

BACON IN THE COLD WORLD: ON WAGERS, WOUNDS AND REAL ABSTRACTION

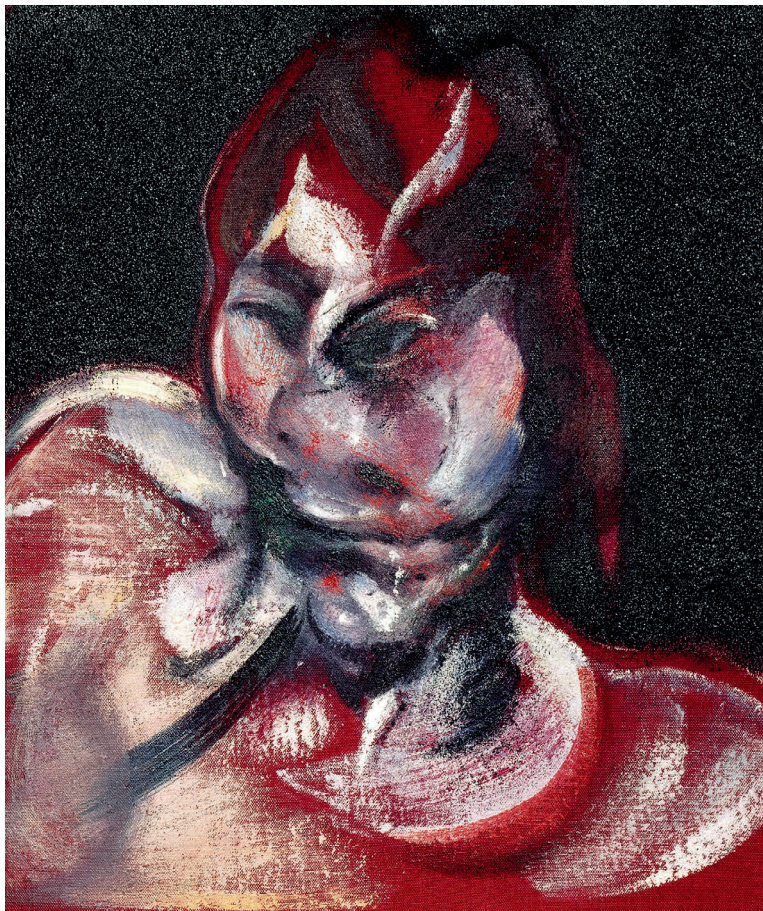
Ben Ware

Take a chance on the artist—maybe you can realize a profit.
Marcel Duchamp

Born to Lose

Bacon's passion for gambling was seemingly inexhaustible. In the words of his close friend, the painter Michael Wishart, Bacon 'adored both cards and roulette, often playing several tables simultaneously, displaying the committed masochism of Dostoevsky, who claimed that the real thrill of involvement only began when he had pawned his wife's jewels and was staking the proceeds.'¹ In Blitz-era London – at a time when gambling was still illegal in the UK – Bacon hosted private roulette evenings at his studio in South Kensington, frequently taking elaborate measures to avoid detection by the police.² Years later, Monte Carlo, with its 'grandeur of futility' as Bacon described it, often provided the backdrop for the artist's high thrills, high stakes games. Here he came under the spell of 'the Belle Époque casino with its succession of large plush salons and magnificent views over the Mediterranean', not to mention the intoxicating 'atmosphere generated by fortunes being made and lost'.³ Describing his passion, Bacon explained:

I like the atmosphere of casinos, you talk to people at the bar and there is the excitement of whether they are winning or not winning and the despair of people who have lost everything and all that goes on in a very concentrated space. [...] I used to think that I heard the croupier calling out the winning numbers at roulette...the winning number, before the ball had fallen into the socket...and I used to go from table to table. [...] [In the end, though,] I'm a heavy loser. In fact, I think I must be the perfect compost for casinos because they must love somebody who comes in who is always losing.



In today's pathologising parlance, gambling is often spoken of in terms of 'compulsive' or 'problem' gambling, something 'damaging' to the individual and society as a whole. If one is to gamble, then the watch-words are moderation and self-control: set a strict spending limit, don't chase your losses, and be aware of any negative feelings that might cloud your judgment. But this demand for 'balance' or strict 'self-regulation' hardly does justice to the complexities of the human subject. Gambling might well be 'dangerous' and 'illogical', but this, as Walter Benjamin reminds us, citing the writer Anatole France, is precisely the source of its attraction: 'At its caprice [gambling] gives poverty and wretchedness and shame – that is why its votaries adore it. The fascination of danger is at the bottom of all great passions. There is no fullness of pleasure unless the precipice is near.'⁴

The allure of gambling, however, leads us into even murkier terrain. In an arresting scene in Karel Reisz's film *The Gambler* (1974), the ludopath Axel Freed (James Caan) tells his friend and money-lender Hips (Paul Sorvino), that all gamblers have one thing in common: 'they are all looking to lose!' Near the end of the film, when Axel hits upon a scheme that finally allows him to clear his debts, he takes himself to the bad part of town and engineers a fight with a local pimp – an encounter that results in him being slashed across the face with a knife. Bleeding profusely, Axel turns to observe his wound in a mirror before letting out a faint smile. The masochist, it would seem, always finds a way to lose and therefore to win.

The wager and the wound, as we shall see, turn out to be key to Bacon's modernism, though not in the way that we might expect.

There is quite clearly an intimate connection between Bacon's devotion to the roulette table and what we might call his *aleatory aesthetics*. According to Bacon himself, 'chance and accident are the most fertile things at any artist's disposal'.⁵ As he puts it in his interviews with David Sylvester, 'if anything works for me, I feel it is nothing I have made myself, but something which chance has been able to give me.'⁶ 'My ideal', he goes on, 'would really be just pick up a handful of paint and throw it at the canvas and hope that', with the intervention of chance, 'the portrait was there.'⁷ If we ask why artistic practice comes to be defined for Bacon in terms of chance, the answer will be something like the following: it is only by making chance 'marks' on the canvas that the painter avoids cliché, succeeds in conveying the 'mystery of fact', and returns this fact more 'violently' onto the 'nervous system' of the spectator. But behind this aleatory method lies an intriguing ideological picture.

The world of chance does not itself appear by chance. Cutting a long story short, for most of the Enlightenment 'chance had been called

the superstition of the vulgar.'⁸ However, by the late nineteenth century, in the words of the philosopher Ian Hacking, 'chance had attained the respectability of a Victorian valet, ready to be the loyal servant of the natural, biological, and social sciences.'⁹ How did such a transformation come about? Simply put: 'an avalanche of printed numbers' and the emergence of a new 'science' of statistics, with nation states classifying, counting, and tabulating their subjects anew.¹⁰ An older determinism was thus eroded, but only for chance to come to the fore in a paradoxical sense. A new empire of chance opened up, but chance itself was rationalised, *tamed*, captured within a structure of new statistical and probabilistic laws. The world of chance thus became less, not more, chancy; and subjects themselves were more, not less, governed by what would later come to be known as 'big data'. As Hacking points out, the new statistical mania provoked a backlash, especially within the realms of art and ideas, which took the form of a demand for a restoration of the ancient and divine prerogatives of *pure chance*.¹¹

It is in this context, then, that we can place such conflicting modernisms as Nietzsche's declaration that the 'lofty sky' above is a 'dance floor for divine chances... a gods' table for divine dice and dicers!'; Mallarmé's 1897 poem *A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance*; Saussure's insistence on the 'arbitrary' or 'chance' nature of the linguistic sign; Duchamp's readymade *3 Standard Stoppages*; surrealism's employment of 'psychic automatism' and the 'divinity' of chance; Bataille's fascination with 'the giddy seductiveness of chance', its promise of a 'happiness beyond limits'; and, of course, Bacon himself.¹²

This recourse to chance, however, raises a number of intriguing questions regarding agency – some of which fall directly at Bacon's feet. While the artist occasionally speaks of chance and the unconscious in the same breath, this, quite clearly, is too hasty a move. In *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901), Freud famously writes that 'nothing in the mind is arbitrary or undetermined'.¹³ While 'external' chance events do occur (beginning with our 'origin out of the meeting of spermatozoon and ovum'),¹⁴ there are no accidents in the unconscious, no instances of 'internal' psychic chance.¹⁵ Slips of the brush or the rag; botching up a painting so that it has to be re-done or destroyed; 'accidental' smears or colour splats on the canvas – these are all, at least by Freud's lights, interpretable, all grist to the analyst's mill. Think you are getting away with chance just because you're an artist? Well, think again.

The issue of agency also returns in a more explicitly political sense. Bacon frequently suggests that he is *employing chance*: he works, he says, hoping that chance is going to *work for him*. This sounds like a curious kind of outsourcing, where parts of the production process are delegated to a mysterious external agent or creative higher power. What

should we make of such a move? First, we might see it as consistent with a certain subtractive element in Bacon. Not only does he wish to eliminate the 'storytelling aspect' of his paintings, he also seeks to remove, at least in part, any trace of direct artistic intention. But this economic dimension also leads in another direction. Despite his avowed atheism, Bacon's relationship to chance is clearly one of 'faith', and specifically faith in a quasi-divine force out of which he can artistically profit. This brings chance directly into the orbit of Friedrich Hayek's definition of 'the market' itself: that 'impersonal' and 'uncontrollable' force, whose 'nature' we cannot fathom, but to which we must all nevertheless submit.¹⁶ Here, then, we are reminded of Adorno's observation that chance today is something of an impoverished concept: merely 'the form taken by freedom' under the 'spell' of capitalist unfreedom.¹⁷

Gambling on the Grotesque

Despite his remarks to the contrary, one might be forgiven for thinking that there is little in Bacon's painting that is actually left to chance. The artist compulsively repeats his highly specific pictorial formulas: monochromatic backgrounds, cut up with lines suggesting domestic interiors; the introduction of various staging devices – beds, sofas, cubicles, cages, chairs and tables – that foreground the famous bruised and bulging figures. Soap opera-like, Bacon also rolls out a familiar cast of characters – friends, lovers, popes, fellow artists, and, most importantly, himself – all of whom come in for similar aesthetic treatment. What is the overall effect?

In Edgar Allan Poe's remarkable short story 'The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar' (1845), the titular character, who is terminally ill, is placed in a mesmeric trance immediately prior to taking his final breaths. With an appearance that is described as 'hideous beyond conception', Valdemar is presumed dead, until a 'broken and hollow' voice issues from his 'distended and motionless jaws', exclaiming 'I am dead...I say to you that I am dead'. The hypnotic process has arrested Valdemar's demise; he is alive, but now reduced to merely repeating the announcement of his own mortal passing: 'Dead! Dead!' When the attempt is made to re-awaken Valdemar, to lift him out of his hypnotic state, his whole frame crumbles, rots away upon the bed, leaving behind only a 'liquid mass of loathsome...detestable putridity'.¹⁸

Almost all of Bacon's figures are to be found in one of these two states: caught up in some kind of mesmeric undeadness, suspended between being and non-being; or else liquifying, like Bacon's late lover George Dyer in *Triptych August 1972*, [fig. 38] into a puddle of flesh coloured ooze, collecting on the carpet. Bacon clearly turns his back

on the ideology of the beautiful, and he would no doubt have laughed at contemporary neo-Kantian theories which conceive of beauty as inciting us to moral 'fairness' and 'equality'.¹⁹ But what of his great gamble with the grotesque?

In a footnote to his *Philosophy of Modern Music*, Adorno describes the grotesque as a form of aesthetic populism: 'From society's perspective the grotesque is generally the form employed to make alien and progressive factors acceptable. The bourgeoisie is willing to become involved in modern art if – by means of its form – it assures him that it is not meant to be taken seriously.'²⁰ The critic Clement Greenberg echoes Adorno when, referring specifically to Bacon, he speaks of the artist's grotesque productions as 'inspired safe taste' – a kind of pseudo-transgressive art that deliberately goes in search of 'rehearsed responses'.²¹

Both of these positions, however, come up short. In a series of virtuoso passages in his early work *Permanence and Change*, the theorist Kenneth Burke connects the grotesque and the revolutionary. The grotesque, he argues, is a higher stage of 'planned incongruity' (above humour) in which 'the perception of discordancies' is 'cultivated' to such a degree that inversions of the existing state of things suddenly become thinkable.²² The grotesque merges what common sense divides; and divides what common sense merges. Like Marxist thought itself, then, the grotesque, according to Burke, 'realigns' consciousness, allowing for a radical reinvention of what counts as 'reason', 'logic', and indeed 'reality' itself.²³ From this perspective a Bacon work such as *Lying Figure with Hypodermic Syringe* (1963), [fig. 26] in which the human form is reduced to a heap of damaged and dis-organised matter, is less a populist aesthetic provocation and more a glimpse of a *different kind of human subject to come* – one whose precise identity remains to be determined.

But there *is* something in Greenberg's jibe regarding rehearsed responses. Bacon's great aesthetic wager – the one upon which he stakes almost everything – is that if the artworks succeed then they do so by making a violent impact upon the spectator's 'nervous system', 'unlocking' what he calls new 'areas of sensation'. But this sounds remarkably like a fixed formula: an attempt to elicit a specific kind of bodily or affective response from the viewer. In one sense, it is the oldest of all old modernist fantasies: the desire for pure aesthetic immediacy, which will return the spectator to a fuller sense of 'life'. Yet this fantasy has a philosophical hole in it: immediacy, as Adorno reminds us, is always already subjectively mediated, and therefore pure immediacy cannot be the basis for aesthetic experience.²⁴ What is required, then, is that artworks be mediated a *second time*: subject to a process of critical analysis and interpretation, which aims not at mastering them

(crushing their immediacy under the weight of subjective mediation), but rather bringing to the fore their very enigmatic nature.²⁵

Dialectics of Chance

This brings us directly back to chance. 'I always think of myself not so much as a painter', Bacon says, 'but as a medium for accident and chance.' At the same time, he insists that images should be 'deeply ordered', and that this ordering is essential to art's function of recording 'facts'. We might be tempted to call this Bacon's dualism. On the one hand, the repetition of a set of ordering rules and devices that hold the paintings together; and, on the other hand, the free play of chance. Except, of course, that the chance operation is already written into Bacon's aesthetic logic. Chance thus becomes necessity.

But here we might take a further dialectical step, one which goes by way of psychoanalysis. In his Seminar XI, Lacan returns to the idea of chance, borrowing two concepts from Aristotle's *Physics*: *tuchē* and *automaton*. In Aristotle, *automaton* refers to spontaneous events in nature, brought about by some external cause (the stone that rolls off a cliff and strikes the man on the head). *Tuchē* refers to chance events, relating specifically to purposive human action, that result in good or bad fortune (an unexpected encounter with an old acquaintance that turns out to be lucky or unlucky).²⁶ For Aristotle, when things happen by chance they happen accidentally or coincidentally, and 'chance is a *coincidental cause*. But in an unqualified sense chance causes nothing.'²⁷ In this respect, chance turns out to be something *uncanny*: both something and nothing; a cause and a lack of a cause; something that can only be apprehended through reason, but which, because fundamentally 'inexplicable', constitutes reason's own blind spot.²⁸

Taking liberties, Lacan 'translates' *automaton* as *repetition* – the automatically functioning 'network of signifiers' that keep on returning, looping back – and *tuché* as *the chance encounter with the real*. If *automaton* is the repetitive mechanism of the symbolic (which is to say, language itself), the real is what 'lies behind' it, interrupting its smooth functioning.²⁹ But *automaton* and *tuché* should not be regarded as two separate spheres. Within the repetitive realm of the symbolic something gets produced that is beyond symbolisation; and this is precisely *tuché*, which, as Lacan says, first presented itself in the history of psychoanalysis in the form of the 'trauma'.³⁰ *Tuché* is therefore what erupts to disturb the symbolic, *out of* the symbolic itself. It is the surprise explosion of the real, which shakes up the subject's very reality; the reappearance of an originary trauma in the cracks of the *automaton*.³¹ It is here, then, that we come across something like a Lacanian dialectics of chance and

necessity. *Tuché* (as chance encounter) has a cause, and this cause is the necessity of the *automaton* (the symbolic *qua* repetition). But what lies behind the latter, driving it forward as an absent cause, is the *tuché* of the trauma that never stops insisting.

Bacon gives an indirect aesthetic twist to this crucial bit of Lacanian theory. While we might be tempted to think that in Bacon's paintings it is the repetitions (the seemingly endless return of familiar figures, faces, props and settings) that create the conditions for the eruption of chance events on the canvas, we should instead begin by turning this thought around. It is not that there is repetition and then, consequently, the appearance of chance. Rather, chance and accident are at the origin of Bacon's works.

How exactly to understand this? Following Lacan, we might say that what motivates repetition in Bacon is, at root, a trauma or *accident of being*. This is not something that we can locate simply by looking at Bacon's own colourful biography, it is not a particular 'experience'. It is instead an originary wound that inscribes itself in the psyche through the process of subjectification itself; one that, functioning as an *absent cause*, determines all that follows. By its very nature this trauma cannot be named or remembered, which is why it keeps on being repeated. Indeed, strictly speaking, it only materializes *retroactively* through its effects – which in Bacon's case are simply the pile-up of disturbances and distortions that we encounter in the paintings themselves. What therefore appears in Bacon *as if* by chance – the famous disfigured figures and frenzied colour marks – turns out in the end to be simply the *appearance of chance*. What we find in the works is in fact nothing other than the automatism of repetition – a repetition that, as Lacan would have it, is inseparable from *jouissance*. Far from reproducing sameness, however, it is the repetitions themselves that are the very source of the new (as variations on a theme), the singular, and the (occasionally) astonishing. It is only by repeating and repeating to excess, we might say, that Bacon is able to elevate the accident (of being) into something essential, to transform the wound into an unmistakable artistic signature.

But this does not mean that chance gets completely sidelined. Instead, it is shifted to a different level: to the encounter between the work of art and the spectator, the object and the subject. The success of such an encounter is *necessarily contingent*: it might take place, or it might not – nothing can decide the matter in advance. Every work of art is, in one sense, a throw of the dice. The possibility of the work striking a particular spectator, throwing them temporarily out of joint, is always more or less a matter of fortune.

So what, at least in theory, would a *real* encounter with a Bacon painting actually entail? First and foremost, it would not be the purely

affective encounter that the artist himself repeatedly insists upon, but rather the experience of finding oneself caught in the work's trap, feeling its enigmatic character making a claim upon us, a call for interpretation. But also something more specific.

Bacon makes good on Adorno's request that artworks 'articulate the state in which [humans] find themselves historically'.³² But he does so in a way that seems almost accidental. It is as if, had he known what he was doing, he wouldn't have been able to do it, or perhaps wouldn't have wanted to. What Bacon does – and what we, as spectators, must therefore respond to – is to render visible not vague 'intensities' but the real abstract forces operating on and through human beings, disfiguring them, mutilating their very nature. *Look what the world has made of us*, Bacon's figures appear to silently exclaim. But this has nothing to do with providing a conventionally 'realistic' depiction of things. Indeed, we are here reminded of Bertolt Brecht's line that 'the situation is now...so complex that a simple "reproduction of reality" says less than ever about reality itself.'³³ Representing what is will therefore require not empirical accuracy, but instead excess and exaggeration. Only the hyperbolic caricature, a self-consciously constructed surplus, comes close to revealing what would otherwise remain hidden: the coldness at the core of the system itself.

Cold World

Samuel Beckett's late novella *The Lost Ones* (1970) begins with the line: 'ABODE WHERE LOST bodies roam each searching for its lost one.'³⁴ This abode is 'a flattened cylinder fifty metres round and sixteen high'; its walls and floor are made of 'solid rubber'. The lost ones, two hundred in total, 'one body per square metre', exist in a state of overcrowded 'gloom'. Most are engaged in the futile task of climbing ladders to reach the various niches and dead-end tunnels within the cylinder. While the temperature inside the space oscillates every four seconds between 5°C and 25°C, in social and subjective terms what we encounter here is a thoroughly *cold world*: shrivelled 'bodies brush together with a rustle of dry leaves'; those with the 'stomach still to copulate strive in vain'; missing rungs from the ladders are used to commit or repel violence.

The most troubling violence in the text, however, comes not from the lost bodies condemned to roam around the cylinder, but from the disembodied voice of the unnamed narrator. Like a nineteenth-century colonial anthropologist, it speaks in an unnervingly dispassionate tone – dissecting the 'customs' of the 'little people' who inhabit the abode, imagining 'a perfect mental picture' of their 'entire system'. What unfolds in Beckett's text then is an interrogation of the abstract violence

enacted by this voice, showing how it opens on to a stalled dialectic of coldness. We might elaborate this as follows. While most of the cylinder's inhabitants still believe in the possibility of a 'way out', any exit initially appears blocked by the all-powerful narrator. As the text grows dense through increasingly elaborate 'explanations', however, the narrative voice hacks away at its own authority: its 'certitudes' become 'doubtful', its 'data' fails to add up, its power eventually reveals itself to be what it always was – *a sinister fiction*. The horrifying spectacle of the inside thus points towards the possibility of an outside. And yet, ultimately, the lost ones remain trapped in their cold abode. Constantly on the move but consigned to stasis, they are quite literally written into silence, and so unable to produce a collective sense of self – a 'we' – that might enable them to traverse their abstract dominion.

Bacon provides a different, though related, take on this dialectic of coldness. The artist sets out from a frozen vision of the social world – one in which human relations are, in Marx's phrase, characterised by 'reciprocal isolation and foreignness'.³⁵ But Bacon sees this situation as simply given, rather than socially mediated. He doesn't grasp how the subject is constituted by the cold forces of capital, specifically the real abstractions of 'value' and 'exchange'.³⁶ It is, however, this very *indifference* to the social dimension, the refusal of politics as such, that allows Bacon to depict the socially disfigured subject with a unique and unsettling accuracy.

We might put this point another way. What Bacon unwittingly makes visible is a specific *temporal dimension* of socially produced 'second nature'. This second nature, simply put, is the internalisation of the economic laws that govern society: their appearance as a kind of fated necessity or alien objectivity, holding sway over human beings but seemingly cut off from any human origin. Undergirding second nature is the exchange principle which, as Adorno points out, is in one respect a mere 'appearance' or 'illusion'; 'at the same time, however, this illusion is the most real thing of all, the magic formula that has bewitched the world.'³⁷ The domination of human beings by the exchange abstraction not only 'degrades subjectivity', turning individuals into mere 'agents of the law of value',³⁸ it also produces a particular temporal split: on the one hand, frenetic activity and constant disquiet; on the other hand, stuckness and stasis. This paradoxical state is described by Walter Benjamin, borrowing a phrase from the poet Gottfried Keller, as one of *petrified unrest*.³⁹

It is this condition of petrified unrest that Bacon's work uncannily and hyperbolically captures. In *Three Studies for Portrait of Henrietta Moraes* (1963), [fig. 27] the artist uses a limited palette of crimson and white; the background is an unnerving inky black. The right-hand

panel is perhaps the most arresting. Violent brushstrokes and smears capture Moraes's robust shoulders and upper chest from which her head emerges, as if emerging through a vaginal opening. The scene is one of controlled chaos – the figure appears to be giving birth to itself. And yet, the whip of black around the neck resembles a tight nuchal cord; the grey and blue pallor of the skin indicates a lack of oxygen (cyanosis); the left eye is open but blank, devoid of life. When Benjamin uses 'petrified unrest' as the 'formula' for Baudelaire's 'life history' it functions as an allegorical expression of the value system itself: a life of agitated movement which, at the same time, is frozen into place – one that 'knows no development'.⁴⁰ This simultaneity of movement and stasis is precisely what Bacon crystallises into an image. In the Moraes portrait, excess animation fuses with ice-cold stillness, producing someone or something that is disturbingly *undead*.

Petrified Unrest

Describing Bacon as an accidental painter of real abstractions finds a direct parallel in some of Louis Althusser's remarks about the Italian artist Leonardo Cremonini. For Althusser, Cremonini is 'not an abstract painter' but 'a *painter of abstraction*' – that is, a painter of 'the real abstract', the 'real relations' that obtain between persons and their things, or more accurately between things and their persons.⁴¹ Cremonini does not directly paint 'living conditions', 'social relations', or 'class struggle'; rather, he renders visible 'the *determinate absence*' which governs them. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx famously says that 'individuals are now ruled by *abstractions*.'⁴² These abstractions, however, as Althusser points out, can never be depicted by their presence, but only 'negatively' by their 'traces and effects'.⁴³

An even more specific connection between Bacon and Cremonini concerns the treatment of the human face. Cremonini subjects his faces to what Althusser calls 'determinate deformation', whereby all coherent expression and individual subjectivity is removed. The faces thus become 'anonymous', 'inexpressive', the mere trace of the abstract forces which dominate their world.⁴⁴ We, as spectators, therefore cannot immediately 'recognise' ourselves in Cremonini's paintings. It is, however, precisely this space of non-recognition that opens up the possibility that we might come to *know ourselves* – know ourselves, that is, as constituted by the cold world of real abstractions. By staging this dialectic, Cremonini, as Althusser remarks in a final lyrical flourish, follows the path opened up:

by the great revolutionary thinkers...the great materialist thinkers who understood that the freedom of [human beings] is not achieved

by the complacency of [their] ideological *recognition*, but by *knowledge* of the laws of their slavery, and that the 'realisation' of their concrete individuality is achieved by the analysis and mastery of the abstract relations which govern them.⁴⁵

In light of Althusser's observations, the affinities between Bacon and Cremonini become striking and profound.⁴⁶ Both artists succeed in capturing what defies direct representation; and success, in both cases, is intimately tied to the fact that depicting the absent presence of capital – specifically its subjective and temporal effects – was never the intended aim.⁴⁷ As with the patient in psychoanalysis, it is as if truth could only ever emerge indirectly, by some kind of glorious accident. But far too little has been made of the politics of Bacon's modernism. Indeed, speaking about his work in this way still seems to violate some secret art-historical prohibition. This silence should, however, only spur us on.

Bacon's faces – like Cremonini's – aren't masks concealing a more 'authentic', more 'human' subject. There is, strictly speaking, nothing beyond the determinate deformations, no pure first nature hiding behind the mutilated second nature that has been socially produced. The deformations are, moreover, not indicative of a sickness in the depicted individuals, but rather of a society in which the individual is, in Adorno's apt phrase, 'neutralised', turned into nothing more than a frozen 'exhibition piece'.⁴⁸ The fact that the deformations remain a constant throughout Bacon's oeuvre, doesn't mean that his work makes no progress.⁴⁹ Rather, it indicates that there is no simple escape from the state of petrified unrest, from the exchange world of mythical ever-the-sameness. If an alternative future is to be constructed then a *determinate deformation* – that is, a *determinate negation* – of the present state of things will be necessary, a mass unleashing of human creative forces. If Bacon's work hints indirectly in this direction, then it does so only by serving as a potent reminder that *what would be different has not as yet begun*.⁵⁰

But this, finally, presents us with a question regarding the politics of modernism today. According to Althusser, critical reflection on art produces self-knowledge; and this knowledge plays a crucial role in the formation of political consciousness. Yet such a position would seem to rehearse precisely the kind of theoretical 'humanism' that its author rejects, ascribing a straightforwardly educative function to the work of art. Without severing the connection between art and politics, what, then, would an alternative, less didactic position look like? To answer this question we might begin by staging a surprise return to the very figure with which we started – *the gambler*.

In a series of stunning reflections on the gambler, Walter Benjamin notes that by placing their bets at the last moment, at a critical ‘moment of danger’, the gambler arrives at a new level of alertness: one captured by the term ‘presence of mind’ (*Geistesgegenwart*).⁵¹ This, for Benjamin, is a thoroughly dialectical concept: it involves a ‘precise awareness of the present moment’, out of which the future – whose energy resides in the still incomplete past – is itself made accessible. Presence of mind is not, therefore, the fantasy of pure immediacy; nor does it have anything to do with contemporary notions of ‘mindfulness’ or so-called ‘presence culture’. It is, on the contrary, political through and through. It marks the difference between the present understood as mere empty duration (just one damn thing after another) and the present grasped as a ‘point of explosion’: a time filled with ‘now-time’ (*Jetztzeit*).⁵² In an extraordinary theoretical twist, then, Benjamin thus manages to connect the temporality of the gambler to that of the revolutionary materialist historian.

In a similar spirit, might we not take the temporal experience of the gambler as an allegory for our own possible experience of the modernist art work? Riffing on Benjamin’s remarks on *Geistesgegenwart*, could we not say that the modernist work ‘elevates’ the subject ‘beyond itself’, forcing it to ‘let itself go’, whilst simultaneously fostering a particular attentiveness that is capable of *foreseeing the present*?⁵³

In the case of Bacon, the paintings provoke presence of mind precisely by bringing us to see the cold world of real abstractions made flesh. They call our attention to how social relations mutilate the subject, confining it to a state of petrified unrest. But to see this with the alertness of presence of mind is also to see behind and beyond it. The monstrous world of abstract economic forces, despite its appearance as something ‘alien’, remains at root a *human world* – one which individuals reproduce ‘behind their own backs’.⁵⁴ ‘*They don’t know it, but they do it*’.⁵⁵ it is human beings themselves who unwittingly inflict the wounds from which they suffer. Of course, works of art cannot, by themselves, prefigure a new political order, nor can they negate the existing one. But they might nevertheless still have a role to play in interrupting capitalism’s business as usual. By making visible the ideological world from which they emerge, they simultaneously remind us of the conditions from which we have failed to emancipate ourselves. If modernism lives on today, it is only because we are still living in what Marx famously called ‘prehistory’, a stage prior to the creation of an actual, flourishing human society.

- 1 Michael Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon: Anatomy of an Enigma* (London: Constable, 2008), p. 148; Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan, *Francis Bacon: Revelations* (London: William Collins, 2022), p. 258. On the reference to Dostoevsky in this quotation, see Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground & The Gambler* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). For a neat psychoanalytic reading of Dostoevsky’s novel, see John Forrester, ‘Transference and the Stenographer: On Dostoevsky’s *The Gambler*’, in *The Seductions of Psychoanalysis: Freud, Lacan, Derrida* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 260–85. For a number of important early psychoanalytic texts on gambling, see Jon Halliday and Peter Fuller (eds.), *The Psychology of Gambling* (London: Pelican, 1977).
- 2 As Stevens and Swan comment, drawing on testimony from Lucian Freud: ‘The cars would begin massing in Cromwell Place after hours, which threatened to attract the attention of the police. As a result, Bacon “had scaffolding put up and bogus window cleaners as lookout men, because it was illegal, quite an elaborate thing...He took a lot of trouble”’, *Francis Bacon: Revelations*, op. cit., p. 219.
- 3 Peppiatt, *Anatomy of an Enigma*, op. cit., p. 145.
- 4 Anatole France, *Le Jardin d’Épiscure*, cited in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 498.
- 5 Michael Peppiatt, ‘An Interview With Francis Bacon: Provoking Accidents, Prompting Chance’, *Art International* 8 (1989): 28–33 (30).
- 6 David Sylvester, *The Brutality of Fact: Interviews with Francis Bacon* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2016), p. 59.
- 7 Ibid., p. 123.
- 8 Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 1.
- 9 Ibid., p. 2.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid., pp. 146–47. On the cultural, intellectual, and ideological development of chance, see also Gerda Reith, *The Age of Chance: On Gambling and Western Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999); Thomas M. Kavanagh, *Enlightenment and the Shadow of Chance* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).
- 12 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book For Everyone and No One*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1969), p. 186. Nietzsche’s thinking on chance gets developed in the American pragmatist tradition. See, for example, C. S. Peirce ‘The Doctrine of Necessity Examined’, in *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings 1867–1893*, vol. 1, ed. N. Houser and C. Kloesel (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992). Stéphane Mallarmé, *Collected Poems and Other Verse*, trans. E. H. & A. M. Blackmore (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 139–181. On Mallarmé’s modernist masterpiece, see also Paul de Man, ‘Lyric and Modernity’, in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1983). Alain Badiou returns to Mallarmé’s *Un Coup de dés* throughout his works. See especially Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 191–98 (Meditation Nineteen). Badiou’s conception of the relation between event and chance, is neatly captured in the following remark from an interview with Peter Hallward: ‘singular truth has its origin in an event. Something must happen, in order for there to be something new. Even in our personal lives, there must be an encounter, there must be something which cannot be calculated, predicted or managed, there must be a break based only on chance.’ See Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. xxv. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris (London: Duckworth, 1983), pp. 69ff. For an exploration of chance in Duchamp, which pivots around the 3 *Standard Stoppages*, see Herbert Molderings, *Duchamp and the Aesthetics of Chance: Art as Experiment* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2010). Duchamp regarded the 3 *Standard Stoppages* as one of his most important works. It involved three threads, one metre in length, dropped horizontally, from a height of one metre, onto three canvases. The threads were then fixed to the canvas with varnish. This was, as Duchamp noted, his first use of ‘chance’ as a ‘medium’. In his 1924 ‘Manifesto of Surrealism’, André Breton defines surrealism as follows: ‘SURREALISM, n. Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express-verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner-the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.’ See André Breton, ‘Manifesto of Surrealism’, in *The Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver & Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1972), p. 26. Georges Bataille, *Guilty*, trans. Bruce Boone (Venice, CA: The Lapis Press, 1988), pp. 72, 71, 72.
- 13 Sigmund Freud, ‘Psychopathology of Everyday Life’, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol VI, trans. James Strachey (London: Vintage Books, 2001), p. 242.
- 14 Sigmund Freud, ‘Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood’, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol XI, trans. James Strachey (London: Vintage Books, 2001), p. 137.
- 15 Freud, ‘Psychopathology of Everyday Life’, SE VI, op. cit., p. 257. While this sounds impeccably neat, we should of course be immediately suspicious: for it is language itself – and by extension the unconscious structured like a language – that problematises any strict separation of inside and outside. Indeed, topologically speaking, what we take to be most intimate turns out to have the quality of exteriority, something radically foreign; and it is this disruption of the conventional split between ‘internal’ and ‘external’ that Lacan designates with his term ‘extimacy’. See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII. The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Jacques-Alain Miller (London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1992), p. 139. See also Nadia Bou Ali and Surti Singh (eds.), *Extimacy* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2024).
- 16 Friedrich von Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1944),

- pp. 204-05. For a critique of Hayek's political-economic non-sense and bad philosophising, see István Mészáros, *Beyond Capital: Toward a Theory of Transition* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1995), pp. 198ff.
- 17** Theodor Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-1965*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Polity, 2008), p. 97. On this point, see also Marx writing in the Grundrisse: 'The social relation of individuals to one another as a power over the individuals which has become autonomous, whether conceived as a natural force, as chance or in whatever other form, is a necessary result of the fact that the point of departure is not the free social individual.' Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1973), p. 197.
- 18** Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar', in *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. J. Gerald Kennedy (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 71-79.
- 19** See Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999). For a well-aimed response to Scarry, which takes issue with the author's conservative neo-Kantianism, see Joan Copjec, *Imagine There's No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004), pp. 169-74.
- 20** Theodor Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans. Anne G. Mitchell & Wesley V. Blomster (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), p. 169.
- 21** Clement Greenberg, '1968: Interview Conducted by Edward Lucie-Smith', in *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969, Volume 4*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995), p. 278.
- 22** Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1984), p. 112.
- 23** Ibid., p. 113.
- 24** See Theodor Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993), p. 59; and Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 69. For a critique of the 'immediatist' emphasis of contemporary culture, see Anna Kornbluh, *Immediacy, or The Style of Too Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2024). This book is a brilliant defence of the tradition of Marxist critical theory against the 'new nihilism' of vibrant materialism, auto-theory, Afro-pessimism, and all the rest. However, the overall argument turns out to be too simplistic: it essentially pits 'good' mediation against 'bad' immediacy, thus passing over precisely the kind of dialectical relation that both Hegel and Adorno insist upon. As the latter notes: 'One can no more speak of mediation without something immediate than, conversely, one can find something immediate that is not mediated. But in Hegel the two moments are no longer rigidly contrasted. They produce and re-produce one another reciprocally...' (Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, op. cit., p. 59).
- 25** Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, op. cit., pp. 118-128.
- 26** Aristotle, *Physics*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 42-48. See also Jonathan Lear, *Aristotle: The Desire to Understand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). In alternative versions of the *Physics*, and in some of the secondary literature, *tuchê* gets translated as 'luck', 'fortune', 'fate' or 'contingency'; and *automaton* as 'accident', 'necessity', or 'chance result'.
- 27** Aristotle, *Physics*, op. cit., p. 45.
- 28** Ibid.
- 29** Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Jacques-Alain Miller (London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1981), pp. 53ff.
- 30** Ibid., p. 55.
- 31** See Mladen Dolar, 'Tyche, Clinamen, Den', *Continental Philosophy Review* 46 (2013): pp. 223-39.
- 32** Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetics: 1958/59*, trans. Wieland Hoban (London: Polity, 2018), p. 77.
- 33** Cited in Anthony Squiers, *Bertolt Brecht's Adaptations and Anti-capitalist Aesthetics Today* (Leiden: Brill, 2025), p. 150.
- 34** Samuel Beckett, 'The Lost Ones', in *The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989* (New York: The Grove Press, 1995), p. 202.
- 35** Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 182.
- 36** On the notion of 'real abstraction', see Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology* (London: Macmillan, 1978). For a still highly insightful discussion linking Sohn-Rethel (and the critique of political economy) to psychoanalysis (and the question of the unconscious), see Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso: 1989), pp. 3-55.
- 37** Theodor Adorno, 'Sociology and Empirical Research', in *The Positivist Dispute In German Sociology*, trans. Glyn Adey and David Frisby (London: Heinemann, 1976), p. 80.
- 38** Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 178; Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2002), p. 229.
- 39** Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, op. cit., p. 319. As Benjamin notes in his dossier on Baudelaire: 'The close of "La Destruction" (published in 1855 under the title "La Volupté") presents the image of petrified unrest. ("Was like a Medusa-shield, / image of petrified unrest" – Gottfried Keller, "Verlorenes Recht, verlorenes Glück.") The idea of petrified unrest in Benjamin has been little discussed, but see Eric L. Santner, *On Creatively Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. 80-81.
- 40** Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, op. cit., p. 329.
- 41** Louis Althusser, 'Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract', in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (Delhi: Aakar Books, 2006), p. 158. Althusser's essay has received surprisingly little attention. Notable exceptions include Michael Sprinker, *Imaginary Relations: Aesthetics and Ideology in the Theory of Historical Materialism* (London: Verso, 1987), ch. 10; Benjamin Noys, *The Persistence of the Negative: A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 167-69; Alberto Toscano, 'Materialism Without Matter: Abstraction, Absence, and Social Form', in Rebecca Colesworthy & Peter Nicholls (ed.), *How Abstract Is It? Thinking Capital Now* (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 63-69.
- 42** Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, op. cit., p. 164.
- 43** Althusser, 'Cremonini', op. cit., p. 162.
- 44** Ibid., p. 163.
- 45** Ibid., p. 165.
- 46** Bacon was acquainted with Cremonini's work. In December 1953, Bacon wrote to his friend, the gallerist and dealer Erica Brausen, suggesting that she invite W. H. Auden to write an article on Cremonini, ahead of the artist's show at Brausen's Hanover Gallery in London. In the event the essay for the exhibition was written by Stephen Spender, not Auden. The letter is reprinted in the catalogue for the 2024 exhibition, held at Galerie T&L in Paris, *Leonardo Cremonini dans l'oeil de Francis Bacon: histoire d'une amitié*. (Thanks to Martin Harrison for sharing this item with me.)
- 47** Althusser says that there is a productive split between Cremonini's 'ideological project' and what materialises on the canvases. This 'ideology' concerns 'the immediate relation between man and nature'; but what Cremonini actually paints (and certainly in his later work) is 'the *difference*' from this ideology – not the 'similarities' between 'man' and 'nature', but, rather, human beings as 'marked' by real abstractions. See Althusser, 'Cremonini', pp. 160 and 161. A similar split might also be seen to be at work in Bacon. While Bacon describes himself as simply 're-cording' 'facts' about his subjects and communicating the 'feeling of life', with all its 'violence' and 'intensity', the paintings themselves can be seen to break free from this high humanist pathos. To put the point very simply: Bacon's extreme individualism becomes an extreme materialism.
- 48** Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, op. cit., p. 135.
- 49** According to John Berger, 'Bacon questions nothing, unravels nothing. He accepts that the worst has happened. 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.' See John Berger, 'Francis Bacon and Walt Disney', in *About Looking* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), p. 123.
- 50** Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, op. cit., p. 145. Citation slightly modified.
- 51** Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, op. cit., p. 512. See also Walter Benjamin, 'Notes on a Theory of Gambling', in *Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 1, 1927-1930*, trans. Rodney Livingstone et al. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), pp. 297-98. I agree with Fredric Jameson that Benjamin's reflections on the temporality of the gambler constitute 'some of his most extraordinary pages'. See Fredric Jameson, *The Benjamin Files* (London: Verso, 2020), p. 93. To briefly outline parts of Benjamin's broader theory of the gambler: he notes the similarity between the gambler and the factory worker on the assembly line: the reflexive mechanism that the machine triggers in the worker appears again in gambling, 'for there can be no game without the quick movement of the hand by which the stake is put down or a card is picked up. The jolt in the movement of a machine is like the so-called *coup* in a game of chance.' While gambling and wage labour would appear to be starkly opposed activities, they are in fact, as Benjamin argues, intimately aligned: 'the drudgery of the labourer is, in its own way, a counterpart to the drudgery of the gambler. Both types of work are equally devoid of substance... The process of continually starting all over again is the regulative idea of gambling, as it is of wages for work.' (See Walter Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', in *Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938-1940*, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 330-31.) As with capitalist work, then, gambling is here tied to the empty temporality of repetition and the general disintegration of human experience. But this, as Benjamin reveals, is only one side of the story. The intoxication of the gambler, as he goes on, in a powerful shifting of the gears, 'depends on the peculiar capacity of the game to provoke *presence of mind* through the fact that, in rapid succession, it brings to the fore constellations which work...to summon up a thoroughly new, original reaction from the gambler.' (See Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, op. cit., pp. 512-13.) What Benjamin is thus aiming at with his theory of gambling is to imagine an overcoming of the capitalist labour process from within, and with it a transformation of time and experience. As the very embodiment
- of the world of exchange, the gambler, for Benjamin, dialectically prefigures its overcoming.
- 52** See Benjamin, 'On The Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress' (Convolute N), *Arcades Project*, op. cit., pp. 460-88; Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', in *Selected Writings, Volume 4*, op. cit., pp. 389-97.
- 53** As Benjamin puts it: 'Presence of mind as a political category comes magnificently to life in these words of Turgot: "Before we have learned to deal with things in a given position, they have already changed several times. Thus, we always perceive events too late, and politics always needs to foresee, so to speak, the present".' Benjamin, *Arcades*, op. cit., pp. 477-78.
- 54** See Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, op. cit., p. 33. Herbert Marcuse gives another formulation of this point when he says: 'The constitution of the world occurs behind the backs of individuals; yet it is their work'. See Herbert Marcuse, 'Philosophy and Critical Theory', in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory* (London: May Fly Books, 2009), p. 111.
- 55** Karl Korsch, *Karl Marx* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), p. 15. This is a modified translation of a phrase that appears in Marx, *Capital: Volume I*, op. cit., pp. 166-67. To further develop the idea of a subject's 'not knowing' about its role as an economic actor, we might introduce the fruitful psychoanalytic notion of disavowal. For an excellent analysis, see Alenka Zupančič, *Disavowal* (London: Polity, 2024).

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