



## Francis Bacon and Bullfighting

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**ENG Abstract.** This article explains how the physical and philosophical world of the *corrida* might nuance our understanding of life and work of the Anglo-Irish artist Francis Bacon, and vice-versa. To this end, the analysis is split into three sections. The first offers a biographical sketch of Bacon's interest in taurine subject-matter. This background context paves the way for an ethical and aesthetic comparison between the working practices of the painter and the matador. The third and last section interprets his final painting, *Study of a Bull*, as a vision of fear and pity to suggest Bacon blurred distinctions between man and beast as he neared death.

**Keywords:** Bullfighting; Francis Bacon; Pablo Picasso; *Study of a Bull*; Animal Studies.

### ES Francis Bacon y la tauromaquia

**Resumen.** Este artículo explica cómo el mundo físico y filosófico de la corrida puede matizar nuestra manera de comprender la vida y la obra del artista anglo-irlandés Francis Bacon, y viceversa. Para llevarlo a cabo, hemos dividido el análisis en tres apartados. El primero ofrece un esbozo biográfico del interés de Bacon por la temática taurina. Este contexto de fondo allana el camino para una comparación ética y estética entre las prácticas de trabajo del pintor y del matador. La tercera y última sección interpreta su pintura final, *Estudio de un toro*, como una visión de miedo y piedad. A medida que se acercaba a la muerte, Bacon ponía cada vez más énfasis en el carácter borroso de las distinciones entre el hombre y la bestia.

**Palabras clave:** Tauromaquia, Francis Bacon, Pablo Picasso, *Estudio de un toro*; Estudio de los animales.

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### 1. Introduction

The overarching theme of the “Francis Bacon: Man and Beast” exhibition at London’s Royal Academy, opened belatedly as a result of the pandemic in January 2022, was the artist’s fascination and identification with animals. Several bullfighting images included in the catalogue were discussed in useful albeit brief fashion (see Peppiatt, 2021; and Testar, 2021). The prominence given to tauromachy in the exhibition itself was, sadly, confused and confusing. *Triptych* (1987) – a painting which drew inspiration from the Andalusian poet and dramatist Federico García Lorca’s poetic elegy for bullfighter and dramatist Ignacio Sánchez Mejías – constituted the centrepiece of a room labelled “the bullfight”. Exhibition notes suggested the triptych was mimicking the three-part structure of a *corrida* in which a bull faces the horseback picadors and *banderilleros* (assistant bullfighters) prior to an individual showdown with the matador. Said hypothesis is undermined by the fact that the triptych is concerned primarily with the matador and a festering post-goring wound. In another room, labelled “After the bullfight”, Sánchez Mejías was referred to as having died a young man (his death was premature, but he was not exactly in the flush of youth – at forty-three, he had come out of retirement and, overweight, was arguably in no fit condition to continue practising his profession). Visitors were incorrectly informed that the bull struck a fatal blow at five in the afternoon – Sánchez Mejías’ final *corrida* begun at 1700 but, although the exact time of the goring remains unknown, it must have been later as it was not the first animal (the standard format for a *corrida* is for three matadors to face two bulls apiece) that killed him. Sánchez Mejías did not trust the local doctor in the provincial town of Manzanares: he insisted on being driven to receive treatment in Madrid (see Wheeler, 2022). As Lorca’s poem describes, he died two days later in the capital, after his wounds became infected with gangrene.

Pedantry aside, amending such basic errors draws attention to a broader epistemic lacunae. The importance of bullfighting in Bacon’s personal and professional trajectory is repeatedly referenced in

passing but not dissected with any degree of precision. A 2005 BBC *Arena* documentary on Bacon opens with clips of a matador being gored, the *corrida* a recurring motif throughout the ninety-minute programme. Misdiagnosing what was in reality a non-lethal injury, Rachel Campbell-Johnson wrote in her review: "The world that Bacon created was as complex, flamboyant and cruel as a bullfight, as the shocking opening sequence of a matador's death suggests" (2005, p. 23). In *The Independent*, Thomas Sutcliffe was left confused by what he assumed to be a biographical metaphor in the documentary:

I didn't fully understand this, other than as a reflection of his taste for cruelty refined into aesthetic spectacle. Was Bacon the matador or the bull? And if he was the matador, what exactly was it that he was spearing between the shoulder blades?' (2005, p. 21).

These are good questions to pose and grappling with them requires a sustained engagement with an issue consistently side-lined by Bacon scholarship: his personal and professional interest in bullfighting.

This article, designed as a triptych, seeks to settle this critical deficit. The opening section charts a biographical chronology for the artist's growing fascination with bullfighting. This provides the context to, in the middle part, locate said fascination within a broader canvas of painter and intellectuals to express an interest in taumachy. Against the backdrop of the increasing amount of time Bacon spent in Spain, the third and final section constitutes the first close and contextualised reading of *Study of a Bull* (1991), a painting completed shortly before the artist's death in Madrid. Bought by a private collector, Bacon's last painting had never been discussed, reproduced or exhibited until Martin Harrison discovered it as he prepared a catalogue of the artist's complete works. It was first put on public display as part of the *Francis Bacon, Monaco and French Culture* (2016) and *Francis Bacon: From Picasso to Velázquez* (2016-2017) retrospectives held in Monaco and Bilbao retrospectively.

## 2. Portrait of an Artist: A Violent (Auto)biography

What prompted Bacon's interest in the *corrida*, and how did it develop over time? The artist had been exposed to the violence of human and non-human animals from a young age. Bacon was born in 1909 in rural Ireland, where his father, a veteran of the Boer War, was now a racehorse trainer. The hunt was as ubiquitous during his childhood as *corridas* had been for many of the masters of Hispanic art. Chronic asthma ensured that, much to his father's disappointment, the young Bacon was a passive observer rather than an active participant. The *corrida* and the hunt later constituted prime raw materials for Bacon's interest in both decomposing flesh – the curators at the Guggenheim in Bilbao hung Goya's *Still Life with Dead Chicken* (1808-12) next to Bacon's *Chicken* (1982) – and violent ritual.

As Gilles Deleuze notes: 'Meat is undoubtedly the chief object of Bacon's pity, his only object of pity, his Anglo-Irish pity' (2005, p. 17). His paintings return time and again to what Mary Midgley terms 'our continuity with the rest of nature' (1995, p. xxiv). Animals may be non-human but we are human animals. Deleuze's interpretations map neatly (too neatly perhaps) onto the artist's own statements about his work. According to Ben Ware, by replicating Bacon's affective focus in his exegesis, he 'fails to give account of what it is that actually compels our interest in them' (2019, p. 15). Nor does the French philosopher give many clues as to how and why Bacon felt compelled to return to specific subject-matter. Howard Caygill has criticised him for ignoring the specificity of Bacon's signature brand of pictorial aggression: 'by locating this violence in the tension between force and flesh Deleuze overlooks its specific, *cynegetic* character as a violence proper to the hunt' (2019, p. 21).

The publication in 2021 of Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swann's exhaustive biography, *Revelations*, has helped to rectify an issue diagnosed by Ernst Van Alphen in the following terms: 'one of the major problems in Bacon scholarship is the authority granted his own voice in the numerous interviews with him' (2003, p. 58). Stevens and Swann document, for example, the reciprocal benefits of his relationship with David Sylvester. On the hunt for a young painter to champion, the critic helped Bacon to render selectively his biography in iconic prose. Sarah Whitfield, Sylvester's companion later in life, claimed the artist would often telephone the critic to ask his advice about answering interviewers' questions (p. 551). Stevens and Swann explore how and why the meticulously curated published conversations between Bacon and Sylvester concealed efforts made by the former as a young man in Paris to gain instruction and secure work in commercial design: "He could then emerge miraculously as an artist, as if sprung fully formed from the head of Zeus" (p. 86).

According to the Anglo-Irish painter's earlier biographer, Michael Peppiatt: 'Picasso's hold over Bacon's imagination while he was young has never been analysed in sufficient depth, even though it provides the single most important key to understanding both his origins and his coming of age as a painter' (1996, p. 59). When the National Gallery approached Bacon to curate an exhibition based on his favourite paintings from their permanent collection as part of a series titled *The Artist's Eye* in 1985, earlier Spanish masters Francisco de Goya and Diego Velázquez figured prominently. Bacon said that he lost his faith when he was sixteen or seventeen (Stevens and Swan, 2021, p. 42). Effusive professions of non-belief later in life did not impede him from seeking beauty and inspiration in religious art. In her review of a 2004 retrospective held at the Museum of Modern Art in Valencia, Sue Hubbard wrote:

Seeing this great English painter in a Spanish context is to revitalise him, for it connects him back not only to Velázquez and Catholic art, to the ancient rituals of bull fighting and the myths and tragedies of Greece, but also to the existential questions embedded deep within the mysteries and paradoxes of faith. (2004, p. 28)

If Bacon had been exposed to the violent pageantry of the Anglo-Irish countryside from childhood, his later encounters with the world of the bullring would be mediated through a combination of art history, photography and personal experience. He kept over fifty-six taurine images and books in his studio,<sup>1</sup> which included Robert Daley's illustrated book about matadors, *Swords of Spain* (Edwards and Ogden, 2001, p. 32). Bacon probably attended his first *corrida* in Madrid on route to Tangiers (a Spanish protectorate where a bullring opened in 1950) in 1958, and the artist subsequently developed a more profound interest during his trips to the South of France and Spain during the 1960s, on which he visited the historic bullrings of Nîmes and Ronda (Stevens and Swan, 2021, p. 228). In a letter dated 25 January 1966, Bacon wrote to his friend, the French Surrealist painter and ethnographer Michel Leiris, to acknowledge receipt of his taurine tract first published in 1938 "For weeks I have been meaning to write to thank you for sending me your superb *Miroir de la Tauromachie*. I am very happy to have it" (cited in Gagolian Gallery, 2006, p. 5).

At a time when most bullfighting activities in Spain had been suspended due to the human bloodshed of the Civil War, Leiris wrote from the relative safety of Paris that the ritual for matador and audience alike constituted a quest for transcendence, an eroticised release from 'the feeling of a diminished, castrated life' (Leiris, 1993, p. 22) so typical, he thought, of the present-day:

In the current state of things (remarkable for an unusual dearth of festivity), an institution such as the *corrida* – which seems, in more than one respect, to confirm to the schema of ancient tragedy – acquires a special value, for it appears to be the only institution in our modern occidental world able to satisfy the demands that we have the right to make of any spectacle, in real life as at the theater with its props and illusions, or on the terra firma of a training field. (1993, pp. 22-23)

This is the best-informed articulation of a modernist fascination with bullfighting, encompassing figures ranging from D.H. Lawrence to Ernest Hemingway, Virginia Woolf to Pablo Picasso. As Laurence Foley surmises in the conclusion to an outstanding PhD on the subject: 'For its figurative potential, its provision of an aesthetic model, its bridging of the gap between a remote past and an unfamiliar present, the *corrida* was an important, and hitherto unheeded touchstone for an array of modernism's most canonical figures' (2014, p. 181). Bacon was of a younger generation than these modernists, but he was out of synch with the artistic trends and social mores of swinging London, as nonplussed by Abstract Expressionism as Pop Art.

Bacon's fascination with photographic images was linked with his twin convictions that the camera's ability to render the empirical world had made realism in painting largely redundant, but that recoiling from physical bodies was a wholly inadequate response to a shift of this kind. In the early 1960s, the Swiss sculptor Alberto Giacometti introduced him to Leiris who became a trusted confidant, a connection with both mainland Europe and the past.

Bacon's earliest extant painting to feature a bull is *Portrait of Isabel Rawsthorne in a Street in Soho* (1967). The beast is in the background, looming behind the subject as a portent of dangers, old and new: 'The classical power of a bull – trapped in a mirror-like reflection – is now meeting the automotive wheel of the modern age. The bull's horn is also a stylish wheel cover' (Stevens and Swann, 2021, p. 499). The ancestral *corrida* comes into the foreground in *Study for Bullfight No. 1* and *Study for Bullfight No. 2*, both from 1969.

Two years later, Bacon became only the second living artist, after Picasso, to be honoured with a retrospective at Paris's Grand Palais. According to Manuela B. Mena Marqués: "It is difficult to understand why Bacon, or the organizers, chose for the poster of this decisive exhibition a singularly Spanish painting: *Study for Bullfight No. 1*. Perhaps to highlight the differences with Picasso?" (2016, pp. 30-31).<sup>2</sup> There may be a kernel of truth in said explanation for the prominence given to what is not generally considered to be amongst Bacon's finest works.<sup>3</sup> The implicit suggestion that the subject-matter might be regarded parochial nonetheless downplays the extent to which Spain's so-called national *fiesta* was a source of fascination for Bacon and others. Photos from the Paris opening night, for example, show the British artist in conversation with André Masson, the French surrealist painter whose *Bull Fight* (1936) and *Bullfighting* (1937) predated *Guernica* and Picasso's use of taurine mythology and iconography to denounce the horrors of the Spanish Civil War in which an illegal coup toppled a democratic regime and resulted in a long dictatorship (1939-1975).

Three years after General Franco's death, the first major Spanish retrospective of Bacon's work took place at the Juan March Foundation in Madrid in 1978. By coincidence, the Foundation's cultural director, in charge of the Bacon catalogue, was the future taurine critic for the *ABC* newspaper, Andrés Amorós, whose father had been responsible for Ernest Hemingway's legal affairs in Spain. José Capa Eiriz, director of exhibitions at the Foundation, recalls that Bacon "was captivated by the *torero* – the sexuality, the elegance, the outfit, the ballet of it" (cited in Burnett, 2009, p. 6). On first viewing, it is tempting to discern clear taurine influences on the two most recent paintings – *Lying Figure* (1977) and *Triptych* (1974-1977) – included in the Juan March retrospective. Such a claim nevertheless requires a disclaimer: the use of circular arenas predates Bacon's work as a painter, and is present in the furniture designs of his youth. In other words, an artistic preoccupation with the geometrical form existed prior to his first documented encounters with the bullring. It is nevertheless striking that Deleuze wrote in some detail about the formal and importance of rings for Bacon's art (2005,

<sup>1</sup> I am extremely grateful to Logan Sisley of Hugh Lane Gallery for very generously giving of his time to compile me a list of bullfighting materials contained in the artist's studio.

<sup>2</sup> 'Es difícil entender por qué Bacon, o los organizadores, eligieron como cartel de esa decisiva exposición un cuadro singularmente español, *Estudio para corrida de toros, no. 1*, de 1969. ¿Tal vez para marcar las diferencias con Picasso?'

<sup>3</sup> As John Russell notes: 'When Bacon tried to paint a bullfight in 1969, he found that it didn't really work to his satisfaction because the image itself was already too dramatic' (1971, p. 135).

pp. 1-5) without making any reference to the bullring, the sacred space of the *corrida* described in Vicente Blasco Ibáñez's 1908 novel, *Sangre y arena/Blood and Sand* as 'the circular space of sand where the afternoon's tragedy would take place for the emotion and joy of fourteen thousand people' (2011, p. 43).<sup>4</sup> Bordering on the inexplicable is the fact that critics have largely ignored the explicit reference to the Roman amphitheatre (used as a bullring) in their descriptions of Bacon's poster for the 1988 "Van Gogh in Arles" exhibition.<sup>5</sup> Van Gogh's shoes are quite clearly designed to look like those worn by a matador, his paintbrush curved like that of a killing sword and, crucially, Bacon's signature round ring is oblong in line with Arles's idiosyncratic bullfighting arena (see Wheeler, 2023).

### 3. Artists, Intellectuals and Matadors

Painting can, of course, be used to denounce as well as to normalise or even justify animal cruelty. As early as the eighteenth century, William Hogarth's engravings for *The Four Stages of Cruelty* (1751) suggested a link between cruelty to animals by children and violence in later-life. Barcelona-based artist Antoni Tàpies, campaigned for bullfighting to be outlawed in Catalonia (as it was in 2011), whilst other contemporary Spanish artists retain a personal and/or professional interest in the so-called national *fiesta*. Antonio Saura published a book on the subject (1983). Miquel Barceló, raised around bulls in Mallorca, only began to incorporate tauromachy into his art after returning from Africa, where he read Leiris's ethnographic writing (see García Puchades & Corella Lacasa, 2014). Leiris, who attended his first *corrida* with Picasso, believed "the bullfight is not so much a sport as tragic art, wherein harmonious Apollonian forms get twisted by the arousal of Dionysian forces" (1993, p. 30).

Discipline and excess inscribe Bacon into aesthetic genealogies to which Greek tragedy and the Spanish *corrida* also belong. Regarding the fishnet stockings Bacon wore under his trousers, Darian Laeder observed: "Lines had to be inscribed on the body, exactly as in his paintings of the human figure; this linear, artificial dimension had to be made present as a counterpoint to the excessive and problematic substantiality of flesh" (2019, p. 89). Goya claimed he had fought bulls in his youth (Hughes, 2003, p. 351), and his *Self Portrait in the Studio* (1790-1795) presents the artist working at the canvas in what appears to be a stylish matador's garb. Basque painter Ignacio Zuloaga (1870-1945) created bullfighting scenes from observance and experience: "In his early twenties, having apparently failed as a painter, antique dealer, and bookkeeper, he enlisted in the school of Carmona in Seville, and was making fair progress when he was so seriously gored by his eighteenth bull that out of respect for his mother's wishes, he abandoned the ring" (McMahon, 1925, p. 128). Figurative artist and painter Fernando Botero (1932-2023) attended bullfighting school as an adolescent in his native Colombia, where he learnt the basics of tauromachy and began to sketch for the first time. Even putting his nationality to one side, Bacon's health meant he was unlikely to face a bull, but he repurposed the theatricality of the *corrida* in his own inimitable fashion. John Rothenstein, the then-director of the Tate, described him holding court at the after-party for his first retrospective at the London gallery in the early 1960s: "instead of wearing his black leather coat he swung it about as a toreador his cloak" (see Stevens and Swan, 2021, p. 457). A photograph of a matador preening himself in the mirror before heading out to the ring later provided a point of departure for Bacon's *Study for Portrait of Gilbert de Botton* (1986).

Leiris is thought to have attended roughly forty bullfights during his lifetime (Guss, 2009, p. 951), more than many non-Spanish commentators to have written on the subject but far less than most serious aficionados, Goya and Picasso included. Shortly after attending his first *corrida* aged eight, Picasso's debut painting, *Le petite picador*, homed in on the horse-riding members of the matador's team (Utley, 2017, p. 65). Apropos watching a badly gored horse being carried out of the ring at a bullfight, the adult Picasso commented to Sir John Richardson: "These horses are the women in my life" (cited in Richardson, 2017, p. 15). Picasso's great matador friend, Luis Miguel Dominguín, organised a *corrida* in the south of France to celebrate the painter's eightieth birthday. On Picasso's insistence, local laws were contravened by killing the bull in public (O'Brian, 2010, pp. 443-44). For the casual attendee, what generally seems most shocking about a professional *corrida* are the climax in which the matador attempts (and more often than not fails) to kill the bull with one quick thrust of the sword and, earlier on, when the mounted picadors weaken the bull as it charges into the horse in the first act. After attending *corridas* with his then-wife, Caroline Blackwood, in Arcachon in the south of France, Lucian Freud (a painter, like Bacon, fascinated by animals, horses in particular) was rather too quick to jump to obvious conclusions about what he had witnessed:

There's a kind of equivalent in painting to the matador who waves the picadors away. The picadors make holes in the shoulder muscles so that the bull isn't quite so dangerous and there are painters – Manet is the real example – who actually waved the picadors away because they want the bull to be itself. (Cited in Feaver, 2019, p. 448)

For once, there is an error or at least simplification in Freud's vision. Although horse-backed picadors do sometimes excessively weaken the bull, their participation is designed to showcase and rouse the bravura of the animal: lower-status *corridas* do not require the bulls to be piqued and the regulatory number of pics

<sup>4</sup> 'el espacio circular de arena donde iba a realizarse la tragedia de la tarde para emoción y regocijo de catorce mil personas.' This is a counter-intuitive blind-spot in Bacon scholarship, Margarita Cappock the only critic to my knowledge to have raised the subject (2003, pp. 188-90). It is also raised in tangential fashion by Georges Didi-Huberman (2005).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the conspicuous absence of references to this matter in official catalogues (Foundation Vincent Van Gogh, 2013; Sabatier, 2012, pp. 110-11).

to be administered rises according to the status of the plaza. In the nineteenth-century, bulls that did not adequately charge against the horses were punished by having swords with fireworks attached placed in their backs by the *banderilleros*, a rare occurrence and the ultimate dishonour for the breeders who had brought them to the ring. An additional rationale for the inclusion of the picadors is to lower the bull's head and charge in order to facilitate the matador making artful passes prior to the final kill.

Confusion derives from the translation of *corrida* (literally "running" [of the bull]) as bullfight in English with its implications of sport and fair play. Matadors are brave, but it would be suicidal to routinely accept 50-50 odds. Many do nevertheless suffer career-ending or mortal injuries. Francis Wolff, an Emeritus Professor from the Sorbonne – and darling of the pro-taurine lobby<sup>6</sup> – argues that a principal virtue of the *corrida* is that "only he who risks his own life can kill the esteemed animal" (2013, p. 70).<sup>7</sup> In the words of Iain Bamforth:

Art is surely the exclusion of death, which obliterates the aesthetic. The only art form I can think of which meaningfully includes it – which turns on doing an animal to death – is the bullfight. There the danger of exposure to the bull's horns keep him in a mortal risk, as that restrained masochist, Michel Leiris, notes in *L'Age d'homme* thereby saving the torero from an art of vain affectation. (2000)

Claims of this kind can readily descend into what Scottish novelist A.L. Kennedy caricatures as Hemingway's "menopausal bar-room stories, the foreigner trying too hard to be part of Spain but, all the while, hoping to keep it exclusive" (2000, p. 37). Irrespective of whether we subscribe to this romantic(ised) vision, bullfighting as a touchstone of authenticity constitutes a recurring and key trope in the history of Spanish art and ideas (Guss, 2009, p. 955). To cite just one example, Eduardo Arroyo's artwork playfully riffs on images traditionally associated with Spain, bullfighting and flamenco central to this lexicon. This does not, however, imply that the Madrid-born painter adopts a kitsch as opposed to sincere approach: "I am proud of being knowledgeable about bulls; I think it is enormously difficult to be knowledgeable about the bulls; it is much easier to have knowledge of boxing" (Arroyo and Pereda, 1998, p. 120).<sup>8</sup>

For Lorca, the *corrida* constituted the quintessential embodiment of "duende", a quasi-mystical quality of passion and inspiration par excellence: "The bulls is where it is in its most impressive guise as it has to contend, on the one hand, with death, that can control it and, on the other, with geometry, with measuredness, the fundamental basis of the *fiesta*" (García Lorca, 1984, p. 106).<sup>9</sup> The grounding principal of the bullfighter earning the right to kill by putting his own life on the line chimes with Bacon's ethics and aesthetics, steeped in risk and violence, sensations that alert the senses. A friendship with Lucian Freud came into doubt when Sigmund's grandson was appalled by Bacon almost losing an eye after his lover, Peter Lacy, drunkenly threw him from a glass window (Gayford, 2018, p. 420). The quarrelling lovers were in turn disappointed by Freud's opprobrium.<sup>10</sup> For Bacon, a patron of casinos, "[p]ainting became a gamble in which every gain made had to be resisted in the search for further gain" (Sylvester, 2002, pp. 454-55). The matador who recoils from danger will never be able to create art, talent and the possibility of the sublime revealed when the stakes are high. To quote Lorca: "The bull has his orbit, the bullfighter his and between these two orbits there is a danger point, the vertex of the terrible game" (1984, p. 106).<sup>11</sup> At his peak, Bacon was a rare case of will-power, instinct and risk substituting for technical prowess and conventional training.

On the one hand, as Martin Gayford highlights, he saw "little point in painting unless one aimed to rival the very greatest, to aim at the standard of Poussin and Picasso" (2018, p. 25). Conversely, however, he had limited technical resources to fall back on when, as could happen, his calculated recklessness failed to deliver. In 1978, a workman stole a painting of a bullfighting scene from Bacon's London studio at 7 Reece Mews. It was later retrieved by the police. The artist paid a reward only to then cut the painting up and threw it into a dustbin (Harrison, 2016, p. 93). This is an extreme manifestation of how painters, unlike matadors, enjoy the privilege of privacy and self-curation. According to British theatre critic and aficionado Kenneth Tynan: "there is no consistency in bullfighting": "The torero is the only artist who works in public, improvising every time with bizarre and unfamiliar material" (1955, p. 42).

In 1913, Sánchez Mejías was guest of honour at a dinner hosted by a leading group of intellectuals and artists. The invitation, whose signatories included dramatist Ramón María del Valle-Inclán and novelist Ramón Pérez de Ayala, stated: "The bullfighting cloaks and muletas are not lower in the aesthetic hierarchy than pens and brushes and burins. They might even have pre-eminence as the kind of beauty they create is sublime precisely because it is evanescent" (cited in De Ros, 2000, pp. 116-117). Not everyone sees things this way. Having travelled to Madrid to attend Las Ventas, A.L. Kennedy acknowledges that the '*corrida* can sometimes create the effect of art (as can, for that matter, a voodoo ceremony, a funeral, or a high mass', yet 'although it has its own rigours and remarkable individual toreros, currently lacks that overarching discipline, creative economy and communicative breadth of an art' (2000, pp. 86-87). The opinions of a matador judging dramatic literature on such limited trips to the theatre would rightfully not be taken that seriously. Georges

<sup>6</sup> There has even been a documentary film made about Wolff's philosophy of bullfighting: *Un filósofo en la rueda/A Philosopher on the Sand* (Aarón Fernández and César Jesús Manuel Muñoz, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> 'sólo puede matar al respetado animal aquél que arriesga la propia vida'.

<sup>8</sup> "me precio de ser un buen conocedor de toros; yo creo que ser un buen conocedor de toros es enormemente difícil; es mucho más fácil ser un buen conocedor de boxeo."

<sup>9</sup> "En los toros adquiere sus acentos más impresionantes porque tiene que luchar, por un lado, con la muerte, que puede destruirlo, y, por otro lado, con la geometría, con la medida, base fundamental de la fiesta".

<sup>10</sup> For the best description of their friendship and what it signified for their respective biographies and art, see the opening chapter of Smees, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> "El toro tiene su órbita, el torero la suya, y entre órbita y órbita hay un punto de peligro, donde está el vértice del terrible juego".

Didi-Huberman is amongst the most insightful foreign commentators on the aesthetics of the *corrida* because, despite being a fairly regularly attendee, the French philosopher remains modest in stressing the multiple dimensions of tauromachy of which he remains ignorant (see, for example, 2005, p. 184). Kennedy's observation that the bullfight provides the source for good photographic images, but does not withstand being filmed due its troughs and failings (2000, p. 137), is arguably evidence of a basic misunderstanding. In the words of Garry Marvin, for aficionados: "It is the existence of the difficulties and obstacles to a great performance, and yet the ever-present possibility of seeing a great performance, something which would signal that the difficulties had been overcome, which kept their interest" (1988, p. 80). The possibility of transcendence, however fleeting, draws them back to the ritualised spectacle.

A *corrida* was staged in Las Ventas in 1940 in honour of Heinrich Himmler's first visit to Francoist Spain. He was greeted with Nazi salutes by both the matadors and the crowd, although the Head of the SS was appalled by the theatre of cruelty. Bacon's *Study for Bullfight No. 1* includes a flag resembling the "Parteíadler", the eagle and swastika emblem of the Nazi party, which appears above the crowd. The most enduring monument to Spanish fascism is 'el Valle de los Caídos' [The Valley of the Fallen], built by forced labour after the Civil War. A snapshot of Bacon with a younger Spanish lover in front of the Caudillo's mausoleum, an architectural wonder, is testament to his prioritising of beauty over justice.

Even in the aftermath of the Axis defeat, Bacon refused to acquiesce in what he believed to be the false pieties of liberal democratic consensus: "I think the suffering of people and the differences between people are what have made good art, and not egalitarianism" (cited in Sylvester, 1993, p. 125). To borrow a phrase from Stevens and Swan: "Bacon could not forget that Nazis were also human. It was human to be inhuman" (2021, p. 194). Bacon did not share Picasso's left-wing politics or posturing, but this did not prevent him from being moved by *Guernica*. As Stephen F. Eisenman notes, "[s]timulating the perceptual cognition of animals, Picasso dispenses with syntax" in *Guernica* (2013, p. 213). The anguished horses simultaneously reflect the horrors of modern-day warfare and Picasso's childhood recollections of watching *corridas* at a time when the equine participants had no protective coverings and were regularly disembowelled. As can be witnessed in *Crucifixion, 1933* (1964), it became a touchstone for Bacon's seething empathy with the centurion's horse at the scene of Christ's execution (see Onians, 2019). Bullfighting, so the standard defence runs, forces the viewer to address the reality behind the façade. Salvaging beauty from misery, as opposed to questioning the material conditions that give birth to tragedy, is not automatically praiseworthy. John Berger's damning critique of Bacon lends itself to being repurposed to vilify the codified ritual of the *corrida*: "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 into more and more elegant art" (2017, p. 347).

The Marxist art critic characterises Bacon as 'a brilliant stage manager rather than an original artist' (2017, p. 342), an over-rated 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 it" (2017, p. 348). Berger neglects to mention that Eisenstein was a great admirer of Walt Disney, the two men being photographed smiling alongside Mickey Mouse. Sylvester, who coined the term 'kitchen-sink' to pejoratively characterise much of the social-realist art of his age, was as much the painter's cheerleader as the critic's nemesis: "It is not surprising that Berger failed to recognise the value of Bacon; he was too much of a boy scout not to see Bacon as a monster of depravity" (2002, p. 16). Berger came to appreciate Bacon later in life, but a puritanical streak coerced him into demanding a social utilitarianism anathema to the artist's world-view. Bacon's commitment to the possibility of transcendence through the figurative form helps to contextualise the apparent anomaly of a vocal atheist rejecting Abstract Expressionism as decorative self-indulgence, whilst engaging with religious art and what Lorca characterised as the "liturgy of the bulls" (1984, pp. 105-106).<sup>12</sup>

#### 4. *Study of a Bull: A Dying Animal in Madrid*

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Madrid replaced Paris and Berlin as Bacon's European city of choice. Good weather and the presence of José Capelo, his last great love, contextualise the attraction to a country whose culture had long inspired him. There are few clues about the number of *corridas* Bacon attended. An undated postcard sent to Leiris from the late 1980s refers to staying on for a *corrida* on the 27<sup>th</sup> as if this were an unsurprising but not necessarily routine activity (Gagosian Gallery, 2006, p. 46). Amorós recalls that Bacon was a familiar face at Las Ventas bullring, but that the painter never became integrated into taurine circles.<sup>13</sup> This impression is shared by matadors active in the late 1980s that I have consulted on the matter. Stevens and Swann suggest that the steep and uncomfortable seating in Las Ventas brought on vertigo in an artist fast approaching his eightieth birthday (2021, p. 662). His final painting, *Study of a Bull* – a relatively rare example from his oeuvre of a monochrome painting, which incorporated dust from his own London studio to imitate the sandy arena floor – is the culmination of taurine fixation that transmits both pity and fear.

One of Bacon's most quoted Wildean aphorisms was: "Bullfighting is like boxing, a marvellous aperitif to sex" (cited in Russell, 1971, p. 221). As two ritualistic forms of violence, boxing and bullfighting are frequent bedfellows for non-Hispanic commentators such as Hemingway, Didi-Huberman and Norman Mailer. Possible points of comparison have traditionally been conceptualised somewhat differently in Spain.

<sup>12</sup> "la liturgia de los toros".

<sup>13</sup> E-mail sent to the author on 3 January 2017.

Eighteenth-century Spanish visitors to London reacted with a mixture of fascination and disgust to the pugilistic persuasion of their hosts (see Bolufer Peruga, 2019). The widespread belief in nineteenth-century Spain that boxing was distinct to, as well as more barbaric than (Shubert, 1999, p. 170), bullfighting is upheld in the present-day by *El País*. The national newspaper of record gives extensive coverage to *corridos* in its culture sections (albeit now relegated from the print to digital editions), but tells contributors not to write about boxing, that cruel and indefensible sport. For aficionados, the bullring is a unique and sacred space, the most cultured *fiesta* in the modern world according to Lorca's gnomic formulation on the matter.

Present-day abolitions refer to bullfighting and boxing alike as anti-Enlightenment aberrations appealing to base passions, but most philosophies of the *corrida* submit to what Midgley disparages as "the essentially colonial picture [...] in which an imported governor, namely Reason, imposes order on a chaotic alien tribe of Passions or Instincts" (1995, p. 260). The three-part *corrida* is structured as a performative display of the mastery of human intelligence, and by implication civilisation, over a wild beast of nature. Heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali famously described himself as a master boxer and dismissed opponent George Foreman as nothing more than pugilistic mass: 'The bull is stronger but the matador is smarter' (cited in Erenberg, 2019, p. 202). In Norman Mailer's *The Fight*, the veteran journalist – who had earlier documented bullfights in Mexico – proffers vivid visual imagery of the 1974 world heavyweight bout: 'Ali was now taking in the reactions of Foreman's head the way a bullfighter lines up a bull before going in over the horns for the kill' (1991, p. 202). Bacon refused to subscribe to a premise accepted, in spite of their differences, by both the pro- and anti-bullfighting lobbies: the assumption that culture is inherently civilised and civilising. His defence of bullfighting decried hypocrisy not violence:

When you go into a butcher's shop and see how beautiful meat can be and then you think about it, you can think of the whole horror of life – of one thing living off another. It's like all those stupid things that are said about bullfighting. Because people will eat meat and then complain about bullfighting; they will go in and complain about bull-fighting covered with furs and with birds in their hair. (Cited in Sylvester, 1993, p. 48)

This is not advocacy for vegetarianism or not wearing animal skin: Bacon simply accepts violence as a natural part of the Nietzschean order of things. In the *Poet in New York* collection, Lorca employs animalistic imagery in "Office and Denunciation" to decry commuter life, enumerating the daily execution behind closed doors of four million ducks or five million pigs for the mechanical consumption of meat (1998). By comparison, the *corrida* is made to appear honourably transparent. A probable influence for Bacon were the photos novelist George Bataille commissioned of La Villette slaughterhouse for the Surrealist magazine he edited, *Documents*. Bataille, who draw on his personal experience of witnessing twenty-year old Valencian bullfighter Manuel Granero being fatally gored in Madrid for the erotic 1928 novella *Story of the Eye*, was of the belief, in the words of Stephen F. Eisenman, that the abattoir "is horrible not because of the violence against numberless animals but because it denies humans the satisfaction of their essential sanguinary desire" (2013, p. 229).

Unlike aficionados, Bacon made no clear-cut distinction between human and non-human participants, professing no loyalty to the man in the suit of lights. In ethical terms, his position substantiates what legal philosopher Richard A. Posner identifies as the risk of not maintaining a 'bright line between animals and human beings': 'we may end up treating human beings as badly as we treat animals, rather than treating animals as well as we treat (or aspire to treat) human beings. Equation is a transitive relation' (2004, p. 61). Bacon reputedly became exasperated with Nikos Stangos for vocalising his disagreement with animal testing, just as horrible as testing on babies according to the Greek poet and editor. Of course people were going to test on animals, the artist retorted. There was, in Bacon's opinion, no reason why they shouldn't test on babies instead but they wouldn't (Eisenman, 2021, p. 53).

Bullfighting shares with Bacon a fixation on the readiness by which the powerful can be rendered powerless. Success for the matador resides not only in administering an effective kill, but also in showcasing the bull's bravura. In *Portrait of Isabel Rawsthorne in a Street in Soho*, Bacon is uncharacteristically hagiographic in his depiction of his artist and designer friend, who died just before him in 1992: "She is not only a duchess but a matador in the ring with the bull under control and an admiring crowd in the distance" (Stevens and Swann, 2021, p. 499). But practicing matadors know that live bulls are never completely domesticated. The point of departure for *Triptych* (1987), the centrepiece of his largest exhibition in Paris for many years was Lorca's poetic elegy for Sánchez Mejías. The poem's obsessive fixation with blood, penetrated flesh and gangrene found its visual correlative in the bruised perforated human legs of Bacon's canvas is his most explicit engagement in a broader lyrical and heuristic discourse surrounding Spain's national *fiesta*. Bacon may well have believed *Triptych* was going to be his last major work (Stevens and Swann, 2021, p. 653). He returned to the taurine theme with a painting completed not long before his death.

*Study of a Bull* reproduces the panoramic view visible from the cheapest tickets in a bullring on the highest tiers of the sunny-side that loom down and across at the gate through which the bull is released. In compositional terms, the positioning of the bull perhaps pertains to pre-existing visual schema. Parallels can be drawn with Marius Maxwell's *A Super Bull Buffalo* (taken from his 1928 photographic collection *Stalking Big Game with a Camera* book, a reference point for Bacon since the 1940s), which renders a mighty quarry pursued this time by a camera rather than a gun, whose photographer has to get perilously close in order to secure his shot. There is, however, an expression of disorientation in *Study of a Bull* not present in the photograph. The subject has been removed from its natural habitat. Less iconic than the so-called moment of truth – the point of maximum risk for the matador, raising the sword for the final kill – there are only a

handful of images of the bull at this initial stage in the photographic books from Bacon's studio. A staple of technologically advanced twenty-first century broadcasts by Canal+, the static cameras of television broadcasts, a fixture of Spanish bars in the early-1990s, rarely featured bulls coming out of the wings. As Martin Harrison has commented of a painting seemingly inspired by Leiris's recent death and Lorca's poem:

The bull is monumental, magisterial, standing motionless and implacable at the top of the picture-field. It is not a Minotaur as in Picasso's iconography of the 1930s, but rather a metaphorical bull-man, the noble but threatened beast with which Bacon is identifying (2016, p. 1392).

Picasso admired the bulls but revealed little interest in identifying with their or for that matter his own vulnerability. There is an empathetic sense of confusion and trepidation in *Study of a Bull* also absent from the galloping sketch of a bull adorning an invitation (that Bacon daubed with ink and kept in his studio) to Claude Viallat's "Dessins" 1991 exhibition at the George Pompidou Centre. It is also instructive in this regard to compare Bacon's painting with a drawing from 1933 by Edward Burra, an artist "wholly unsentimental about animals" (Stevenson, 2007, pp. 191-192), of a bullfight which adopts a similar viewpoint but foregrounds the interaction of the spectators as opposed to the bull.

Positioning his subject between darkness and light lends itself to a symbolic interpretation as the bull finds itself in a liminal zone between life and death. Aficionados and breeders often claim the moment in which the eyes of the sacrificial beast have yet to adjust to the light represents the moment of maximum stress, although this questionable assertion is generally made to downplay the cruelty of the *corrida* in its entirety. In any case, that a matador's gesture of greeting his opponent by going down on his knees (*a puerta goyola*) is so risky is attributable to the human immobility of this posture and the unpredictability of an animal with distorted vision. It is impossible to ascertain how much Bacon knew about such technicalities but, beyond its metaphorical weight, the light and darkness of *Study of a Bull* reveals an artist attuned to the sensations experienced by his subject as it exits the dark tunnel into a loud sunny arena. To answer a question posed at the beginning of the article, Bacon was willing to cast himself as both the matador and the bull, but the imminence of death brought him increasingly into the orbit of the participant in the *corrida* less likely to survive.

Ignoring medical advice, he travelled to Madrid in April 1992. After suffering a cardiac arrest, he was cared for by nuns. When hospitalised, he was taken to the Ruben Clinic where he was cared for by the nuns.<sup>14</sup> Sister Mercedes has since become a minor celebrity in Spain, recalling on television the dying artist seeking solace by sketching pictures of bulls. Following his death on 28 April, he was placed in a coffin and taken to the Almudena church to be cremated. The few reporters who turned up (there would likely have been more if it had not been for an ETA terrorist bombing elsewhere in the city that same day) were not permitted access to the chapel, and there were no mourners (Stevens and Swan, 2021, p. 701). According to Bacon's wishes, no funeral service was held. His ashes were returned to the UK, but no gravestone exists in either London or Madrid. *Study for Bullfight No. 1* was employed as a posthumous homage in promotional materials for the 1992 Nimes bullfighting season. This was a rare tribute to a figure long considered to be Britain's greatest living artist.

If Bacon's interest in bullfighting has been relegated to the realm of the anecdotal by art critics, the painter has largely been ignored by experts in bullfighting. This is counter-intuitive given that aficionados in contemporary Spain defend themselves from the rallying call of abolitions, "It's not culture, it's torture", with a rollcall of artists and intellectuals to have been interested in bullfighting. In 2017, matador Enrique Ponce took the now traditional Picasso-style *corrida* to the next level, premiering *Crisol* [Crucible], a synaesthetic spectacle incorporating classical musical, flamenco and works by the French artist Loren at the Malaga bullring (see Wheeler, 2018). Two years later, Las Ventas launched the season with an advertising campaign featuring extracts from Lorca alongside Peruvian matador Andrés Roca Rey to commemorate the centenary of the poet arriving from his native Andalusia to the Spanish capital. Bacon hardly advertised his presence in bullrings, whilst neither his oeuvre nor his biography lends itself to the taurine lobby's programme of reputational management.

Violent sensations stirred by Bacon and bullfights alike are not edifying, but rather all too human. This analogy can, however, only go so far: a painter's work, however tortured, does not generally rely on the almost inevitable sacrifice of an animal and occasional death of a man. Some, although no means all, of what Bacon produced with paint and matadors with their cape constitute culture by any definition, occasionally of a high order. Acknowledging that does not rule out moral objections. What is disturbing about Bacon and bullfights alike are the mirrors they offer to human civilisation. Art, like people and life, can be bloody cruel.

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<sup>14</sup> Bacon was taken to room 417, where matinee idol Tyrone Power – whose many credits included the lead role in a film adaptation of *Blood and Sand* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1941) – had also spent his final days after suffering a heart attack.



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