

The Cry of the Ear

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Abstract

The anatomy theatre of human and non-human bodies is the subject of an essay that probes the relations of visual art to performative portraits of painful, often sado-masochistic deformities of figuration. Francis Bacon: *Man and Beast*, exhibited at London's Royal Academy Art (2022), opens up a vast, and hugely disturbing, spectrum of works by a painter who was fearless in drawing out the contorted and dissolving shapes of subjects—male, female, animal, biomorphic—that might be considered characters in mythic, tragic and melodramatic political or erotic spectacles. Except that Bacon's characters are brutalized and victimized by love and desire that haunt us like a silent scream, unheard or inaudible in paint, yet still screaming in the face of our embarrassed recognition of distress, of violence endemic in nature and our "empty power, field of death" (Artaud). The essay looks at Bacon as a theatrical impresario, an experimenter and calculating freak-show director down nightmare alley.

Keywords: Earbody, deformation, sado-masochism, animality, crucifixion

The labyrinth of the ear—the cochlea—takes us into an inner vibrational world.^[1] A spiral-shaped cavity, the cochlea resembles a snail shell containing nerve endings that are essential for hearing. The ear inside also provides our sense of balance. The antechamber to the Royal Academy's exhibition, *Francis Bacon: Man and Beast*, with the solitary display of the early *Head I* (1948), already unsettles such balance. It has the capacity to throw the viewer off completely. A head and upper torso, dark interior space of body



Francis Bacon, *Head I*. Oil on canvas, 1946. Oil and tempera on board, 100.3 x 74.9 cm. Photo courtesy of Royal Academy of Art

trickling down and becoming wider, a sprawling thicket as in the early *Figure Studies* from the mid-1940s, shown in the next room, where grass and flowers sprout, where large bodies are hunched over, partly covered by floating herringbone coat and umbrella, gaping mouth hole peaking out from wildflowers. The mouth as ear, listening.



Figure Study II, 1945–46. Oil on canvas, 145 x 129 cm

In *Head I*, lines run across, as if wiry frames or pipes. Scorched landscape extends torso. Certain motifs emerge from the very beginning: one pronounced ear, a violently twisted mouth with crooked teeth, an amorphous blurred face with distorted chin, a whitish blotch of hippopotamus skin, a tassel hanging from above, faint outlines of architectural boundaries. Our ears hurt, there is no real defense against outbreaks of brutality, invasiveness, rape and fury; crucifixions hollow us out from the start, with the second painting (from 1933) shown next—ghostly ectoplasms vanishing off from the remainder of thin arms, legs, ribs.

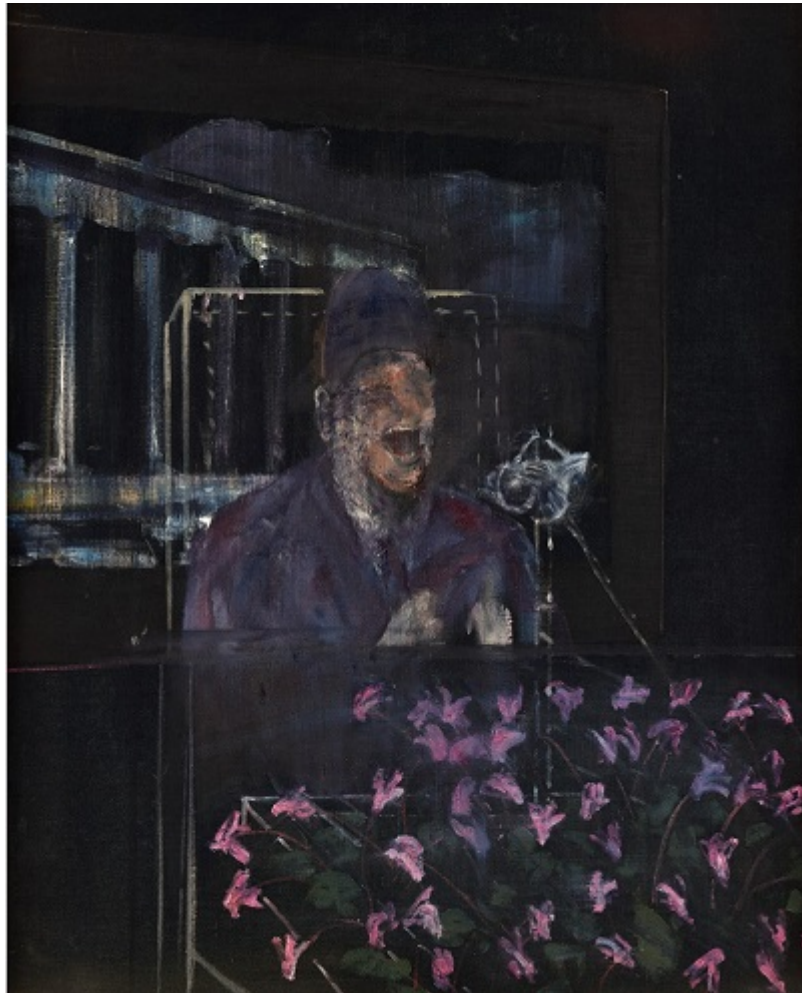




Crucifixion, 1933. Oil on canvas, 62 x 48.5 cm. *Fragment of a Crucifixion*, 1950. Oil and cotton wool on canvas, 140 x 108.5 cm

What hold on our imagination has this particular painter had, of the many twentieth century artists that challenged our perceptions and assumptions. Unlike the cubists, surrealists and abstract expressionists, Bacon has been a painter of figural nightmares and iconoclasm. Being thrown off balance: it happened already on the way to the Royal Academy, when I stopped at Gagosian Gallery to walk into a black-curtained dark corridor, with one single, dimly lit painting of the “first pope” at the far end, the eyes needing time to adjust. We face a purple-clad figure in a cage, mouth wide open as if shouting into a microphone, down below the attentive masses painted as pink cyclamen, with mighty Roman columns hovering in the back, perhaps linking the pope to Mussolini and Hitler, Eichmann in his glass booth, with current strongmen in the European theatre and elsewhere in the world brutalizing us in renewed phantasmagoria. War time, time of false, loud lies. This “landscape” was painted shortly after World War II, which Bacon spent in South Kensington, helping to rescue bodies from the wreckage of bombing. Before the war, and after having grown up on his irascible military father’s horse farm in Ireland during World War I, Bacon spent time with mentors in thrilling Weimar Berlin, where he encountered museums and galleries, and a wild night life with transvestites and prostitutes of every sex, shortly followed by his move to Paris where he delved into the art

of the surrealists and the hot spots of queer clubs in Montparnasse, but also coming across the abattoirs at La Villette. Violent father, homosexual desire, libertine nightclubs, wars and carcasses in plain sight at the slaughterhouses—this is in part the adventurous adolescent palette of the young furniture maker and interior designer, who took late to painting, claiming he hadn't made any art of interest before 1944. At that point his father and two of his brothers had already died. In 1949, interviewed by *Time*, he expressed his “desire to paint like Velázquez but with the texture of hippopotamus skin.”



Landscape with Pope/Dictator, c. 1946. Oil on canvas, 140 × 110 cm

The curators also tell us, in the section “Wildlife,” that Bacon spent time in South Africa in 1951–52, visiting his widowed mother and two sisters, becoming entranced for a while by vast horizons and wilder animals moving “through the long grass,” as he notes in his letters. In his London studio, numerous photos and books were found attesting to his continuing interest in animals; not least he also began to develop a passion for bull fights, stunningly staged in Room 6 where the curators assemble three fascinating studies of entanglements—enfleshment between bull, matador and cape, twirling shapes of color and contorted merged bodies, with a hinted choreography of ejaculation—white gobs of paint splashed onto the canvas, in one version, a shadowy blob of bull or dried blood in another, watched by crowds behind, now no longer cyclamens but an anonymous mass under a standard. A wall text confides that Bacon thought of “bullfighting, like boxing, as a marvelous aperitif for sex.”





Second Version of Study for Bullfight No. 1, 1969. Study for Bullfight No. 1, 1969. Oil on canvas, Oil on canvas, 197.7 x 148 cm, 198 x 147.5cm

The Royal Academy exhibition is large—eight rooms with 45 paintings spanning Bacon’s career from early works of the 1930s/1940s through to the final painting he ever made in 1991 (*Study of a Bull*)—and takes us through an increasingly disconcerting sequence of powerful, often brutal figural studies of human and animal landscapes. Portraits of flesh, bones, skin and contorted sexual vibratory scenes. Theatrical nightmares of tragic proportions, but here rendered in stilled form, with all the implicit motion quieted and arrested. The sadomasochism and queer figural biomorphism—Bacon reveling in his often pronounced (self) crucifixions of meat and carcass—indeed the sheer extremity of distorted bodyscapes is arresting and at times breathtaking. The biographical details are known, also continuously hinted at in the curators’ wall texts, yet do we need to know whether Bacon felt boxing or *corridas* were an aperitif for sex? Do we need proof of Bacon having seen Eisenstein’s films, or having engaged in sado-masochistic practices with lovers who chained him to the bed?

We hear howls and screams, feel voluptuous curves, muscular torsos, intimate ventriloquisms in shadowy embraces between man and monkey (*Head IV, 1949*), nude female figures convulsed and sprawled out, flesh polymorphously unboundaried (*Portrait*

of *Henrietta Moraes on a Blue Couch*, 1965), with predatory owls and other birds descending upon us: animal and human bodies in distress, yet the re-occurring ear supplying a pronounced opening, providing continuity, like a strange wandering womb, “animal within animal,” as the Greek physician Aretaeus surmised when diagnosing strange symptoms moving throughout the body.

Is painting ever silent? The echo ear^[2]—hole, sexual organ, anus, vagina dentata. A strong and even wounded icon in this mythicizing iconography. In *Second Version of Triptych 1944*, painted in 1988 with a background color changed from orange to blood red, a birdsnake-like creature is seen crouching on a table (on the right panel), its long-stretched neck ending in no face, merely howling mouth, a gaping.

Naturally, Bacon may be trying to outdo Velázquez, Picasso, Munch, Giacometti, Bellmer, the Surrealists, and all the others around him (like Lucien Freud), stealing ideas from books on animals and birds, Muybridge’s chronophotographic locomotion studies, Freud’s studies on hysteria, Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* and the Greek tragedies (Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*). Hysteria a wandering womb, as ancient doctors thought, and Freud and Charcot also surmised in their studies (at the Salpêtrière, the face became evidence of scientific inquiry, a recordable state of signification, as Charcot claimed, constructing portraits of hysterical madness as evidence). These influences can be obvious or implicit, yet they hardly matter in view of the gripping physical affect these works have on us, images that Bacon hoped could attack “an area of the nervous system to which the texture of paint communicates more violently than anything else.” Bacon is indeed a visceral artist not bothered to speak frequently of instincts, and highly charged sensations, his attraction to martyrdom or the bloody reverberations of furious vengeance in Greek drama. He was a literary painter and theatrical impresario but also an experimenter and calculating freak-show director down nightmare alley. His scenes are all staged, one could say, for grim affect, death or departure of male lovers stirring occasions to make guilty, yearning, malevolent portraits.

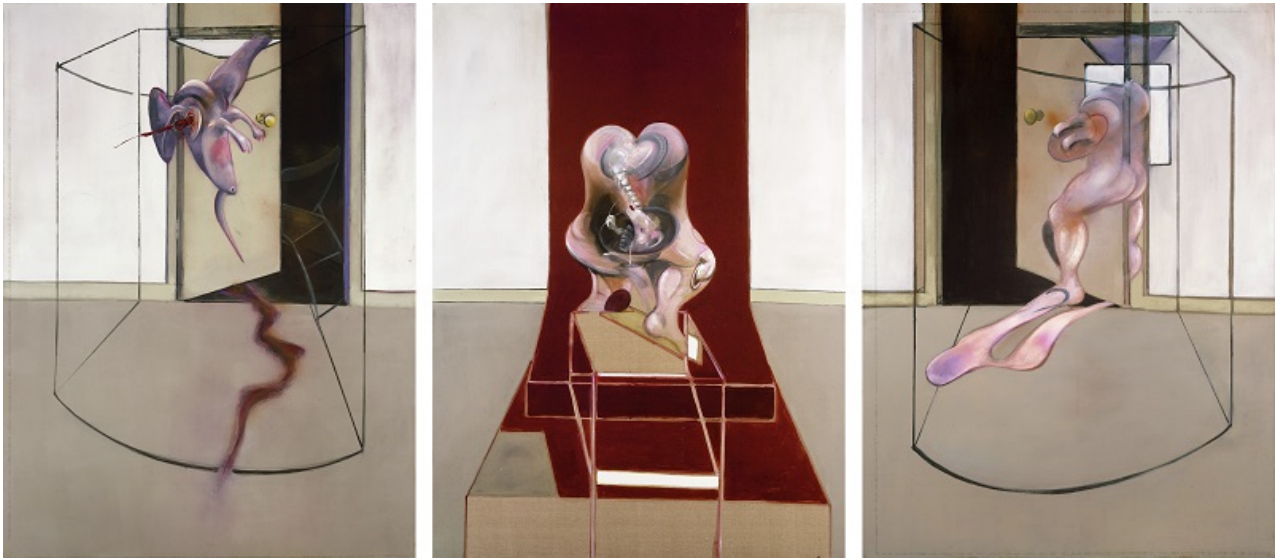
One is thinking of a kind of theatre of cruelty, after Artaud. The French theatre visionary’s drawings, made during his stay at the psychiatric hospital in Rodez, in fact came to mind frequently when walking through these rooms: *Pour en finir avec le jugement de dieu*. At Rodez, Artaud painted many self-portraits of his face, *le visage humain*, dissolving and reconstructing it, blotching it out with black ink, this “empty power, field of death,” as he referred to it.^[3] Bacon also ploughs the field of abject disfiguration—the faces of the portrayed, for example, Peter Lacy, George Dyer, Isabel Rawsthorne, Henrietta Moraes, are all agonizingly dis-shaped.



Triptych August 1972. Oil and sand on canvas, 198.1 x 147.3 cm each

Thus, Deleuze's or Agamben's notion of "becoming animal" is philosophically overwrought; in fact, Deleuze's *Logic of Sensation*, when I first read it, seemed heavily overtheorized. Why not allow Bacon's instinctiveness, and his brush and colors, to affect "an area of the nervous system to which the texture of paint communicates more violently than anything else," as he is quoted in the wall texts? Mouth and ear in *Head I* (1946) anticipate many of the mouths and ears in later paintings, orifices and snake-like elongated necks with curved chimpanzee human visages, and the hearing of an imaginary cry or scream seems to haunt Bacon's painting, from the crucifixion studies to the Popes and the later figure studies of biomorphic and choreographic wrestlers, bull fighters, tightrope dancers, animalistic hybrids and transmogrified furies that would be shown in his triptychs of the 1960s and 1970s. Bacon's insistence on drawing a finely executed ear (not cutting his own off, as van Gogh maniacally did after a fight with Gauguin, then giving it to a prostitute as a token of his affection, as legend goes) is intriguing since it addresses the silence in the visual—with torment never actually imaginable without sound.

Man and Beast is structured into a "re-appraisal," as the catalog introduction by long-term Bacon friend Michael Peppiatt (who co-curated with Sarah Lea and Anna Testar) calls it. Bacon's well-known vision of tormented bodies hardly needs reappraisal, and



Triptych Inspired by the Oresteia of Aeschylus, 1981. Oil on canvas, 198 x 147.5 cm each

yet, each time curators refocus our ways of looking or listening, a more disturbing innate bestiality and violence, lurking under hippopotamus skin, might be sensed, instinctively.

Observing recurring motifs in the paintings is a different matter, though, as one begins to collect shapes of animality or caged-ness, or wonders what bestiality now means, in the era of a potential third world war. We are lost, and wandering through the exhibition one is painfully drawn to pondering the idea of the triptych, and what for example *Triptych Inspired by the Oresteia of Aeschylus* conveys to us, the cochlea hovering on the left panel. This ear, we are told by the wall text, is inspired by *The Birds* (*Life Nature Library*) and photos of pelicans diving into the sea.

Bacon's triptych is leaking blood and suspending earbodies, I would argue, forcing us to listen to our imagination of the tragic being kept alive in a forceful manner, whatever our deeper associations with our animality within animal.

Note

The exhibition *Francis Bacon: Man and Beast* was shown at Royal Academy of Art, London (29 January–17 April, 2022). I wish to thank Michèle Danjoux for her insightful comments and provocations that inspired this writing.

Endnotes

[1] "My painting is all about myself, my thoughts and feelings, and what are called the 'moeurs' of my times . . . I think one makes this kind of huge well inside oneself and images keep rising out of it the whole time" (qtd. in Peppiatt 23–24). Michael Peppiatt has also written the introductory essay for the exhibition catalog: *Francis Bacon: Man and Beast* (12–37). All references to the exhibition's wall texts are also found in the catalog. Further inspiration was derived from David Sylvester (1987).

[2] For a long time it was thought that what happened when sound waves hit the cochlea was simply passive—the physical structure of the cochlea sorted the sound waves spatially according to frequency; the nerves of the cochlea then signaled the intensity of each frequency to the brain. After World War II, however, Cambridge scientist Thomas Gold proposed a radical new theory in which the cochlea’s response to sound also included the production of sound itself—a kind of feedback—and the interaction between the incoming sound and the self-produced sound gave much more accurate frequency information to the brain than the passive cochlea could manage. Although Gold’s theory was soon found to be scientifically correct, and the sound produced by the cochlea could be demonstrated and even heard outside the ear, it took over 40 years for the idea to become accepted and for the true sophistication of the hearing mechanism to be appreciated. Compare with Thomas Gold (49–58). Thanks to cognitive roboticist Owen Holland for this inspiring reference.

[3] Compare to Stephen Barber (88–92).

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