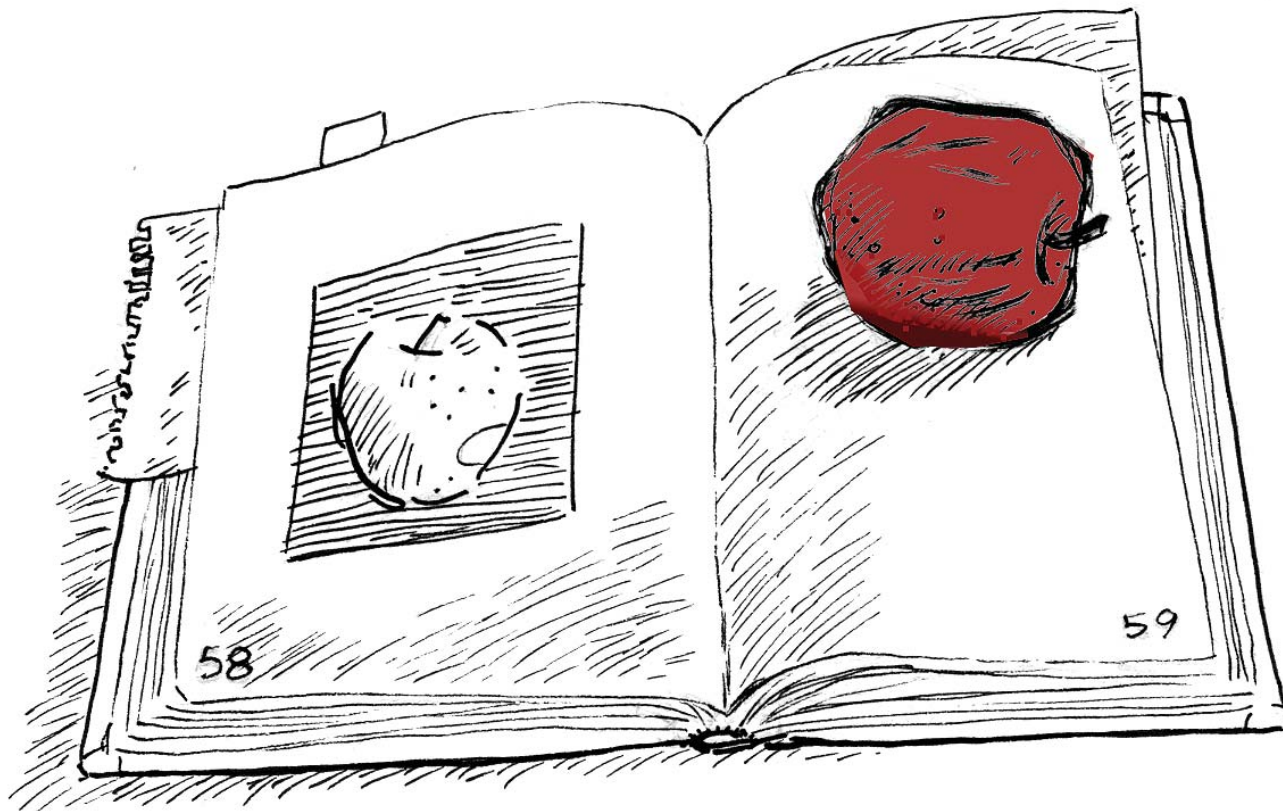


Comparison/Contrast Pattern



Comparison / Contrast

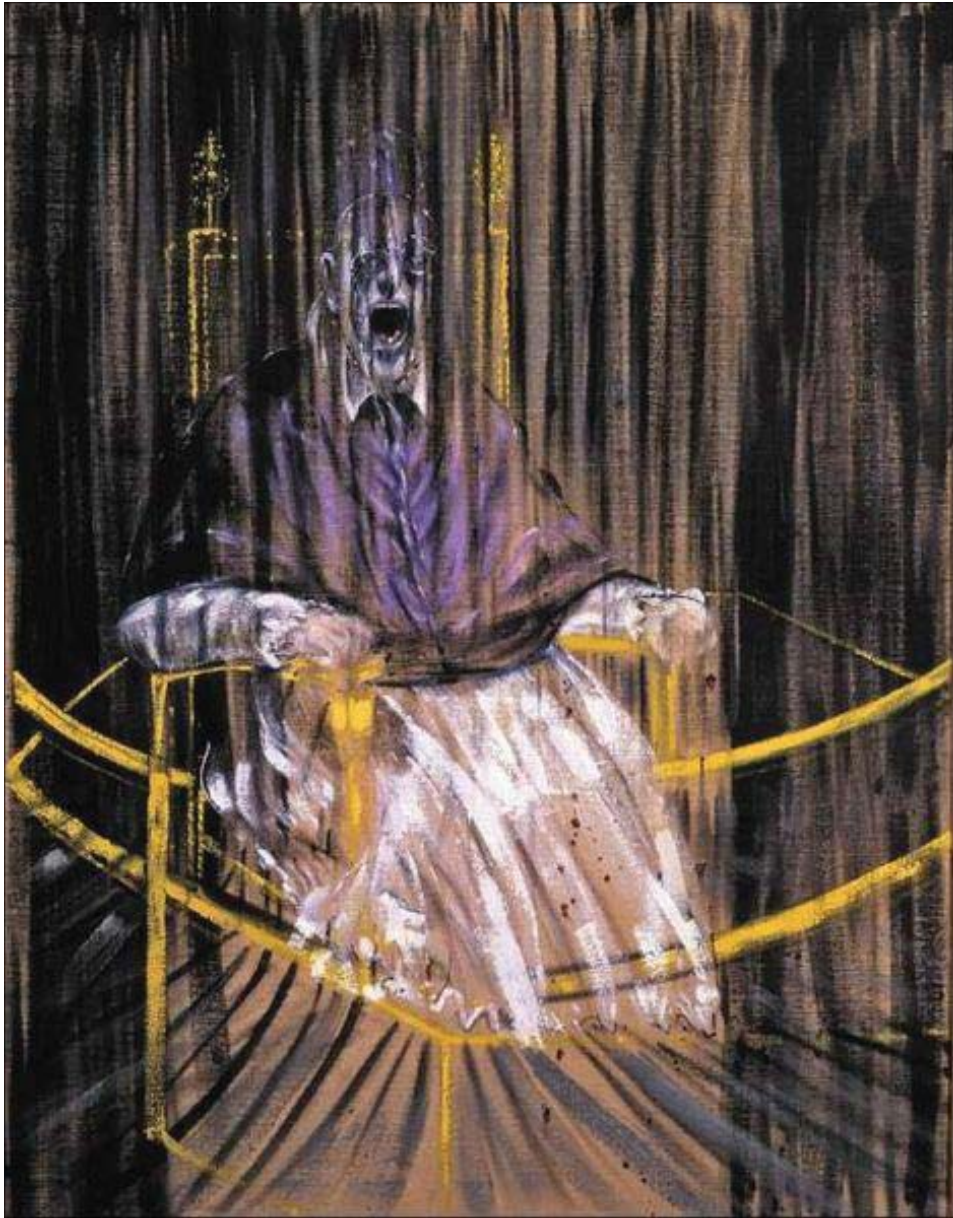


Portrait of Cardinal Filippo Archinto attributed to Titian.



Portrait of Pope Innocent X by Velazquez.

Comparison / Contrast



A Study of Velázquez' Portrait of Pop Innocent X.

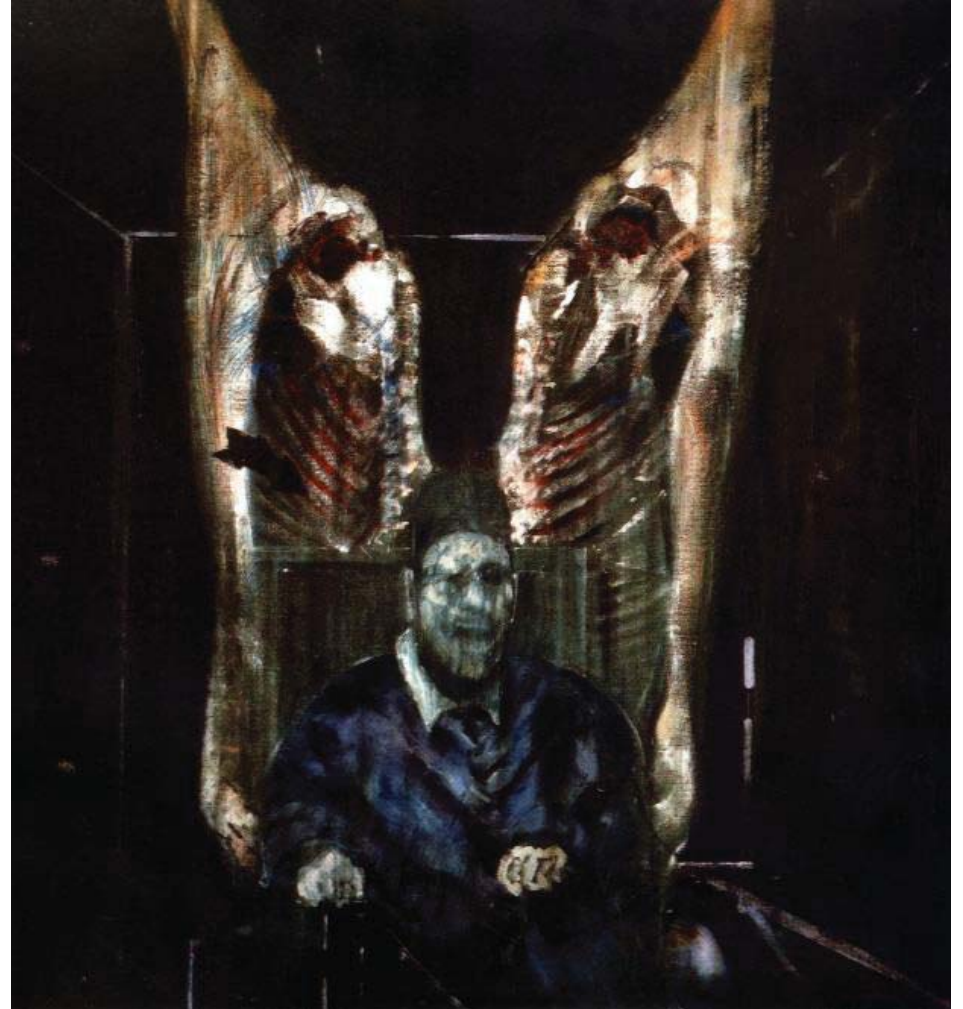


Figure with Meat

Comparison / Contrast



Seated portrait of male figure
by Francis Bacon

Comparison / Contrast

***Francis Bacon and Walt Disney* || John Berger**

A blood-stained figure on a bed. A carcass with splints on it. A man on a chair smoking. One walks past his paintings as if through some gigantic institution. A man on a chair turning. A man holding a razor. A man shitting.

What is the meaning of the events we see? The painted figures are all quite indifferent to one another's presence or plight. Are we, as we walk past them, the same? A photograph of Bacon with his sleeves rolled up shows that his forearms closely resemble those of many of the men he paints. A woman crawls along a rail like a child. In 1971, according to the magazine *Connaissance des Arts*, Bacon became the first of the top ten most important living artists. A man sits naked with torn newspaper around his feet. A man stares at a blind cord. A man reclines in a vest on a stained red couch. There are many faces which move, and as they move they give an impression of pain. There has never been painting quite like this. It relates to the world we live in. But how?

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To begin with a few facts:

1. Francis Bacon is the only British painter this century to have gained an international influence.
2. His work is remarkably consistent, from the first paintings to the most recent. One is confronted by a fully articulated world-view.
3. Bacon is a painter of extraordinary skill, a master. Nobody who is familiar with the problems of figurative oil-painting can remain unimpressed by his solutions. Such mastery, which is rare, is the result of great dedication and extreme lucidity about the medium.
4. Bacon's work has been unusually well written about. Writers such as Davis Sylvester, Michel Leiris and Lawrence Gowing have discussed its internal implications with great eloquence. By 'internal' I mean the implications of its own propositions within its own terms.

Bacon's work is centered on the human body. The body is usually distorted, whereas what clothes or surrounds it is relatively undistorted. Compare the rain-

Comparison / Contrast

coat with the torso, the umbrella with the arm, the cigarette stub with the mouth. According to Bacon himself, the distortions undergone by face or body are the consequence of his searching for a way of making the paint ‘come across directly on to the nervous system.’ Again and again, he refers to the nervous system of painter and spectator. The nervous system for him is independent of the brain. The kind of figurative painting which appeals to the brain, finds illustrational and boring.

‘I’ve always hoped to put over things as directly and rawly as I possibly can, and perhaps if a thing comes across directly, they feel that it is horrific.’

To arrive at this rawness which speaks directly to the nervous system, Bacon relies heavily on what he calls ‘the accident.’ ‘In my case, I feel that anything I’ve ever liked at all has been the result of an accident on which I’ve been able to work.’

The ‘accident’ occurs in his painting when he makes ‘involuntary marks’ upon the canvas. His ‘instinct’ then finds in these marks a way of developing the image.

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A developed image is one that is both factual and suggestive to the nervous system.

‘Isn’t it that one wants a thing to be as factual as possible, and yet at the same time as deeply suggestive or deeply unblocking of areas of sensation other than simple illustrating of the object that you set out to do? Isn’t that what art is all about?’

For Bacon, the ‘unlocking’ object is always the human body. Other things in his painting (chairs, shoes, blinds, lamp switches, newspapers) are merely illustrated.

‘What I want to do is to distort the thing far beyond appearance, but in the distortion to bring it back to a recording of the appearance.’

Interpreted as process, we now see that this means the following. The appearance of a body suffers the accident of involuntary marks being made upon it. Its distorted image then comes across directly on to the nervous system of the viewer (or painter), who rediscovers the appearance of the body through or beneath the

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marks it bears.

Apart from the inflicted marks of the painting-accident, there are also sometimes painted marks on a body or on a mattress. These are, more or less obviously, traces of bodily fluids—blood, semen, perhaps shit. When they occur, the stains on the canvas are like stains on a surface which has actually touched the body.

The double-meaning of the words which Bacon has always used when talking about his painting (accident, rawness, marks), and perhaps even the double-meaning of his own name, seem to be part of the vocabulary of an obsession, an experience which probably dates back to the beginning of his self-consciousness. There are no alternatives offered in Bacon's world, no ways out. Consciousness of time or change does not exist. Bacon often starts working on a painting from an image taken from a photograph. A photograph records for a moment. In the process of painting, Bacon seeks the accident which will turn that moment into all moments. In life, the moment which ousts all preceding and following moments

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is most commonly a moment of physical pain. And pain may be the ideal to which Bacon's obsession aspires. Nevertheless, the content of his paints, the content which constitutes their appeal, has little to do with pain. As often, the obsession is a distraction and the real content lies elsewhere.

Bacon's work is said to be an expression of the anguished loneliness of western man. His figures are isolated in glass cases, in arenas of pure colour, in anonymous rooms, or even within themselves.

Their isolation does not preclude their being watched. (The triptych form, in which each figure is isolated within his own canvas, and yet is visible to the others, is symptomatic.) His figures are alone, but they are utterly without privacy. The marks they bear, their wounds, look self-inflicted. But self-inflicted in a highly special sense. Not by an individual but by the species, Man—because, under conditions of such universal solitude, the distinction between individual and species becomes meaningless.

Bacon is the opposite of an apocalyptic painter who envisages the worst is likely.

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For Bacon, the worst has already happened. The worst that has happened has nothing to do with the blood, the stains, the viscera. The worst is that man has come to be seen as mindless.

The worse has already happened in the *Crucifixion* of 1944. The bandages and the screams are already in place—as also is the aspiration towards ideal pain. But the necks end in mouths. The top half of the face does not exist. The skull is missing.



Comparison / Contrast

Later, the worst is evoked more subtly. The anatomy is left intact, and man's inability to reflect is suggested by what happens around him and by his expression—or lack of it. The glass cases, which contain friends or a Pope, are reminiscent of those in which animal behaviour-patterns can be studied. The props, the trapeze chairs, the railings, the cords, are like those with which cages are fitted. Man is an unhappy ape. But if he knows it, he isn't. And so it is necessary to show that man cannot know. Man is an unhappy ape without knowing it. It is not a brain but a perception which separates the two species. This is the axiom on which Bacon's art is based.

During the 1950s, Bacon appeared to be interested in facial expressions. But not, as he admits, for what they expressed.

In fact, I wanted to paint the scream more than the horror. And I think if I had really thought about what causes somebody to scream—the horror that produces the scream—it would have made the screams that I tried to paint more successful.

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In fact, they were too abstract. They originally started through my always having been moved by movements of the mouth and the shape of the mouth and the teeth. I like, you may say, the glitter and colour that comes from the mouth and I've always hoped in a sense to be able to paint the mouth like Monet painted a sunset.

In the portraits of friends like Isabel Rawsthorne, or in some of the new self-portraits, one is confronted with the expression of an eye, sometimes two eyes. But study these expressions; read them. Not one is self-reflective. The eyes look out from their condition, dumbly, on to what surrounds them. They do not know what has happened to them; and their poignancy lies in their ignorance. Yet what has happened to them? The rest of their faces have been contorted with expressions which are not their own—which, indeed, are not expressions at all (because there is nothing behind them to be expressed), but are events created by accident in collusion with the painter.

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Not altogether by accident, however. Likeness remains—and in this Bacon is this Bacon uses all his mastery. Normally, likeness defines character, and character in man is inseparable from mind. Hence the reason why some of these portraits, unprecedented in the history of art, although never tragic, are very haunting. We see character as the empty cast of a consciousness that is absent. Once again, the worst has happened. Living man has become his own mindless spectre.

In the larger figure-compositions, where there is more than one personage, the lack of expression is matched by the total unreceptivity of the other figures. They are all proving to each other, all the time, that they can have no expression. Only grimaces remain.

Bacon's view of the absurd has nothing to do with existentialism, or with the work of an artist like Samuel Beckett. Beckett approaches despair as a result of questioning, as a result of trying to unravel the language of conventionally given answers. Bacon questions nothing, unravels nothing. He accepts the worst has happened.

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His lack of alternatives, within his view of the human condition, is reflected in the lack of any thematic development in his life's work. His progress, during 30 years, is a technical one of getting the worst into sharper focus. He succeeds, but at the same time the reiteration makes the worst less credible. That is his paradox. As you walk through room after room it becomes clear that you can live with the worst, that you can go on painting it again and again, that you can turn it onto more and more elegant art, that you can put velvet and gold frames round it, that other people will buy it to hang on the wall of the rooms where they eat. It begins to seem that Bacon may be a charlatan. Yet he is not. And his fidelity to his own obsession ensures that the paradox of his art yields a consistent truth, though it may not be the truth he intends.

Bacon's art is, in effect, conformist. It is not with Goya or the early Eisenstein that he should be compared, but with Walt Disney. Both men make propositions about the alienated behaviour of our societies; and both, in a different way, persuade the viewer to accept what is. Disney makes alienated behaviour look funny

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and sentimental and therefore, acceptable. Bacon interprets such behaviour in terms of the worst possible having already happened, and so proposes that both refusal and hope are pointless. The surprising formal similarities of their work — the way limbs are distorted, the overall shapes of bodies, the relation of figures to background and to one another, the use of neat tailor's clothes, the gesture of hands, the range of colours used - are the result of both men having complementary attitudes to the same crisis.

Disney's world is also charged with vain violence. The ultimate catastrophe is always in the offing. His creatures have both personality and nervous reactions: what they lack (almost) is mind. If, before a cartoon sequence by Disney, one read and believed the caption, *There is nothing else*, the film would strike us as horrifically as a painting by Bacon.

Bacon's paintings do not comment, as is often said, on any actual experience of loneliness, anguish or metaphysical doubt; nor do they comment on social relations, bureaucracy, industrial society or the history of the 20th century. To do any

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of these things they would have to be concerned with consciousness. What they do is to demonstrate how alienation may provoke a longing for its own absolute form—which is mindlessness. This is the consistent truth demonstrated, rather than expressed, in Bacon’s work.

Berger, John. “Francis Bacon and Walt Disney.” *Selected Essays*. New York: Vintage Books, 2001. Print.