

The first in a trilogy of books that seeks to illuminate Francis Bacon's art and the motivations, and to open up fresh and stimulating ways of understanding his paintings

# Bacon and the Mind

*Art, Neuroscience and Psychology*

Christopher Bucklow, Steven Jaron,  
Darian Leader, John Onians and Semir Zeki

120 illustrations

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Bacon and the Mind:  
Art, Neuroscience and Psychology



FRANCIS BACON  
STUDIES I

## Key Sales Points

- Comprises of five essays that deconstruct Bacon's imagination in ways that offer revealing insights into the man and his work
- Discusses and discloses previously hidden meanings in Bacon's work by exploring the artist's non-conscious mental process
- Published under the aegis of the Estate of Francis Bacon



*Two Studies for Portrait of George Dyer, 1968*



*George Dyer Talking, 1969*



Oedipus and the Sphinx after Ingres, 1983



Figure Study II, 1946

aggressive valence. Shortly after the painted reply to Helen Lessore had been completed, he told David Sylvester that his work is 'an attempt to bring the figurative thing up onto the nervous system more violently and more poignantly', and further, in 1963 to Michael Peppiatt: 'in a painting that's even worth looking at the image must be twisted...if it is to make a renewed assault upon the nervous system.'

What then constituted Francis Bacon's nervous system? What did he mean by the expression, and how did his usage differ from a technical one? He possibly recognised a biochemical or more broadly a physiological basis for the nervous system (associating it with sexual arousal) but his use of the term was intuitive rather than scientific. He was of course not alone in the matter. T.S. Eliot possessed a similar if slightly more informed understanding which is worth comparing with Bacon's, given his long-held esteem of Eliot. In his essay on Philip Massinger (1920), for instance, Eliot held that the dramatist 'dealt not with emotions so much as with the social abstractions of emotions [...]. He was not guided by direct connections through the nerves.' At about the same time, he wrote in his 1921 review of Grierson's anthology, *The Metaphysical Poets*: 'One must look into the cerebral cortex, the nervous system, and the digestive tracts.' We do not know if Eliot suspected that the cerebral cortex was part of the central nervous system or that the digestive tracts formed what is known as the enteric nervous system. He had perhaps come across



*Triptych—Two Figures Lying on a Bed with Attendants*, 1968 (central panel)



*Study for Bullfight No. 1*, 1969



*Study for Bullfight No. 2*, 1969



*Three Studies of Figures on Beds*, 1972, (central panel)

that has to do with using your critical faculty [...]. This state only superficially resembled the inebriety he regularly found himself in; nevertheless, his ego was wilfully overrun by the id, 'a chaos, a cauldron of seething excitement'.

To Francis Bacon's mind, then, what was called 'instinct' held primacy over 'will'. 'I think that great art is deeply ordered,' he explained to David Sylvester. 'Even if within the order there may be enormously instinctive and accidental things, nevertheless I think that they may come out of a desire for ordering and for returning fact onto the nervous system in a more violent way.'<sup>43</sup> Order, however, had to be submitted to instinct, Bacon stating that he wished to 'be able to do something nearer one's instinctive desire'.<sup>44</sup> Another way he put it was that the 'brain' should refrain from 'interfering with the inevitability of an image'.<sup>45</sup> The image 'seems to come straight out of what we choose to call the unconscious with the foam of the unconscious locked around it'.<sup>46</sup>

#### Sexuality as Chiasmus between the Human Situation and the Nervous System

The 'greatest art always returns you to the vulnerability of the human situation,' then, was related in Bacon's mind to the scenes of 'birth, and copulation, and death'. Human sexuality, in which one might wound or be wounded, traumatise or be traumatised, constituted one of these three elementary instances of the human situation. Francis Bacon's nervous system repeatedly mediated into his painting images of his sexuality. Fundamentally, the process of painting was a means of

satisfying an instinctual demand understood as the antithetical requirements of actively dominating and being passively dominated; dominating the subject matter but at the same time being dominated by it—just as by turns Bacon sought to dominate his sexual partner and accepted domination by him. *Two Figures*, 1953 [20] and *Two Figures in the Grass*, 1954 [21] are among the most poignant pictorial expressions of the deployment of this instinctual demand. A streak of white paint squeezed from the tube directly onto the canvas suggested a signature in the form of an ejaculatory climax in other compositions (e.g., *Triptych—Two Figures Lying on a Bed with Attendants*, 1968, central panel; the two versions of *Study for Bullfight*, 1969; and *Three Studies of Figures on Beds*, 1972, central panel).

Bacon practiced sadomasochism with avidity, going so far, for example, as being beaten regularly through the second half of the 1950s while in Tangiers. It is said that the British Consul-General expressed worry when he was repeatedly found in this state in the early morning by the police, and that it was a source of pleasure.<sup>47</sup> Bacon further referred to the conjoining of violent sexual fantasy and pleasure in Proust's *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, noting that the first chapter described 'everything there is to say about homosexuality'.<sup>48</sup> It thus bears rereading in this light. We find there the narrator, hidden from view, overhearing a din of 'sons inarticulés' due to Baron de Charlus's savage taking of Jupien. The 'inarticulate sounds' of sadomasochist sex were another instance of Bacon's fixation on the sensorial and visual possibilities of the scream, others being the helpless mother in Poussin's *Massacre of the Innocents* [xx] screaming in terror as Herod's soldier



Poussin, *The Massacre of the Innocents*

Bacon was interested in capturing this point of division in his father, it would follow that he would gravitate towards the image of the lost child. And it is exactly this motif that we find in the two images that, apart from the Velázquez, were to 'haunt' Bacon more than any others. First of all, the scene of the screaming nurse from Eisenstein's 'Battleship Potemkin', in which the baby in the pram falls away from her, followed by the image of a man striking a blow with a sword. When Bacon travelled to Berlin after he left Ireland at seventeen in the wake of his brother's death, it was not just the decadence and sexual commerce that left its mark on him, but the isolated image from this film.

And secondly, Poussin's *The Massacre of the Innocents* in which a soldier strikes a child as he presses his foot into its neck, and the mother desperately tries to stop him. Bacon became mesmerised by this painting after he saw it at Chantilly, directly after his stay in Berlin, and it contains what Bacon would call 'probably the best human cry in painting'. The echo of 'innocent' from *The Massacre of the Innocents* to the Velázquez *Portrait of Pope Innocent X* can't be mere accident. It isn't just in the image itself that we need to look for clues to help understand the effect of the Velázquez portrait: there is a link to the Poussin in language, through the word 'innocent'.

Bacon painted versions of the Potemkin image, and it has often been pointed out that the scream of the Screaming Popes is in fact the scream of the Potemkin nurse, a still of which Bacon kept on the wall of his studio. The figure with the first real scream, the 1952 *Study of a Head*, both wears the pince-nez from Potemkin-



*Study of a Head*, 1952



*Pope 1*, 1953

Lightfoot and has a strangely feminine appearance. And just as the pince-nez ramify in Bacon's art, so do the wheels of the nurse's pram: the tubular structures may of course derive from Bacon's furniture designs and any number of sources, but it would be difficult to deny the ubiquity of pram imagery, from the 1945 *Figure in a Landscape*, the 1946 *Painting to Pope I* and the 1971 remake of *Painting*. We could also of course wonder why he had been originally drawn to that style of curved steel so soon after his Berlin and Paris adventure.

We can note here that both images, the Poussin and the Potemkin, involve exactly the same elements: a woman screaming, a doomed child and a military man striking a blow. And Poussin's child is not simply doomed, he is very graphically gasping for breath, a detail which becomes all the more important when we remember that Edward Bacon was to die of a respiratory illness or, in the family mythology, of an asthma attack. It is also surely no accident that one memory from the Berlin trip that Bacon would repeat was grasping the swan's neck that formed the corners of the breakfast trolley at the Hotel Adlon, a feature of not only the Poussin image but the 1944 *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*. 'The world is just a dung heap', Bacon would say, 'it's made up of compost of the millions and millions who have died and are blowing about. The dead are blowing in your nostrils every hour, every second you breathe in'. Do we now have an answer to our question of why Bacon's Popes are screaming? Is it for the same reason that the nurse in Potemkin is screaming, the lost child? It is indeed significant that the series of Screaming



*Second Version of Triptych 1944, 1988*

the stimulus; moreover, departures are resistant to adaptation, in that continual exposure does not diminish the response obtained from the DLPFC and parietal cortex, as repeated exposure to unusual human artefacts apparently does.

This raises a host of interesting questions. The first among them is related to the representation of faces, bodies and objects in the brain. Whether they are represented in discrete groupings within a larger cortical area or whether each of these categories is separately represented, Bacon's paintings raise the question of a separate and privileged access to the brain's emotional systems existing for the representation of faces and bodies, compared to that which exists for ordinary man-made objects. If so, it is likely that groupings or modules representing faces and bodies have different connections with the brain's emotional system, through routes that remain to be determined. Equally interesting in this context is that the representation of faces and bodies appears to be much more robust, which implies that there is less room for experience to modify that representation in the way that representation of human artefacts can be modified, a suggestion supported by the experiments of Chen & Zeki (2011). This implies that the connections of the latter are much more plastic than those of the former, making it interesting to uncover the different mechanisms that regulate plasticity in these different representations. This is also likely to be reflected in the mechanisms regulating the formation of concepts for different attributes. The enduring shock element in Bacon's paintings, even after repeated viewing, speaks in favour of a pronounced resistance to modifying the concept of a face or a body; by contrast, concepts of human artefacts are much more modifiable and less resistant to change. Hence, it follows that the determinants of concept formation are much less plastic for faces and bodies, the brain apparently not tolerating departures from a primitive significant configuration for them.

Next comes the question of routing of visual signals to and from a given area of the brain. It is important to realise that faces and bodies, whether ugly, neutral or beautiful, are processed through common structures – the OFA, the FFA and other areas detailed above. At some point in these pathways, a neural decision must be taken to forward the results of the processing to one part of the emotional brain



*Three Studies of Isabel Rawsthorne (on light ground), 1965 (right panel)*

or another. This raises the question 'at what level, in the face and body processing pathways, is the routing of signals to one of the destinations made?', a question that applies equally to beautiful and ugly faces. It is also interesting to learn when and how signals are not routed to the emotional centres or routed to them without eliciting a strong and detectable response, as happens with neutral faces. This of course amounts to a neurobiological question of general interest, for all cortical areas have multiple inputs and outputs and whether all the outputs from an area are active when the area undertakes an operation or whether they are active only when the area undertakes a particular operation (Zeki 1993). In our context, this can be more precisely formulated by asking whether departures in significant configuration in one direction activate certain outputs from the area while departures in the other direction activate other pathways.

This also raises the question of what constitutes, in terms of responses from a given area, say the FFA, a negative or positive departure from an essential configuration. In theory at least, it should be possible to study this by using imaging techniques that can determine whether the pattern of activity in a given area differs according to departures from the essential configuration.

Hence, Bacon's work raises a host of interesting and important problems, not only in the somewhat specific domain of the neural mechanisms regulating face and

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