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Can One Paint Criminology?

Ronnie Lippens, Keele University

Interviewed by James Hardie-Bick, Keele University



Peter & Paul

© Ronnie Lippens oil on
canvas 61 X 71 c

JHB: I would like to start by asking you about the title. Why did you decide to call your painting *Peter and Paul*?

RL: I suppose it's about the origins of things, of the world actually. St Peter was, of course, the rock on which the Church was to be built –hard, tough, fixed ... but also: seminal, the origin, the source of creation. But can lifeless, rigid rocks be creative? Can they bring things about? Could Peter's rigid, rock-like codes ever have been creative? Where is Peter in the painting? Is he the figure on the left? Is he unstructured raw matter, like the earth, or like a rock? Or is he hidden in the uncompromising structures (ancient Law?) on the right? Let's take St Paul. Paul is a different beast altogether, but again a very ambivalent beast. Paul's mission was to universalise Christ's message. There's a certain element of flexibility implied here: 'Alright, we'll have to adapt'. The rock that we had, or we once thought we had, let us ditch it and put something else in place. Let's be a bit more flexible, because otherwise we won't be able to convince and persuade others to join us. But the ambivalence in universalism is, 'alright we need that element of flexibility but let's not have too much of it'. St Paul's doctrine too was very dogmatic. There is a bit of flexibility in the sense that we're going to ditch the old rock, the old law, but that's about it. But the new law is as irremovable as the last law. So where is Paul? Is he the figure on the left ... the slightly dynamic, ready-to-compromise, ready-to-bend-the-rules figure on the left? He might be. St Paul was ready to bend the existing rules in order to propagate, beyond the rock, if you wish, of ancient Law, what he thought should be Christian doctrine. But he could just as easily be in the strictly divided spaces on the right of the picture. Paul's universalism, admired by 21st century critics such as Slavoj Zizek, engendered a life denying, very rigid, very divisive form of life. His was a *Crime against Life*, said Nietzsche. So where is Paul, then? And where is Peter? I don't know.

There's a little Deleuzoguattarism in the painting. Is the figure on the left fleeing from structure? Is he or she on *lines of flight*, is he or she *becoming other*, becoming *minor*, becoming newness? Or is this figure actually creating law and code, is he or she actually creating new *forms of life*, new law, new code? In short: is the *striated space* (or coded space) of the law producing interruption or indeed resistance, or is sheer unformed chaos –there are no dividing lines in the figure on the left- engendering structure instead? Or is it both? To put it differently: is the figure on the left (i.e. the openness of existence, the indeterminacy of existence) creating law and code, or is it actually dismantling, unsettling them? And if we look from right to left: are the structures of law and code (Mondrian, anyone?) in turn generating the chaos, the openness, the indeterminacy of dissent and resistance. Or are they just over-coding the latter, making them disappear as it were in their striated space?

So that's basically the topic. You have smooth space (or the un-coded) everywhere, unstructured, undetermined, and out of this smooth space structures crystallize, or striated space (coded space) emerges. But the latter are bound to disintegrate in turn. The question then of course becomes, which was first? Do we first have a code out of which then unstructured non-code emerges? Or was it first a non-code out of which then the code emerged? This has criminological relevance. Take murder. Is that a coded thing? Is that a structured thing? There are reasons to say that of course they are coded and structured, you know, they are the result of all sorts of structured spaces that come together, and that have produced this outcome. But on the other hand, you could say: no, despite all sorts of coded structures, things emerge, things happen. And this is a topic that I think criminologists have been very uncomfortable with and haven't thought through all that much and I thought, well, let's express that.

Oh, and here's another possible theme in the painting: 'crime versus law'. Or: 'crime as law'. Or again, 'law as crime'. But where is the crime? Is it in resistance? If it's not resistance, is it the primordial and creative *élan vital*, as a Bergson would have had it? Or is it in the divisive codes of law and order? I don't know.

JHB: *The first thing I found to be most striking about your painting is the eye, or at least what appears to me to be an eye, and I was wondering about what kind of significance the eye has.*

RL: It's an eye because I wanted to make clear that this is a reflecting entity. It is what we could call a self. The mix of colours is important. Is the whirl of the self in the painting – a mix of blue, yellow, red and there's even a tiny little bit of white if you wish- is the self the source of the structured code on the right hand side of the painting? Or is the self the outcome, the product of those structured codes? It's the same colours that appear. But here again, this relates to the first question, where is Peter and where is Paul? I don't know where they are, but the colours are the same.

JHB: *You see your painting as divided into the left hand side and the right hand side?*

RL: Yes, to be perfectly honest that's a very good comment because I couldn't see or feel how I could have done it otherwise, my imagination doesn't stretch that far, but I see your point. In the ideal picture there wouldn't have been that difference.

JHB: *I actually thought this was an intentional strategy to address issues concerning intersubjectivity. We can see the presence of one person, but we can't see anyone else, but to a certain extent, the other is still present. What drew me towards that interpretation was the clear connection between the left hand side and the right hand side of the painting. The colour red is bursting out and overflowing from one side to the other. There does seem to be some kind of connection.*

RL: Yes, that is true. I'm quite happy that you mention this connection here. When I painted it I wanted to make exactly that connection. My wife actually said to me that it looks like an umbilical cord, and yet I hadn't actually thought about it like that. When I painted it I just wanted to make the connection saying that something very blurry happens between the self and what's outside and, you know, we don't really have a way of putting our finger on it, on what exactly it is that happens. And I wanted to make that clear. But the umbilical cord, it's a bit too strong a metaphor, but I saw her point. Of course we all know that the umbilical cord goes in one direction, but supposing the umbilical cord goes in two directions.

But to go back to your previous question, I'm still not convinced that there must be two sides, I still think that there was a lack of my imagination that caused me to paint two sides, but I agree with you on the substantial point that you make because to some extent I wanted also to express the self, that we are all selves, hence the eye, but that there is also a space, an indeterminate space in here, the yellow bits here [around the eye and down into the torso], an empty thing – *nothingness*, existentialists might say, nothingness as the location of emergence. There's also a bit of whiteness, not just in the self, but everywhere, and the whiteness is nothingness. Nothingness generates us, human beings that have

nothingness in us, but there is also nothingness out there. Within the structures there is nothingness. We imagine them to be rock-like structures, but actually they couldn't be there without emptiness or nothingness in them.

JHB: *And how does this relate to the self?*

RL: There are some people that say that the self is just the result of what we go through, the sum total of our experiences with others or with the imagined others. My position would be that well, I'm ready to accept that to a certain extent, but we are not the sum total of what we encounter. The most important thing in our self is that which we don't know anything about: it's that zone of emptiness. It is what happens and what is present in every moment of our waking life. Every moment of our life is made up, largely, of a void like emptiness.

In the painting the self is actually indistinguishable from its surroundings ... and yet, it is clearly separate. It builds itself from elements in its environment and thus to some extent it is indistinguishable from the latter. But at the same time it is singularly separate from the world that's surrounding it. It has its own singular structure, its own singular law and code. On the other hand it's also very unpredictable, very chaotic, and, to a very considerable extent, very indeterminate. There's a lot of non-determined and indeterminate *nothingness* in the self. The boundary between self and world then is, quite possibly, undecidable. Which means that in life, and in human affairs in particular, one never knows what's going to happen next. Yes, of course, I see the trajectories that we all went through in our biographies, the experience we had, etcetera. That's all very fine, very nice and all very important. But we are still left with that vast void of emptiness. This means that human life is to a very significant extent unpredictable and indeterminate and that's our relation to the other. Are we just the effect of our experiences with the other, with others? No, we are more than that. We are actually, to a large extent, nothing.

JHB: *Sartre's work is clearly relevant here and this is something I think we should come back to, but before we do I would like to ask you about what I felt was one of the strongest themes of your painting, that of order and chaos, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say chaos versus order. Is that something you wished to convey with the painting or is that something that just emerged out of the process. Did chaos emerge out of order or did order emerge out of chaos?*

RL: Very good question! Yes, practically speaking, that was exactly what happened, because of course when I originally painted the figure on the left hand side there was much more chaos with colours actually merging into each other and it could have been a total mess, and it was! It was a completely terrible mess and the picture didn't look right. So I had to find my way around it and I came up with this idea where the colours indeed sort of flow into each other but they don't really merge and mix and produce a terrible unsightly mess. So the idea was there but I had to simplify it. There is still a certain messiness in the painting though. There are colours that overflow structure. There are things overflowing and that cannot be kept within bounds.

But yes, indeed: the 'chaos versus order' theme. But which –chaos or order- is the location of the origin of the world, of events, etc? Complexity or chaos theorists know: the origins are in chaos. But perhaps things are a bit more complicated than that. Where's the origin of events? Is it in the chaos of the flesh, or in the chaos of desire, or is it in the order of

law? It is tempting to read unformed chaos as the origin, but could structure in turn originate events, if only perhaps in the form of resistance?

JHB: *I felt the way the colours sometimes overflowed could be seen as highlighting the contingent nature of existence that was so central to Sartre's philosophy.*

RL: It's also to do with the practicalities of painting. You have a confined space and a number of colours, I decided to only use four. Then when you have painted a certain corner of the painting in a particular colour, then that produces certain kinds of constraints and you have to take account of them. But to be perfectly honest I think this is such a good question because it refers to something that I was not really conscious about when I did the painting. Although no sooner had I painted the painting, then I myself indeed realised that a number of colours were overflowing all over the place. The red, the colour of blood, it's everywhere. Blood meaning in this context just life, the life force and now we're talking Bergson, and I was not conscious of that when I painted it. There was something about the red though, I knew there was something special about the red and only when it was completely finished did I realise that the life force must have been in the back of my mind when I painted it.

JHB: *There are probably others, but Sartre, Bergson and Deleuze and Guattari are the four philosophers who seem to be the most relevant to the themes you address. You've already spoken about Deleuze and Guattari. Could you say a little bit more about both other philosophers and how their work directly relates to some of the themes we've been discussing?*

RL: Yes, but let's remind ourselves of Deleuze and Guattari's smooth and striated space first. That was one of the things which were on my mind when I was working on the painting of course. The problem here is that particular powers always tend to over-code whatever it is that's emerging. They themselves –i.e. the powers that are doing the over-coding- are of course also emerging from the same life force. All to no avail, as there will come a time when they will all disintegrate again because that's what the life force is about. Now I think that about 80% of Deleuze and Guattari comes from Bergson, and Bergson is in the painting, very much so. This constant overflowing, but also the life force that is doing all sorts of things including producing striated space and powers that then try to over-code the very origins from which they came. So this sort of movement would be a Bergsonian movement. So this is the connection with Bergson and Deleuze and Guattari. The connection with Sartre of course is the void and the emptiness, and the void and the emptiness is something I consciously thought about. Right in all the bloody messiness of the world, there is that sort of white, empty space. White represents nothingness, the zone of sheer indeterminacy.

JHB: *Was there anything else in Sartre's philosophy that could be relevant here? In particular, I was thinking about 'the look' and the significance of being seen by another person in Sartre's philosophy.*

RL: Not when I painted it. Now that you mention it, yes! But not when I painted it. When I painted it I was thinking more about the reflecting subject, the pondering subject, the deciding subject. That is why I painted the eye. But your remark is a very apt one. There's

one eye in the painting and the painting has been inspired by Sartre, but it's not the gazing eye that I had in mind when I painted it.

JHB: *Aside from writing his philosophical works such as *Being and Nothingness*,*

Sartre famously wrote plays, novels and short stories to convey his philosophy. Do you feel that painting can also offer an interesting and accessible way to express philosophical ideas?

RL: Yes, the real theme of the painting is about trying to answer the question - can we paint criminology? Because, you know, I'm not the only one, there are many people who feel that language, academic language in particular, is no longer able to grasp what the issues in life are about. So we must look for other ways that may be able to express more aptly what life is about. And yes novels and plays are fine, but that's still language. It may be better than academic language, but it's still language. So can we do it another way? Or maybe we need to do both, as we are, in this interview! Sculpture you could do, but, as it happens, my thing is painting. I feel that sculpture is more conceptual than painting. You have a number of things that you want to express and then you throw things at the canvas. A lot of stuff in painting is unreflective. That is the important bit, because it's closer to what the experience of life is about. One of the things that Bergson said is that there are no moments in life as every moment would be indivisible or indistinguishable from the next. One of the things this means is that if there is a moment that moment is infinitely full of all sorts of things. If that is the case, and if the moment is limitless and if we accept that nothing is able to completely grasp it, can we at least go beyond the structures of language to get a bit closer? Maybe painting can get us right at the moment of experience itself. So that was my idea.