key to a Deleuzian ontology, the movement beyond is not a move into a transcendent realm, but the emergence from one stratum or material configuration into another, or even simply the reorganization of the materials left over by the old stratum. This emergent line of escape actually removes the grip of the former stratum and thus eliminates it. Newman's paintings are transcendent not only in that they lead beyond the present social configuration and style of stratification, but also in their breaking with older patterns of behavior through a creative process of becoming. Transcendence, then, should be seen as destratification in the sense of transforming the strata. Starting with the points of division between two hierarchical components, Newman is able to transcend the strata by drawing an affective line (a zip) that cuts across predominant forms of organization in order to sort through their patterns of categorization and capture, reducing these forms to illusory apparatuses that subdue the force of life into serial catalogs of insipid redundancy.

First, some definitions. What is a zip? A zip is an immanent threshold that acts as a precipice jutting into the outside, providing a line of flight from the field of representation and the

apparatuses of capture. While a threshold is any line that functions as a site of difference between the current order of things and other potential modes of being, an apparatus of capture can be anything that aims to stratify difference, for instance by the ossification of primary and supplementary terms. Typical artistic distinctions act as such apparatuses: figure/ground, light/darkness, foreground/background, verticality/horizontality, etc. These apparatuses are closed doors that clearly distinguish us from them, up from down, heaven from earth, human from nature. This logic of doors allows only linear, vertical, human, and serial progression. The door acts as a divisive device, cutting off, and often covering up, the realm of potentiality, providing a way to cut up the world into cleanly defined categories. In fact, the logic of doors is nothing but an attempt to capture novel sensations and creative maneuvers, reduce them to a manageable size, compare them to an already established order, and normalize, normalize, normalize. The order of representation, the reduction to a predominant regime of signification, the reign of subjection, and the capture of hierarchical devices discipline the energy of life into normalized bodies. Within such hierarchies, life is chained, quartered, and heralded as a successful case of reformation of the welling chaos of existence. Desire is curbed, socialized, and brought to judgment. But this is the place to begin; and this is exactly the place for the introduction of a zip, a living critique of representational thinking. By diagramming the transversal zips that blaze through the strata of the painting, Newman is able to break free from representational painting. Deleuze offers a meticulous procedure for diagramming the line of flight out of the strata, a material moment of becoming.

Lodge [one]self on a stratum, experiment with the opportunities it offers, find an advantageous place on it, find potential movements of deterritorialization, possible lines of flight, experience them, produce flow conjunctions here and there, try out continuums of intensities segment by segment, have a small plot of new land at all times. It is through meticulous relation with the strata that one succeeds in freeing lines of flight.... Connect, conjugate, continue: a whole “diagram.”³

Newman, then, diagrams in that he indicates these moments of becoming in a painterly way, the moments of freeing up subterranean passageways that act as lines of flight. On the canvas of *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, the traces of lines of flight still burn into the paintings, clearly evincing a way out of predominant representationalism. Not every zip is the same; rather, zips are sometimes brighter and sometimes softer. In fact, the longer one looks at this painting, the more zips appear, offering more opportunities for pushing out, for producing “flow conjunctions,” for the emergence of a new mode of existence.

Representationalism, on the other hand, is the reification of identity and the subordination of difference. An identity is slapped on unclaimed (or sometimes proclaimed) territory, thereby stratifying the inherent wildness of moving vectors of life. But on a Deleuzian reading of Barnett Newman, this is not the way to establish truth. Rather, as Nietzsche says, this is the smoke and dust thrown up during a scavenging search for something to grasp when one is installed on a motile plane of pure becoming. Despite traditional claims, representational painting and thinking do not capture the truth of existence once and for all, but are instead symptoms of a life of redundancy. These symptoms reveal a way to enforce social order, to corral errancy and nomadism, and to establish a predominant regime of signs. The diagrammatic use of the zips, in contrast, does not attempt to perfectly represent the moment of becoming, but merely to mark a point where a new pattern of behavior emerges. But though it is easy to rap on and on about the atrocities of the desire to capture truth, this is only half of the picture. Once the operative elements have been located and traced over, it is time to break free from the floated traditional image of art and thought.

The function of a Deleuzian reading of Barnett Newman is to evoke the potential for destabilization so that one is able to create new sensations, new blocks of affects, new ways of conceiving of painting and life that can never be captured by a single system of signification. Rather than trying to imitate, represent, or capture, Newman marks an intensive threshold of becoming. Beneath a representational regime is a plane of imperceptible forces that traverse the face of the painting and extend beyond it infinitely in every direction. Newman's zips function as exactly these burning lines of escape to an outside that is paradoxically furthest away even while closest at hand. The outside is immanent, too close to notice from a stratified position, yet always already accessible.

A zip is a force of sensation, the instantaneous gasp and exclamation that there is always more lying beyond, that we are only given a refraction of a field of moving relations and intensities. Zips are not, however, allusory and mimetic, but diagrammatic markings of the potentialities for total immersion, for the dissolution of dualities, identities, and signification. "The meaning is the presentation, but it presents nothing"; it is pure experimentation, pure presentation, pure affectation.⁴ Newman's presentations are not signs or meanings, not words or things, but pure intensities working directly on the body *and* the eye. And this is exactly what diagrammatics presents: an intensive series of affects. Zips are the introduction of discontinuous conjunctions: the insertion of "this ... and this ... and this ...". The zips employed in *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* are points of experimentation, moments of the dissolution of identities and division, and the immersion into a plane of bleeding scarlet bursting at the seams. *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* presents nothing but a plot of land freed from hierarchical ordering, the point at which it is no longer possible to tell where the self ends and the painting begins. The force of the zip has drawn together the sign of the self and the sign of a work of art, and scrambled the codes of organization, leaving only sensations swarming back and forth. The sensation of viewing Newman's painting is a direct encounter with a multiplicity of bodies "not in so far as [they] are represented as object[s], but in so far as [they are] experienced as sustaining *this* sensation."⁵ *This* sensation is the tipping point between the imperative to represent and capture, and the chaotic outside of pure becoming.

If Newman's work has a subject matter, it is the moment of creation, or the sensation of creation itself. Out of a world of chaos a line appears, a zip presents itself. The line marks, effectuates, and ushers in a material world; it shows the fall of the dice. Newman's *Here* sculptures, such as *Here I (To Marcia)* [[link](#)], show the field of representation dropping away, leaving only two zips standing out in pulsating relief, two instants of becoming: pure differential thresholds.

Every time an artist or a philosopher has claimed to capture truth, something seeps out; some excess is always left over. When the Greeks tried to embody human beauty in their sculpture, they simultaneously indicated the corporeal deformations excised from the ideal; when Descartes tried to reduce knowledge to a stable, unquestionably subjective foundation, he also revealed his own metaphysical limitations. In every attempt to establish a majority tradition, irresolvable minorities are produced. Newman's zips are the moving matter-reality of that excess, presentations of the ineluctable failure of apparatuses of capture; his paintings move to their own rhythm, mapping the contour of the current state of affairs but also its points of failure.

Newman does not merely replace the old regime with a new one, but indicates that there is always more, that recognizable identities are only illusions draped over an incessant febrility of becoming-minor; the presentation of a living movement cutting through the red seas is the return of dis-organ-ization, the removal of organs, a flight to the body without organs.⁶ Capture will always fail; and that is exactly a meaning of the zip. With every claim to order, disorder is produced; with every subject, an unidentified other is lurking behind the black holes of an alien face. When Newman claims that the zip is the beginning, the moment of creation in *Genesis*, this can be read as the potentiality for other ways of life, different ways of thinking, alternative ways of painting. As Newman's zips are figural marks exemplifying thresholds of infinite becoming,

they convey moments of genesis, thereby revealing a subtending virtuality of all things, a pregnant potentiality for infinite multiplicities, a veritable egg. This allows a Deleuzian ontology to proclaim that something is always different than what it currently is. Every becoming is a becoming different. The zips in Newman's paintings are different sizes and colors, and these differences indicate different stages of the moments of genesis; this focus on the nuances of the genetic moment is an advantage of this diagrammatic reading. A very thin zip presents perhaps the exact moment after the initial birth, while a larger and more intensive zip presents a time a little bit after that singular moment of threshold-crossing.

This threshold is not a closed door, not a hard and fast division between what is and what will come, but a presentation of both. As Alice is simultaneously growing smaller and larger, we, the viewers standing before the painting, are caught in a moment of becoming. We find that we are multiplicities of disorganized movements leading out in every direction, rising and falling at different speeds. In looking at *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, we enter a zone of indiscernibility that can only be sensed, never said or represented.

Newman's words and works suggest a familiarity with cultural relativism, such as Ruth Benedict's groundbreaking case studies of ritualistic practices of so-called primitive peoples, and other forms of relativism circulating during Newman's active period.⁷ These case studies had a Nietzschean tendency, shedding subjectivity and autonomy in favor of opening up to the material forces erupting during "festivals of world-redemption and the days of transfiguration."⁸ This escape from signification and into the anonymous perfervidity of the outside is still applicable today. It is still possible to follow a line of escape out of the strata, always maintaining a certain escape velocity. Even today, we escape from ourselves in becoming ourselves; yet "becoming ourselves" is unique if it is given a Deleuzian-Nietzschean twist. In Deleuze's own words, becoming who you are involves

say[ing] simple things in your own name, ... speak[ing] through affects, intensities, experiences, experiments. To say something in one's own name is very curious; for it is not at all when one takes one's self as an "I," a person or a subject, that one speaks in one's name. On the contrary, an individual acquires a real proper name only through the most severe exercise of depersonalization, when one opens himself to the multiplicities that traverse him from head to toe, to the intensities that flow through him ... [to an exploration of an] infinite variety of postures and situations.⁹

From primal ritualistic exercises to painterly abstraction, there is a long trend of depersonalization that begins with the tail end of a line of flight and leads directly into the outside.

The colors on each side of the zips explode across each other, transgressing divisions, creating, plotting new spaces of land. The weave of the canvas consumes us as we consume the painting. Out of the germination of chaos a new form emerges and a new rhythm echoes forth. In Newman's introduction for an exhibition he organized at the Betty Parsons gallery in 1947, he wrote that the "artist's problem ... [is] the idea complex that makes contact with mystery—of life, of men, of nature, of the hard, black chaos."¹⁰ Newman echoes this idea elsewhere: "All artists whether primitive or sophisticated have been involved in the handling of chaos."¹¹

A zip is a plan for marking the insertion of catastrophe, an infinite experimentation with colors and lines.¹² The diagrammatic character of a zip is "an elaboration of lines that are 'more' than lines."¹³ Yet while a zip marks the catastrophic moment, it does not imply a suicidal collapse. In fact, Deleuze notes that complete catastrophe is perhaps the worst outcome: "Staying stratified—organized, signified, subjected—is not the worst that can happen; the worst that can happen is if you throw the strata into demented or suicidal collapse, which brings them baddown

on us heavier than ever.”¹⁴ “Rather than submerging further ... [it] makes us emerge from the catastrophe.”¹⁵ What is important is the becoming-different, not the mere negation of identity.

Although much of this Deleuzian reading of Barnett Newman’s paintings might seem to digress from the traditional understanding of this late Abstract Expressionist’s work, it makes an interesting twist in keeping with the outsider position that Newman held in his generation. Newman did not receive the recognition of Rothko, Pollock, and other leading figures of postwar abstract painting until late in his career. Newman always seemed to follow a different line, a more experimental one, which allowed him to escape the clear end of a generation of artists. Newman, I contend, followed a different beat that allowed him to evade the strictures of his generation and to become a thinker of the threshold leading into the chaos of the outside.

The outsider positioning of Newman in relation to the rest of his generation, however, does not fully motivate an alternative reading of his oeuvre. Rather, it is within the fissure opened up between Newman’s theoretical explanations and his actual works of art that we can insert a Deleuzian reading. It is through this opening, which offers a momentary glimpse into the virtuality subtending beyond stratified divisions, that Kant’s possible/real duality could not venture; and it is exactly in this space that Deleuze’s account of virtuality offers sufficient means for understanding the importance of Newman’s zips.

The virtual and the possible are quite different. For one, the status of the possible in relation to the real prevents the two from touching, something that cannot account for the intensive genesis that occurs at the threshold. The possible does not allow for a genetic moment; rather, the possible simply doubles the real. The real is only the possible with “existence” added to the concept. This is reminiscent of Nietzsche’s rather mocking critique of Kant’s transcendentalism: “‘How are synthetic *a priori* judgments possible’ Kant asked himself—and what really was his answer? ‘By means of a faculty.’ But is that—an answer? An explanation? Or is it not rather merely a repetition of the question?”¹⁶ That is, how does Kant’s epistemological and metaphysical account of the mind and the world justify existence and experience? Because human experience is possible! This rather playful remark actually has more philosophical importance than it might at first seem. For it becomes clear that the possible is nothing more than the mirror image of the real, a repetition of the very question that was raised. What is missing from Kant’s account is an explanation of the genetic moment. The possible, as Deleuze himself says, merely “double[s] like with like. Such is the defect of the possible: a defect which serves to condemn it as produced after the fact, as retroactively fabricated in the image of what resembles it.”¹⁷ There is no genesis; there is no spark; but only a repetition of the question, which acts as a closed door that prevents the crossing of a strict divide between the world of appearances and the world of things-in-themselves, between heteronomy and autonomy, between passivity and spontaneity, between possibility and reality.

The virtual, by contrast to the possible, does not merely mirror the real by a logic of resemblance. The virtual does not resemble the actual to any extent; for rather than consisting of stratified identities, it is populated only by differences. These differences act as the genetic moments of becoming-actual, or differentiation. The doors are thrown open, they are ripped off their hinges, and different forms of organization emerge. As one sense of order takes hold, others, infinitely many others, remain folded into each formation. All that is necessary to tap into this outside of virtual differences is a theoretical opening, a marking of becoming, a trace of difference. Actuality emerges, then, along a divergent line, reaching across an intensive threshold, as it were. Thus the actualization of the virtual differences is a “genuine creation.”¹⁸ Seen in a purely “possible” light, Newman’s paintings might fail to present such a destabilizing movement. Leaving the theoretical inadequacies of a quasi-Kantian aesthetic theory behind, the very immersion in such paintings as *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* is a violent attack on the sensibility, a shock to normal expectations. The intensive space between the outside and the strata provides enough space for this Deleuzian reading. With the emphasis on the virtual sense of sublimity/outside in mind, I will leave off with a quote from “The Sublime is Now”: “The

elements of sublimity [the outside] in the revolution we know as modern art exist in its effort and energy to escape the pattern rather than in the realization of a new experience.”¹⁹

RYAN JOHNSON
Department of Philosophy
Kent State University
Kent, OH 44240
EMAIL: rjjohns1jan@gmail.com

1. See Barnett Newman, “The Sublime is Now,” *Tiger’s Eye* (October, 1948), 51–53. In this article Newman actually seems to prefer Burke over Kant in some ways, but this is mainly due to a philosophical misunderstanding. That is, Newman incorrectly assumes that Kant does not have a strict division between the sublime and beauty.

2. The only reason to even attempt to save the word “transcendence” is because many other readers, and often Newman himself, have used the word. But with a little adjustment, the word can be saved.

3. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1987), 161.

4. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 81.

5. Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Dan W. Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 35.

6. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, chap. 6.

7. Ruth Benedict’s brand of cultural relativism; Freudian psychology; Gregory Bateson’s anthropology; and the results of the Macy Conferences were prominent in intellectual discourse in the postwar West.

8. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. William A. Hausmann (New York: Macmillan, 1924), 31.

9. Gilles Deleuze, “Letter to a Harsh Critic,” in *Negotiations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 6–7.

10. Barnett Newman, “The Ideographic Picture,” in *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 107.

11. Barnett Newman, “The Plasmic Image” (1945), in *Newman: Selected Writings*, 138.

12. Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 83.

13. Ibid.

14. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 161.

15. Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 83.

16. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, part 1, “On the Prejudices of Philosophers,” section 11 (London: Penguin Books, 1973), 42.

17. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), 212.

18. Ibid.

19. Newman, “The Plasmic Image,” 108.

Bibliography

Deleuze, Gilles. *Difference and Repetition*. Translated by Paul Patton. New York: Columbia University Press, 1968.

———. *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*. Translated by Dan W. Smith. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.

———. “Letter to a Harsh Critic.” In *Negotiations*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.

———, and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Translated by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1987.

- Lyotard, Jean-Francois. *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*. Translated by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991.
- Newman, Barnett. "The Ideographic Picture." In *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.
- . "The Plasmic Image." In *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good and Evil*. Part 1, "On the Prejudices of Philosophers," section 11. London: Penguin Books, 1973.
- . *The Birth of Tragedy*. Translated by William A. Hausmann. New York: Macmillan, 1924.