



Šarūnas Sauka. Photo Šarūnas Mažeika/BFL

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A double capture of body and life: Deleuzian reading of Sauka's pictures

Jūratė Baranova^{1*}

Abstract: This article deals with the surrealist paintings of Šarūnas Sauka (b.1958), an artist totally unknown in the West and not even broadly investigated in Lithuania. Following Deleuze, the argument for this paper concentrates on the question: can Deleuzian concepts engaged for the experimental reading of Francis Bacon's paintings also apply to the works of other artists? The author of the article proposes reading visual stories created by Sauka using the strategies Gilles Deleuze employed when reflecting on Francis Bacon's paintings. Some similarities between "dark" topics (e.g. suicide, inferno) and particularly the theme of the body and the dismantling of the organism are possible points of meeting between the two painters. "Life is frightening" is the starting point for both painters. Bacon paints the sharpness of a real scream, whereas Sauka escapes the dreadfulness of life by choosing a strategy of indirect communication and abstract humour.

Subjects: Modern Art; Regional Art

Keywords: Sauka; Bacon; Deleuze; body; life



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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Šarūnas Sauka (b.1958) is not a follower of Francis Bacon's painting. From the point of view of style and technique, Bacon and Sauka are two quite different creators. But they both had a taste for the same repeatable topics. They were both inclined to include in the narrative they created series of their own self-portraits. They both expressed a strange interest in the figures of popes.. They both demonstrated interest in some dark and difficult topics, e.g. suicide. However, the most important similarity between the two was their common interest in the body and flesh. Experimenting with the flesh and the human body they both succeeded in expressing, speaking in Deleuzian terms, the intensities of the forces of life. Their pictures are documents from two different epochs in time. Bacon tries to paint the reality of the scream, Sauka suggests viewing the reality of life as a joke.

1. Introduction

Surrealism takes different historical forms. There is French surrealism starting from André Breton's *Manifest*, of which the best examples are the works of Salvador Dalí. There is Belgian surrealism with the most interesting examples of the works of René Magritte or Paul Delvaux, and there is also the contemporary postcolonial surrealism of artists from the post-soviet region with a powerful production but lacking any global intellectual environment. Such an artist is Šarūnas Sauka (b. 11.09.1958), one of the most intriguing and challenging contemporary Lithuanian surrealist painters (and a laureate of the Lithuanian National Prize for Culture and Arts). Although Sauka is totally unknown in the West, where not a single publication on him is to be found, he is well known in Lithuania as a provocative artist. On 2016.01.15, when an exhibition of various kinds of his work (from painting to minor jewellery) was held in the Vilnius National Gallery, the crowd of visitors was so vast it was difficult to get inside. Nevertheless, it is a strange paradox that, even in Lithuania, Sauka's work has not been very widely researched. Discussion of the Sauka phenomenon has been avoided by Lithuanian art critics with the exception of two philosophers who reflect on his paintings from a distance, one a writer who is a friend of the artist, and the other his daughter, who combines semiotics with art criticism.

One's first impulse is to treat Sauka's work as a new version of surrealism. In 2001, Rimantas Dichavičius compiled the first album of Sauka's works and the expert on Islam Sufism doctor of philosophy Algis Uždavinys in his introduction *Šarūnas Sauka and the End of Classical Metaphysics* remarked that "Sauka is an unsurpassable genius of the *Inferno* in all respects and modalities, but not a surrealist pure and simple (Uždavinys 2001, p. 15).

In 2017, the second album of Sauka's paintings was published including written interpretations by authors from different spheres (see the fragment from cover page with Sauka's face in Figure 1). The writer Parulskis wrote a very personal text: "Why do I like Šarūnas Paintings?" and as an answer to this rhetorical question: "sometimes I stroll through his paintings as if I were travelling inside the structures of my own deep memory, and remembering things that I have forgotten long ago, or have never wanted to recall and name. I cannot claim that I can decode all the artist's

Figure 1. Fragment from "Station". 2010. Cover page of the album *Šarūnas Sauka*. Vilnius: Maldžio fondas, 2017.



symbols and images, or that I know what they may mean to him, but the idea of this journey is to find out what they mean to me” (Parulskis, 2017, p. 109). Parulskis also notices that Sauka: “paints human dreams, fears, obsessions, intuition, state of mind, illusions and fantasies, and does it in a more interesting and less schematic way than the Surrealist artists <...> This can generally be called a memory, archetypal memory, or simply the great deep memory from which we all emerge” (Parulskis, 2017, p. 111). Jūratė Baranova (the author of this article—also not an art critic but a philosophy professor) was the first who started to write on Sauka in cultural publications in her 2004 essay *The Threat of Hell and the Longing for Heaven: Šarūnas Sauka and Sigitas Parulskis* (Baranova 2005, pp. 77–83). She compared the similar signs of transcendence discerned by the painter and the writer. In her essay *What would Carl Gustav Jung have said about Šarūnas Sauka’s Alchemy?* included in the last album, she suggests approaching Sauka’s creation as one long dream, the dream not of one particular individual, but one that all humanity dreams again and again. Carl Gustav Jung called this invisible experience the collective spiritual life of mankind, the archetypal soul, the relation with infinity (Baranova 2017, p. 323). The traces of Jung’s insights can be detected in the characters as the painter’s own *alter ego*. Sauka seems obsessed by the motive of self-portrait in different contexts as if he is searching for his own shadow, what Jung would have called in the words of old alchemists *aliquem alium internum* (“the same other which is inside”) (Baranova 2017, p. 323). The painter’s daughter Monika Saukaitė, who graduated from master studies in Vilnius University’s Greimas’ Center and completed her PhD thesis on her father’s paintings *Narrative Strategies in Šarūnas Sauka’s Paintings* in Vilnius Academy of Arts, selected some of his self-portraits and very successfully applied the semiotic square to explain the inner narrative of some of these self-portraits (Saukaitė, 2013). In this album, she observes that Šarūnas Sauka’s paintings are not just a never-ending narrative, but also an infinite collage of references: “The illustrations for *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Dante’s *Inferno* and *The Stations of The Cross* are among the very few works which have an obvious literary prototype. Most of the others are open to different interpretations and each viewer’s personal associations, yielding stories which can interweave mythology (the world tree in *Thaw*), Christian iconography (St Sebastian in *Just You Wait!*), Western art (the women of Leonardo da Vinci, Francisco Jose de Goya and other masters in *Art is a Healer of Souls*), ancient sculpture (the battered marble figures in *Escape*), kitsch (a swan, a blonde woman and the crying eye of God in *Beauty*), pop culture (an Arnold Schwarzenegger lookalike in *Terminal Stop*), pornography (a group of women in *Murder in the Restaurant*), historical events (*The Battle of Žalgiris*) and people (Lenin in *Bothersome Dream*, Čiurlionis in the *Shade*)” (Saukaitė, 2017, p. 16). Not one interpreter in these two volumes ever mentioned the problem of the body in Sauka’s pictures. But the distorted body screaming with its naked and vulnerable intensity is possibly the main reason for the phenomenon of the ‘fear of Sauka’. But how is it possible to approach this body of Sauka? From what perspective?

2. Methodology

Does this complexity in Sauka’s paintings explain why he is not very popular among art critics? Or perhaps it is rather that some zone of indiscernibility and undecidability in his pictures badly needs a more theoretical and conceptual approach? Indeed, bearing in mind the multiplicity of perspectives in his paintings, perhaps the need is even for many different albeit incommensurable theoretical approaches? It has been pointed out that both Jung’s archetypes and the semiotic square are applicable, yet these two parallel approaches have nothing in common. Once again, Uždavinys treats the problem of body in his pictures from a transcendent perspective: “The scope of his imagination is quite astonishing, and it includes various manifestations of corruption, rotting and deterioration, usually connected with corporeality understood as the antithesis to the Christian ideal of Redemption and that of corporeal resurrection” (Uždavinys 2001, p. 15). On the other hand, is it possible to approach the signs of these bodies from the immanent perspective? It is difficult not to perceive that different variations of the visualisation of the body are at the focus of the painter’s attention. We suggest reading Sauka’s pictures from the perspective of Gilles Deleuze’s immanent empiricism. In the second volume of Deleuze’s *Cinema 2: The*

Time-Image, Chapter 8, *Cinema, body and brain* starts with the sentence: “Give me a body then: this is the formula of philosophical reversal”. What happens to the body when it is given? The body is no longer an obstacle separating thought from itself, which it has to overcome to reach thinking. It is on the contrary that “which it plunges into or must plunge into, in order to reach the unthought, that is life” (Deleuze, 1989, p. 189). Using Deleuze’s insights, an attempt to rediscover possible similar strategies of approach towards the body in Sauka’s painting was made by the author in a conference paper: *Gilles Deleuze and Artistic Research* (DARE2017). Gilles Deleuze wrote a book on Francis Bacon’s painting: *Francis Bacon—logique de la sensation* (1981). The English translation by Daniel W. Smith appeared in 2003 as: *Francis Bacon. The Logic of Sensation*. This article suggests approaching Sauka’s works using the Deleuzian concept of the body and comparing his insights when reading Bacon’s pictures to the possible articulation of Sauka’s paintings. The author also relies on the phenomenologist Alphonso Lingis’ reading of Bacon’s pictures as critical to Deleuze’s insights. The methodology used in the article relies on this comparative approach. Sauka and Bacon are two painters from different parts of the world and different personal circumstances. Sauka (born in 1958) was born in Lithuania, then part of the Soviet Union, while Bacon was born half a century earlier (in 1909) and in the free world. They chose very different or rather opposite styles of life. Bacon was born “of English aristocrats in Ireland, but disowned and thrown out by his father at the age of sixteen for his homosexuality and throughout his life indulged in a voluptuous taste for pain in the Berlin, Tangier, and London lower depths” (Lingis, 2014, p. 92-93). When in 1990 Lithuania gained its independence, Sauka nevertheless did not show any inclination to travel round the world. Coming from a well-known Lithuanian language professor’s family, he consciously chose to leave Vilnius and live in seclusion with his wife (also a very interesting painter) and two children in a small remote Dusetos village house among numerous lakes and forests. His pictures, as for example *Home Again*, often explore the theme of the secluded space of a small village house (Figure 2).

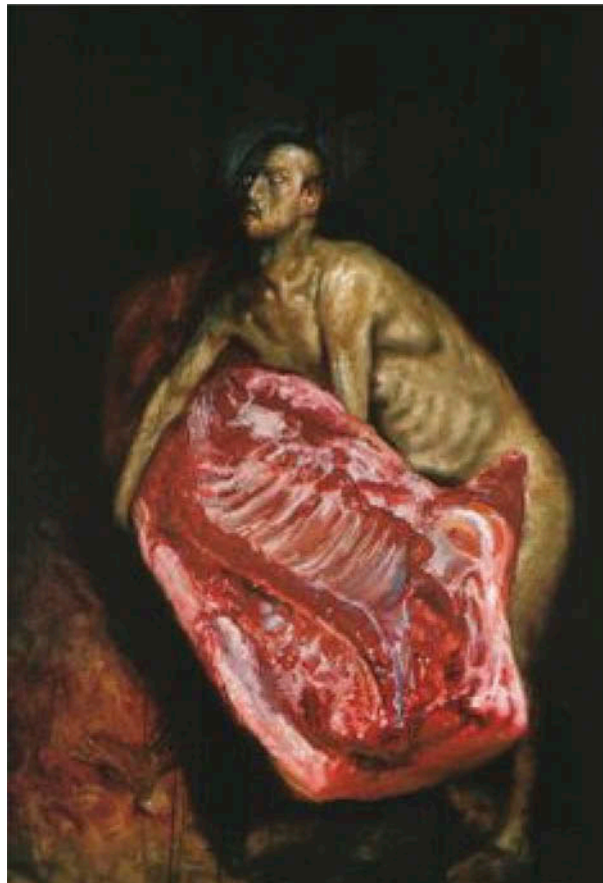
Figure 2. Sauka Šarūnas. *Home again*. 1993.



Despite their different life styles, both painters have a very critical attitude towards their own canvases. Sauka refused to give any official speech during the presentation of his picture at the presidency. In his second volume he reflected: “Actually, I feel awkward in front of people like Baranova, Parulskis and the security guard Marat in Moscow. I cannot paint and I have not painted anything like the meaningful words they have said or written about me. Every finished work frightens me. I have given myself away, and now they will denounce me as a fake. I feel guilty in front of everyone who has admired me” (Sauka, 2017, p. 112). Bacon expressed dissatisfaction with his works even more radically. Alphonso Lingis writes that: “one day, Bacon passed a gallery and spotted a picture of his that he had thrown in the garbage in Tangier. Going inside, he asked how much it cost and was told 50 000. He immediately wrote out a cheque, carried the painting outside and stamped it to shreds on the pavement (Lingis, 2014, p. 92).

Why can Sauka and Bacon be considered comparable at all? The possibility of comparing these two painters—Sauka and Bacon—arises through their common interest: both painters experimented with the pictorial possibilities of the human body. They also experimented with meat, as can be seen in Sauka’s picture *Home Again* (Figure 2, Figure 3). As Lingis observes, in Bacon’s pictures “humans are shown devoid of attitude, intention, character or effort undertaken in an environment of real things, as though flesh and meat was their fundamental reality. These bodies of meat are nonetheless alive, a zone of obscure (but often intense) sensations. They are weighted down with the weight of flesh, they are agitated inwardly, they are shaken with spasms and they scream and vomit. They are, in Deleuze’s terminology, bodies without organs” (Lingis, 2014, p. 85). In Sauka’s pictures, flesh and meat also distort the body and play a very important role. Sauka is very close to Bacon in his pictures where large pieces of bloody meat dominate, as for example in *Nap* (1992), *Head of a Pig* (1993), *Burden* (1993) [Figure 3], and *Woman has a Head of a Pig in her Hands* (1993).

Figure 3. Sauka Šarūnas. Burden. 1993.



Is it relevant to apply Deleuze's concepts of a body without organs and organism for the experimental reading of Sauka's pictures?

"Is there a coherent theory of the body in Deleuze, and if there is, what can we do with it?" asks Joe Hughes at the very beginning of the introduction *Pity the Meat?: Deleuze and the Body* to the book *Deleuze and the Body*. It seems that, in reviewing the research of the ten authors included in the volume, Hughes could not find a coherent theory of the body in Deleuze. So he concluded: "The great strength of this collection is that rather than closing the theory of the body into a definitive account of embodied life, it opens it up as a site for creative conceptual-corporeal experimentation. It shows that there are many theories of the body, each with multiple connections and applications, each with a different productive capacity, and each expanding what the Deleuzian body can do" (Hughes, 2011, p. 5). The present article is an attempt to read the signs of the body in Sauka's pictures, trying to open one more connection for creative conceptual-corporeal, or transversal experimentation. The attempt to compare Sauka and Bacon is made from the Deleuzian perspective. Similar strategies of Deleuzian reading for different types of art are not new. The twenty-first century abounds with different studies on Deleuzian approaches towards art. Ronald Bogue focuses on three branches of art in the book *Deleuze: on Music, Painting, and the Arts* (Bogue, 2003). The theoretical aspects of Deleuze and Guattari's approach towards the arts were discussed by Anne Sauvagnargues in her books *Deleuze and Art* (Sauvagnargues, 2013), and *Artmachines: Deleuze, Guattari and Simondon* (Sauvagnargues, 2016). Antonio Calcagno, Jim Veron and Steve G. Lofts published the book *Intensities and the Lines of Flight. Deleuze/Guattari and the Arts* using the principle of intersection between theory and practice. In 2010, Stephen Zepke and Simon O'Sullivan published the volume *Deleuze and Contemporary Art* in which they declared that: "contemporary art is a field of production (we would say a future) that ignores the line Deleuze and Guattari draw between concepts and sensations" (Zepke & O'Sullivan, 2010, p. 1). But Sauka's painting is not an example of the contemporary art practices Zepke and Sullivan had in mind. Sauka prefers the traditional form of painting on canvas following the inventions of classic masters. Maria Tamboukou, in her article *Deleuzian Approaches to Gwen John's Paintings*, used Deleuze's insights and concepts (faciality, forces, rhythm, form) to go deeper into the works of the rather figurative Welsh artist Gwen John (1876–1939). Tamboukou focused on Gwen John's portraits of women and girls to trace pictorial acts that moved beyond figuration and narration (Tamboukou, 2014). Sauka is also a figurative and narrative painter. Lingis noted that Bacon too is a figurative painter, but Deleuze succeeded in overcoming this aspect of his creation by means of formal concepts (e.g. rhythm) taken from other areas of reality. Body without organs, the dismantling of the organism and not least the concept of life itself are also concepts stemming from outside the pictorial sphere. Laura Junutyte in her article "Alternative overcoming of representation: F. Bacon, G. Deleuze" reflected on Deleuzian reading of Bacon's pictures (see: Junutyte, 2014, pp. 117-139). But in this article Sauka and Bacon meet for the first time.

3. Body and life

A double capture of body and life is the topic that preoccupies Deleuze's attention in many of his works. As usual when starting from Plato, thought and philosophical thinking were opposed to the reality of the body. In order to think, one must overcome this opposition. Antonin Artaud (1896-1948) turned the relation between a thought and a body upside down. He invented the theatre of cruelty, based on the new language of body gestures and opposed it to ordinary language and thought (Artaud, 1958, p. 141). On the other hand, Artaud's schizophrenic insights floated the concept of a body without organs, and Deleuze was in some sense inspired by Artaud. From theatre, Artaud expected the power to influence the aspect and formation of things and spoke about art and life as of two nervous magnetisms. "We use our body like a screen through which pass the will and the relaxation of will", Artaud writes in *The Theatre and Its Double* (Artaud, 1958, p. 138). Deleuze writes in the second volume of *Cinema*: "We are not copying Artaud, but Artaud lived and said something about the brain that concerns all of us: that 'its antennae turned towards the invisible', that it has a capacity to 'resume a resurrection from death'. We no longer believe in

a whole as interiority of thought—even an open one; we believe in a force from the outside which hollows itself out, grabs us and attracts the inside” (Deleuze, 1989, p. 2012).

In *The Logic of Sense*, he referred to Artaud’s insights on how one can reflect on the body without organs (see: Deleuze, 1990, p. 82-93). He referred to Artaud’s insights also in *Difference and Repetition* (see: Deleuze, 1994, pp. 146-148). He also returned to Artaud in the book *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* written together with Félix Guattari (see: Deleuze & Guattari, 1983, p. 8). In *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, the idea of the body without organs was transferred into a philosophical concept and integrated into the vocabulary of their invented concepts (see: Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, pp. 148-166). “I was simply enchanted by the perfect inexhaustibility of the body,” declares Deleuze. In *Cinema 2*, he also pays tribute to Artaud’s theatre of cruelty, based on body gestures, connecting it to the theoretical sources of modern cinema that he sees as the unity of image and the new thought (see: Deleuze, 1989, pp. 165-170). In the book *The Fold* reflecting on Leibniz’s philosophical insights, Deleuze also returns to the question of the body. He considers as tremendously original Leibniz’ idea that we must have a body because an obscure object lives in us (Deleuze, 1993, p. 85). In the present paper, however, the author relies on Deleuze’s insights into the various possibilities for experimenting with the body discussed in his book *Francis Bacon. The Logic of Sensation*. When describing Francis Bacon’s paintings, Deleuze, writes about the meeting between Bacon and Artaud on the surface of the body without organs (Deleuze, 2003, p. 45).

Experimenting with the intersections between life and the body is one of Sauka’s main themes. Experimentation with the body in Sauka’s pictures takes different trajectories: first of all it turns towards the body without organs and also to the dismantling of the organism. Alphonso Lingis equates the concept of the body without organs to the infantile body: “When warm, support and nourishment encounter and enter the infantile body, transitory sensations of pleasure form, and contented with this content, the body closes in upon itself. Warmed and nourished, the infantile body closes its eyes and ears and returns to the state of the egg” (Lingis, 2014, p. 84). What does this dismantling create in Sauka’s case in comparison with Bacon, if one adopts Deleuze’s insights as conceptual tools? When Sauka is painting the intensive fact of the body affected by different forces from outside and inside, he is painting the body closed in upon itself. Bacon painted the bodies of two men turned to the closed egg in a state of orgasm. Sauka also uses the image of two bodies (a man and a woman) closing into the egg in a state of orgasm, in a series of pictures, as for example *Wrestling*, and in the series of paintings *Double I* (1992) (Figure 4), *Double II* (1992), *Double III* (1996). Sauka’s experiments open up new trajectories for approaching a body without organs. It is possible to encrust a jewel into different kinds of non-organic things, even into tissue, but what if a jewel is encrusted into an organic body? An organic body encrusted with a non-organic jewel on its surface becomes an animal without the distinctive features of a human face, but with animal limbs painted into the moment of copulation.

The legs of the woman at the moment of copulation become also like the legs of some animal, her face is indiscernible in *Double III*, and in *Double II* the woman is without a head and blood is exuding through a hole in the neck like sperm.

Alphonso Lingis notes that: “what Freud called the ego, a psychic state, Deleuze and Guattari identify as the organism, the organized organism, a state of the body. It is the body whose organs have stabilized, coordinated by a posture and focussed upon a task... Deleuze and Guattari see this organism as a constrained, constricted state of the body: the organism, Deleuze says, is the prison of life” (Lingis, 2014, p. 84). Seen from the point of view of this particular methodology, therefore, dismantling the organism seems like freeing life from imprisonment.

Deleuze remarks that: “Bacon dismantles the organism in favour of the body, creating an “affective athleticism,” a scream-breath (Deleuze, 2003, p. 45). In his pictures, Sauka also

Figure 4. Sauka Šarūnas. Double I. 1992.



dismantles the organism in favour of the body. This dismantling in Sauka's pictures follows different trajectories. In one of them dismantling starts from the head. The head is a rather vulnerable part of the body in Bacon's pictures, but in comparison with Sauka the dismantling moves in the opposite direction. Reflecting on the pictures of the screaming pope, Lingis notes: "The intensive forces of this field encroach upon the central figure, but the figure also expels itself, disintegrates into the field. The top of the head of a screaming pope dissipates into the field; limbs disintegrate; a body dissolves, leaving only a head" (Lingis, 2014, p. 87).

Sauka, on the contrary, separates the head from the body. In his early picture *Self-Portrait with a Plum* (1983), the decapitated head of the artist with a plum in his mouth elegantly lies on a cushion and gazes into the spectators' eyes. The possible Salome grieves in the background (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Sauka Šarūnas. Self-Portrait with a plum. 1983.



In *Self-Portrait No 2* (1983), the main protagonist still has a head, with the left eye gazing attentively at the spectator, but the cushion with his decapitated head floats in the dark space before him. Two additional duplicates of the same head lie on the red floor (Figure 6). Deleuze reflected upon this phenomenon of a split body and, following Bacon's reflections in his interview, described it as internal and external "autoscopia," meaning the sensation that "it is no longer my head, but I feel myself inside a head, I see and I see myself inside a head; or else I do not see myself in the mirror, but I feel myself in the body that I see, and I see myself in this naked body when I am dressed...and so forth" (Deleuze, 2003, p. 49).

In Sauka's pictures the head is very vulnerable—it can be decollated even by a banana (*Banana Bites off Man's Head*, 1995), but in this execution the women as usual play the main role.

In the picture *Mum* (2012), one can see a possible execution (Figure 7). The resigned alter ego of the artist (Sauka uses his self-portraits in the complex compositions) kneels with his head on the chopping block waiting for the execution. The headsman waits with a kitchen axe for the chicken to be beheaded, but, unlike the main *alter ego* of the artist, he is already without a head himself. Beheaded chickens with human heads embedded in place of their own and dressed in old clothes as spectators are also on their knees watching the execution. The women are placed at the top of the hierarchy but seem unimpressed. In this early painting, Sauka as usual paints beheaded men, but in later ones there are beheaded women. In *Uncertainty* (2013), the beheaded women are standing in the left and right parts of the picture as if in the sun on a beach near the sea.

In the series of pictures with the title *Travel to Rome* (2013), naked women are standing and offhandedly holding their heads in their hands as if they were prosaic umbrellas (Figure 8). But these heads do not appear to belong to the women's bodies. They are much more like heads of Mephistopheles. As Deleuze notices, following Beckett's *Characters* and Bacon's *Figures* escaping from the organism, the body escapes from itself. "It escapes from itself through the open mouth, through the anus or the stomach, or through the throat, or through the circle of the washbasin, or through the point of the umbrella" (Deleuze, 2003, p. 50).

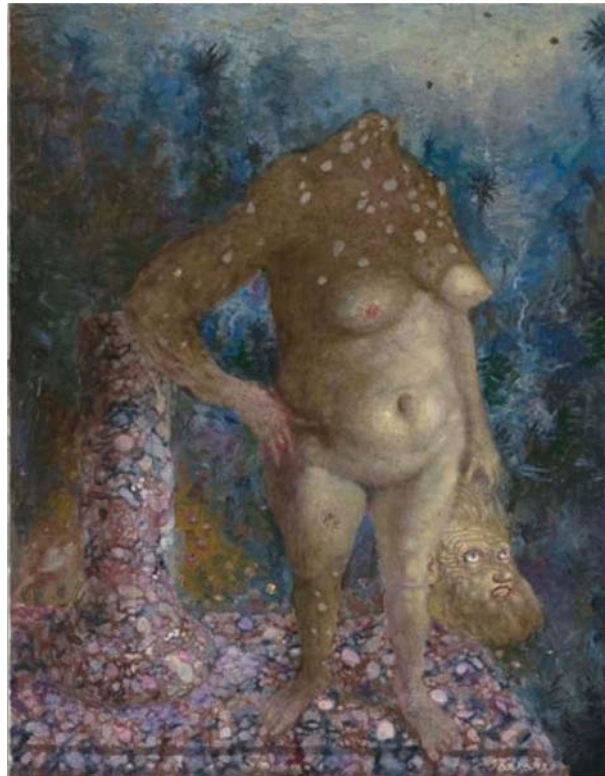
Figure 6. Sauka Šarūnas. Self-Portrait No 2 .1983.



Figure 7. Sauka Šarūnas. Mum. 2012.



Figure 8. Sauka Šarūnas. Travel to Rome. 2013.



It also escapes from itself by transforming into an animal's body. "Bacon painted howling monkeys, slinking dogs, owls, elephants and also heads with crooked rodent teeth, animal heads on humans and humans becoming animals" (Lingis, 2014, p. 90). Sauka also painted humans with the heads of pigs or rabbits (e.g. *An Evening by a Bonfire*, 2015), a huge standing monkey with an enormous penis gazing like a human at the spectator (*Are you fuookin' crazy man?* 2015) . But the most popular animal in Sauka's pictures is already dead and beheaded: a supermarket chicken, an animal to be consumed,

and in some sense to be sacrificed (*Chicken*, 1989). He embeds his own self-portrait into the already cold body of the chicken and uses this motif in different pictures.

In the *Inferno* (1991–1992), describing the possible tortures in the inferno, the artist paints one of his suffering *alter egos* as waiting to be cooked in a dead chicken's body (Figure 9). Another of his *alter egos* in the same picture is hanging with limbs bound like an animal waiting to be sacrificed. Sauka identifies the inferno with the transformation of huge numbers of different bodies into bodies without organs, bodies becoming meat. These are beheaded bodies, half bodies, bodies with open viscera, bodies with flayed skin, or with their own heads in their hands, bodies swimming in the river of their own blood in the moonlight of the viscera from other bodies. The inferno is the orgy of bodies swallowing each other. The inferno opens when half of your body has become a sausage or the belly of a pig stuffed with minced meat, very appetising and prepared for eating. In this way one is seduced into one's own body. Is this not a scene very close to Artaud's theatre of cruelty? Some observers discern too great a concentration on cruelty in Sauka's paintings. In some sense Sauka's "theatre of cruelty" is supposed to produce shock in the same manner as Artaud's in order to revitalize the world we live in. Artaud wrote: "Everything that acts is a cruelty. It is upon this idea of extreme action, pushed beyond all limits, that theatre must be rebuilt... The theatre must give us everything that is in crime, love, war, or madness, if it wants to recover its necessity" (Artaud, 1958, p. 85).

In 2010, the Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė decided to hang one of Sauka's pictures *A Painting for the Millennium of Lithuanian's first mention* (2007–2009) in the presidential palace, and explained to the astonished public her intention of demonstrating a conceptual attitude towards Sauka's painting: "The picture inspires different thoughts. It is as complicated as the course of Lithuanian history. I would like to provoke the public with it".¹ The public reacted by taking offence, and responded to the president with the rhetorical question: "We have rather difficult lives. Why provoke us with this terrible painter?" Bacon's paintings also received similar reactions. When in 1945 Bacon exhibited his first painting *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*, John Russell reacted to it: "Images so unrelievedly awful that the mind snaps shut". "We had no name

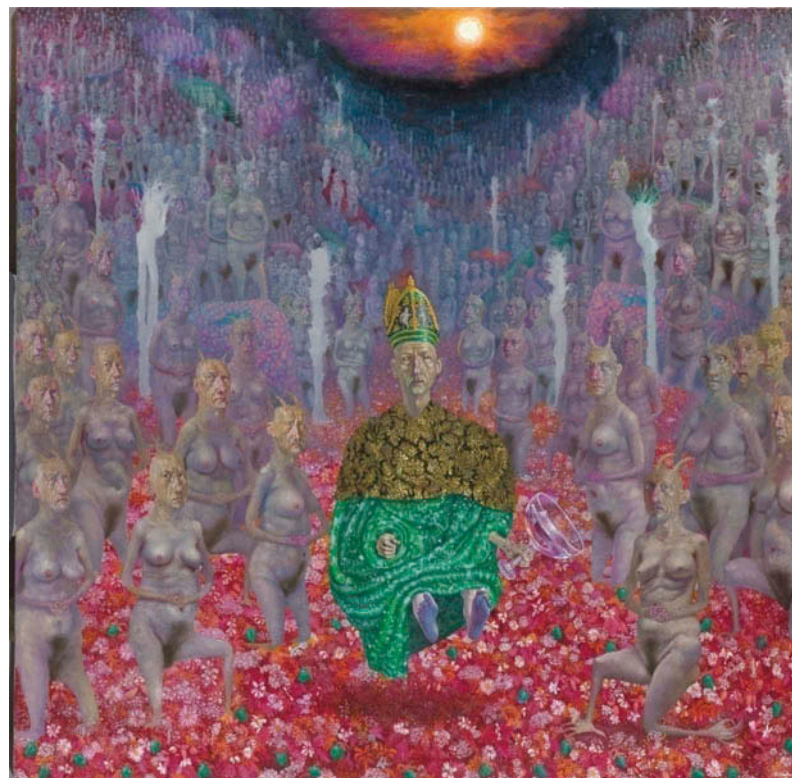
Figure 9. Sauka Šarūnas.
Inferno. 1991–1992.



for them, no name for what we felt about them” (Lingis, 2014, p. 91). After the publication of an article in the Lithuanian press interpreting the phenomena of cut heads in Sauka’s pictures stemming from the Biblical stories of Judith and Salome, one of the readers from USA reflected: “without reading in advance where the images of Sauka are coming from we are not able to understand them. His pictures do really attract us but we just stand open-mouthed. I think one of his forerunners is American painter Ivan Albright”. It is doubtful if Sauka ever saw even copies of Albright’s pictures. In any case, Sauka, like Bacon and Albright, can be named as a “dark” painter. As Lingis points out (in fact criticizing him): “instead of seeing in Bacon’s paintings violence, degradation and pain, Deleuze sees primal and superabundant life. Yet Deleuze also says that the fundamental emotion in Bacon is not a taste for horror, but pity” (Lingis, 2014, p. 86).

“Pity the meat! Meat is undoubtedly the chief object of Bacon’s pity, his only object of pity...,” Deleuze notes, reflecting on Bacon’s paintings (Deleuze, 2003, p. 23). But this is not true for Sauka. Sauka does not feel pity for meat. He does not feel pity for anyone. He is joking. He is sarcastic. Becoming animal and becoming meat is like a comic event. One can conclude that Sauka, like Bacon, does not have a taste for horror. He has a taste for seeing life as a lasting comedy. The inferno is a sarcastic picture of *socium*, a parody, a caricature. Including the painter’s personal self, Sauka’s pictures are telling stories. They are figurative. From the point of view of Lingis, Bacon is figurative as well. Lingis disagrees with Deleuze’s formal reading of Bacon’s pictures through the concept of rhythm escaping the figurative aspect and by this—the overcoming of representation. Lingis says: Bacon tells the story and one can recognize people he was painting. Even the pope is a concrete pope from a Velasquez picture. Sauka in the picture *A Trick* (2011) also uses the figure of the pope levitating in the company of strange creatures probably from his secret parish (Figure 10). And the main figure of the pope in Sauka’s picture is also concrete—he is his *alter ego*. But the idea of the picture has nothing to do with reality, and androgynous creatures with women’s bodies and devil’s heads are as if from a mystical world.

Figure 10. Sauka Šarūnas. *A Trick*. 2011.



“Sometimes,” Deleuze notes describing Bacon’s pictures, “the human head is replaced by an animal: but it is not the animal as a form, but rather the animal as a trait—for example, the quivering trait of a bird spiraling over the scrambled area...” (Deleuze, 2003, p. 21). In such pictures, according to Deleuze, Bacon is painting a zone of indiscernibility or undecidability between man and animal. Man becomes animal, but not without the animal becoming spirit at the same time, the spirit of man, the physical spirit of man presented in the mirror as Eumenides or fate. It is never a combination of forms, but rather the common fate: the common fact of man and animal” (Deleuze, 2003, p. 21).

Sauka first of all, is experimenting with multiplied images as simulacra of his own image of body, with his own face and his own fear of the crowd. Some critics accuse Sauka of painting Christ with his own face in his series of pictures *Stations of the Cross* (1998–2001).

The priest of the village he lives in refused to take the *Stations of the Cross* to the Church, encouraging the inhabitants of the village to react to Sauka’s paintings with a hail of rotten eggs. Christ carries Sauka’s face (Figure 1), but the animals and the murdered chickens in his other paintings also carry his face. Christ seems very far from the animals, but on the other hand, is there such a big difference between the sacrifice of an animal and the sacrifice of a man? Bacon was also obsessed with the images of the screaming pope. He painted forty-five images of Velasquez’s pope screaming.

Deleuze in *Cinema 1 The Movement—Image* does not see a great distance between Christ and the ass from Robert Bresson’s movie *Balthazar* (*Au hasard, Balthazar*), for the reason that the ass only knows the non-choices or the effects of the choices of men. The ass is not able to choose, but he is also not able to choose to betray. He is innocent. “Thus the ass is the preferred object of men’s wickedness, but also the preferential union of Christ or of the man of choice” (Deleuze, 1986, p. 116).

It does not appear that Sauka feels sad because of the common fate of man and animal. He looks at this common fate as a joke. He paints a little pig presented for dinner, already cooked and seemingly very tasty. But in the picture *Murder in the Restaurant* (1999–2000), he also paints himself presented for dinner instead of the little pig (Figure 11). The artist’s *alter ego* lies on a large table and a crowd of hungry women are greedily tasting and ready to

Figure 11. Sauka Šarūnas. *Murder in the restaurant.* 1999–2000.



consume his already beheaded body. As is usual, man takes the skin from a dead animal and uses it for his everyday needs, including clothes. But what if the man takes the skin from himself? What is it to take off one's skin just before going to sleep, if as usual all other garments are taken off? In the picture *Going to Bath* (1993), the artist's alter ego has already removed the skin from the lower part of the body and is taking the last step—removing the upper skin as if it were a shirt.

The same happens in the picture *Love* (1995) in which the artist's alter ego is going to bed with a very seductive woman, who looks like she is from a Goya picture. Sitting on the edge of the huge bed, he has already succeeded in taking the skin off the lower part of his body. The same happens in the picture *Group Entertainment* (1992) in which a group of men are going to entertain themselves by taking off their skin (Figure 12). They do not appear to be overly frightened at the sight of the open meat of their bodies and surroundings. Neither do the figures in Sauka's other pictures appear scared. There is no athleticism in his pictures, no hysteria, and Sauka is not painting the "scream", as Bacon did.

In any case, both Bacon and Sauka are trying through their experiments with the painted bodies to catch the inner autopoiesis of life. This capture of life through a body returns to the question of what the relation is between the subject and his or her body. Slavoj Žižek discerns two traditions in answering this question. For such thinkers "as different as Francisco Varela, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Heidegger, who all search for the unity of body and subject, the point at which the subject directly 'is' his or her body" (Žižek, 2004, p. 121). Against this tradition stands the Cartesian tradition which says: the body exists in the order of *having* -I am not my body, I *have* it, and this gap renders possible the Gnostic dream of Virtual Reality in which I will be able to shift from one to another virtual body" (Žižek, 2004, p. 121) According to Žižek, Deleuze—the last great philosopher of the One—with his notion of the "body without organs" that thrives in the multitude of its modalities also belongs to the first group. But, according to Varela, this autopoietic, notion of life always resides in the question "how are we to pass from this self-enclosed loop of Life to (Self)Consciousness? Organic biological Life and self-consciousness are two different things. To prove the emergence of spirituality from material body cells is a great topic for philosophers dealing with it. But the painter has direct access to life through the means of the body and flesh. To reflect in an image is a different but much

Figure 12. Sauka Šarūnas.
Group Entertainment. 1992.



Group Entertainment
Group Entertainment
1992

easier solution than to prove the secrets of life by means of argumentation and thought. Bacon and Sauka by their experiments with bodies simply jump in the middle of the problem and come to their own conclusions.

Bacon had a very clear idea about what life is saying: “Life is so violent; so much more violent than anything I can do” (Lingis, 2014, p. 93). “Life is frightening,” Deleuze also quotes Cezanne’s insight as an important point for connecting life with the arts. “Life provides many ambiguous approaches to the body without organs,” Deleuze notes, and suggests the examples of alcohol, drugs, schizophrenia, sadomasochism etc., asking the rhetorical question when reflecting on Bacon’s paintings: “But can the living reality of this body be named ‘hysteria’, and if so, in what sense?” (Deleuze, 2003, p. 47). As one of the responses to the frightening life in arts, Deleuze diagnoses hysteria as the symptomatic clinical essence of painting as art, because it is based on pure presences. The colour system itself is a system of direct action on the nervous system. This is not the hysteria of the painter, but the hysteria of painting. For painting, hysteria becomes art, Deleuze concludes (Deleuze, 2003, p. 52). Music does not have hysteria as its clinical essence, but is confronted with galloping schizophrenia: it strips bodies of their inertia, of the materiality of the presence: it disembodies bodies.

In Sauka’s paintings one can discern the same inspiration as Bacon and Cezanne observed: “Life is so violent”, “Life is frightening.” But unlike Bacon’s attitude, Sauka has in mind not real, but imaginable, mythical and mystical Life. In a picture, the painter overcomes possible hysteria with the forces of humour. The crowd is always funny in Sauka’s pictures: like characters from vaudeville. But even more important is his “higher irony” that he demonstrates by creating and multiplying the ridiculous personage of himself. Is it irony or humour? Irony, as Søren Kierkegaard revealed, is indirect communication (Kierkegaard, 1989). Irony is usually connected with verbal or situational order (see: Colston Herbert & Gibbs, 2007). Irony is considered as a language trope and is the topic of literary studies (see: Eastham, 2011). Deleuze saw a difference between irony and humour. The problem with irony, from Deleuze’s point of view, is its elimination of all difference—its inability to admit what is beyond its point of view. And it is this ironic ascent that has dominated Western thinking. But “in humour, the self appears less as an organised agent or organising subject and more as a collection of incongruous body parts. Think of the humour of the clown with outrageously large feet, or slapstick comedy where the body collides with a banana skin or entwines itself around the deckchair it attempts to assemble. Beckett makes use of this antsubjective aspect of humour. In addition to conflicts of logic in his dialogue, he also writes classically comic movements of bodies: bodies that fall over banana skins, that struggle with ladders, tapes, dustbins and stuffed toys. The self is no longer a subject, an absent synthesizing point of view, but an ad hoc, disconnected and disrupted connection of movements. The language of humour is less oriented to meaning—some sense behind the physical word—precisely because words are repeated as so much automatic or mechanical noise. Humour takes the human subject back or “down” to its corporeal origins (Colebrook, 2005, p. 135). Sauka’s humour sometimes comes very close to sarcasm, sarcasm that is directed towards others, mocking others, revealing what is funny in them. But at the same time the use of self images in the pictures of the comedy of life brings self-mockery into play, saying: the creator of vaudeville is the funniest of all. He becomes like the cockroach from Franz Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*. Trembling, he stands on his four feet on the ceiling of a country house, like a fly or some other insect as the artist’s *alter ego* in the picture *Escape* (Figure 13).

In 1973 Bacon painted the *Triptych of George Dyer*, his former lover who committed suicide. In the left panel, we see him naked and dead on the toilet, as he was found after his successful suicide in 1971. Bacon continued to paint Dyer for nine years after his suicide. The topic of suicide is also the theme of some of Sauka’s pictures. Again, the main protagonist of these pictures is Sauka himself: his *alter ego*. The plot is not real (the painter cannot paint the picture in the case of

Figure 13. Sauka Šarūnas. Escape. 1990.



a successful suicide). It is imagined and sarcastic. He makes a joke because of the pompous pretension of such a deed.

The main protagonist is at the centre of a huge canvas, trying to commit suicide by swallowing gas from a kitchen gas cylinder (Figure 14). The comic side of the situation is the large balloon at his back inflating because of the gas. The potential suicide is not alone, being surrounded by a crowd of his own multiple alter egos, and other characters who pay no attention to him. Sauka's picture seems to illustrate Alasdair Macintyre's insight about the life of a person being lived upon a stage: "We enter upon a stage which we did not design and we find ourselves part of the action that was not of our making. Each of us being a main character in his own drama plays subordinate parts in the dramas of others, and each drama constrains the others" (Macintyre, 1992, p. 213). This tension between an exceptional individual and the indifferent crowd that seems to have nothing to do with the drama of the main protagonist is a constant motif in Sauka's pictures. Bacon's bodies in his pictures, as Lingis, points out, are alienated and completely isolated (see: Lingis, 2014, p. 86). The bodies of the main protagonists in Sauka's pictures are sometimes surrounded by vast crowds of identical characters. Even if the crowd consists of different faces, the main protagonist has no connection with it. Bacon's bodies are isolated in an empty space, whereas Sauka's are isolated in a crowd.

4. Conclusion

Sauka is not a follower of Bacon's painting. From the point of view of style and technique, Bacon and Sauka are two quite different creators. But they both had a taste for the same repeatable topics. They were both inclined to include in the narrative they created series of

Figure 14. Sauka Šarūnas.
Fragment from 'Suicide'. 1995.



their own self-portraits. They both expressed a strange interest in the figures of popes. Bacon created forty-five distorted figures of Velázquez' screaming popes. Sauka painted himself in the role of the levitating pope. He also presented his own face in the figure of Jesus. They both demonstrated interest in some dark and difficult topics, e.g. suicide. However, the most important similarity between the two was their common interest in the body and flesh. Experimenting with the flesh and the human body they both succeeded in expressing, speaking in Deleuzian terms, the intensities of the forces of life. On the other hand, their pictures are documents from two different epochs in time. Bacon tries to paint the reality of the scream, Sauka suggests viewing the reality of life as a joke. Robert Garnett in his article *Abstract Humour, Humorous Abstraction* indicates as a vital fact "that we cannot in the twenty-first century believe in art in the same way that Bacon did. We cannot believe in Bacon's 'cry' anymore—and after the joke-Event of Duchamp and Dada it is arguable as to whether it was believable in the first place. Art can't shock and traumatise us in the same way anymore. Art's affectivity and effectivity is today of a different and more 'pre-posterously' humorous order" (Garnett, 2010, p. 193).

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Note

1. (See: <https://www.lrp.lt/en/press-centre/photos/21462/dalia-grybauskaite-attended-presentation-of-sarunas-saukas-painting-dedicated-to-the-millennium-of-lithuania/a183>).

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