

Picasso, Bacon and the Time of Monsters

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I.

In an interview in 1945, Picasso was pressed for his thoughts on the relationship between politics and art. He responded by taking two pieces of paper and scribbling down 'a written declaration so that no one will have any doubts [on] the matter'. His mini-manifesto reads as follows:

What do you think an artist is? An imbecile who only has eyes if he's a painter, ears if he's a musician, or a lyre in every chamber of his heart if he's a poet...? Quite the contrary, he is at the same time a political being constantly alert to the horrifying, passionate or pleasing events in the world, shaping himself completely in their image. How is it possible to be uninterested in other men and by virtue of what cold nonchalance can you detach yourself from the life that they supply so copiously? No, painting is not made to decorate apartments. It's an offensive and defensive weapon against the enemy.¹

While the journalist effectively goads Picasso into making this statement – suggesting that his recent decision to join the Communist Party is merely another personal whim and that art and politics have nothing in common – the artist's remarks nevertheless bring into focus a number of crucial aesthetic questions. What, exactly, constitutes political art – art as a 'weapon' against the status quo? Is art politically meaningful only insofar as it engages in an explicit critique of society? Or can artworks devoid of a concrete political message still harbour radical political potential?

These questions remain urgent for us today, at a time when art's role is becoming increasingly uncertain. What follows will explore them in relation to Picasso and Bacon by focussing on a particular theme – that of *monsters*. Simply stated: how can the monsters that we encounter in the works of Picasso and Bacon prompt us to think again about the relation between art and politics? Moreover, how might these peculiar modernist monsters enable us to grasp the present in new and unexpected ways?

'The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: now is the time of monsters.'² This statement, attributed to the Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci, has been widely cited and would now seem more relevant than at any time in recent history. Yet today we might give Gramsci's formula a new twist. It is not that the old world is dying and a new one struggles to be born. Rather, a new world has already broken

through – but only as an obscene version of the old one. It is precisely this new-old world that constitutes our time of monsters.

So how, then, are we to think about monsters and the monstrous? And what lessons might art provide?

The English word *monster* derives from the Latin *monstrum*, which is related to the verbs *monstrare* ('show') and *monere* ('warn'). At its origin, the monster thus has a portentous quality – it appears in the world as a sign or demonstration of some present or future menace. For the French philosopher Georges Canguilhem, 'the existence of monsters calls into question the capacity of life to teach us order.'³ The monster upends established cognitive categories (human and beast, inside and outside, living and dead); it merges what common sense divides and divides what common sense merges.

Like the psychoanalytic symptom, the monster shows itself as a manifestation of some underlying disturbance or disorder – one that calls out for interpretation. In his account of the sublime, Kant says that a thing grows more attractive the more fearful it becomes. This is precisely the case with the monster, which marks the point at which desire and anxiety cross paths. As a point of symbolic excess, the monster is a reminder of the precariousness of life, of the possibility of our own extinction. At the same time, however, faced with the monster we also catch a glimpse of a *different kind of human subject to come* – one whose precise identity remains to be determined.

II.

The modernist writer Gertrude Stein says that 'Picasso once said that he who created a thing is forced to make it ugly. In the effort to create the intensity and the struggle to create this intensity, the result always produces a certain ugliness.'⁴ Here, however, we might cut straight to the chase and substitute ugliness with monstrousness.

There is, it should be noted, something monstrous about Picasso himself: the hyper-narcissism ('I am God'),⁵ the ceaseless production, the endless appropriation and quotation of different styles, the troubling idea of 'genius' which continues to surround him.⁶ This is Picasso as a kind of modernist mega-father; the artist as brand name, commodity, signature and symbol. The critic Benjamin Buchloh situates the monstrosity of Picasso somewhat differently. For Buchloh, Picasso is unable to face the 'epistemological consequences' of his own early work. After the end of cubism, what we find is a call to order, 'a return to the traditional values of high art', a resurrection of the notion of the 'master artist'.⁷ The whole shift reveals an inherent authoritarian tendency. Here, then, is Picasso speaking in 1935:

There ought to be an absolute dictatorship ... a dictatorship of painters ... a dictatorship of one painter ... to suppress all those who have betrayed us, to suppress the cheaters, to suppress the tricks, to suppress mannerisms, to suppress charms, to suppress history, to suppress a heap of other things.⁸

1 | Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*, 1937, oil on canvas, 3.50 x 7.80 m, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid



Monstrous indeed. And yet this is not the whole story, neither with respect to monsters nor politics.

A figure, presumably a woman, stands at the edge of the sea. Her head, a small featureless boulder, sits atop an extended pyramidal neck (cat. 8). Gigantic arms stretch out over her head: the right hand clasps the left wrist in some kind of frozen aerobic pose. The torso, which appears to consist entirely of a pair of naked and exaggerated buttocks, is supported by two solid struts, legs without feet. The figure is clearly monstrous. Seemingly cut from stone, its cream and pinkish-grey surface also lends it a fleshy quality. Is it living or is it dead? Perhaps it's both. The figure, we might say, occupies an uncanny position between world-less stone sculpture and world-forming human being.

The painting in question is *Woman Standing by the Sea* (1929), one of several works depicting beach-dwelling monstrosities that Picasso produced during the late 1920s and early 1930s.⁹ While the status of the monster is typically cemented through an act of

naming (recall the famous words of Victor Frankenstein, 'miserable monster whom I ... created'), here Picasso's monster is not defined as such. This absence of symbolic identity, however, serves only to amplify the figure's unnerving strangeness: is it a monster that doesn't know that it is monstrous, or a monster dreaming that it is simply a sunbathing nude?

Today it is difficult to encounter a monster – be it in art, fiction or film – without being reminded of the various monsters that have appeared (or in many cases reappeared) in our contemporary world: war, economic crisis, ecological catastrophe, pandemic, genocide. But looking at Picasso's *Woman Standing by the Sea*, one cannot help but think of the monster under a different aspect: as a warning and, at the same time, as a call to action.

According to the theorist Fredric Jameson, the monster is less any single message or meaning, and more a vessel in which different meanings – that is to say, conflicting desires and anxieties – are absorbed and organised.¹⁰ In Picasso's painting, the monster appears quite literally as a vessel, and specifically an ark: the solid rectangular torso shows itself as

the sizable hull; the elongated neck as the wheelhouse and living quarters. Grounded on the shore, this ark-monster stands patiently on its support (thick, chiselled legs), as if waiting for the sea-levels to rise.

The German philosopher Günther Anders offers an intriguing way of grasping the political stakes of this reading of Picasso's painting. In an essay, 'Mourning the Future', Anders presents a new parable of Noah. Wearing sackcloth and ashes, Noah enters the city and addresses a crowd: *Don't you know it is we who are already dead?* Asked when this catastrophe occurred, Noah replies: *Tomorrow*. Responding to the confusion that this answer provokes, the doom-saying Noah clarifies: *The day after tomorrow, the flood will be something that has been; then it will be too late to mourn, for there will be nobody left. We must feel the pain of tomorrow's loss. Only by acting as if the worst has already happened can it still be prevented.* Later that evening, Noah receives a knock at his door. A carpenter enters and says: *Let me help you build an ark, so that this may yet become false.*¹¹

Anders's parable has a clear message: to forestall the very worst we need to act as if the catastrophe is already upon us. Doesn't Picasso's monster confront us with precisely the same demand? Isn't this baffling creature of the sea a dire warning of what is to come if the conditions of life remain unchanged? And might we not therefore say that *Woman Standing by the Sea* anticipates *Guernica* (1937; fig. 1); or, to put the point more dialectically, that in painting *Woman Standing by the Sea* Picasso is in fact *already* painting *Guernica*?

A telling anecdote to conclude. During the Nazi occupation of Paris, a German officer entered Picasso's apartment and, pointing at a photograph of *Guernica* on the wall, asked: 'Did you do that?' 'No', Picasso replied, 'you did'.¹² What stands out here is not only the artist's wit, but also his philosophical insight: art objects do not float free from politics, nor are they simply the expression of the immediate intentions of individual artists. Rather, artworks come into being as *social facts*, making visible the ideological world from which they emerge. In the case of Picasso's monsters, however, these works not only speak to their own crisis-ridden times; they also remind us that we are yet to emancipate ourselves from a world in which catastrophe is not the exception but the rule.

III.

At the centre of Bacon's view of life stands a particular monster: *boredom*. In his interviews with David Sylvester, the artist detects it everywhere: boredom sets in when a painting attempts to tell a story; it results when the individual is given too much security by the state; it is the feeling produced by most twentieth-century art, after Picasso and Matisse.¹³ For Bacon, there is a clear connection between boredom and death. Asked by Sylvester when the realisation of death first came upon him, Bacon replies with a remark that is, in equal measure, humorous and grotesque: 'I realised when I was seventeen. I remember it

very, very clearly. I remember looking at a dog-shit on the pavement and I suddenly realised, there it is – this is what life is like.'¹⁴

Bacon's entire art practice is, in one respect, an attempt to slay the monster of boredom. As he never tires of stressing, the aim of his work is to make a 'violent' impact upon the spectator's 'nervous system', to 'unlock' what he calls new 'areas of sensation'. In effect, it is the oldest of all old modernist fantasies: the desire for a kind of pure aesthetic immediacy that will return the viewer to a fuller sense of 'life'.¹⁵

But this emphasis on sensation turns out to be something of a theoretical dark cloud hanging over Bacon. In an era saturated with explicit and disturbing imagery, bombarding the viewer with violent effects is more likely to intensify psychic numbness than to produce any kind of enlivenment. An aesthetics of sensation risks becoming *anaesthetics*. And so we need to ask: How might we grapple with Bacon's monsters beyond the logic of the shudder? How are we to recover their philosophical, psychoanalytic and political significance?

Three Studies of Henrietta Moraes (1969; cat. 29) is one of Bacon's most striking serial portraits. In the right-hand panel the model's face is monstrously distorted. Her right eye is almost completely painted out; the left is swollen and closed – caught in a state of pleasure, pain or merely the instant of a blink. The real drama of the painting, however, is Moraes's mouth: shifted laterally across the face, plump pink lips are parted, revealing an upper set of razor-sharp white teeth. Bacon frequently talks about his fascination with mouths and teeth, but here the image recalls something much more specific: the mythical monster known as *vagina dentata* – the toothed female sex organ able to bite and castrate.

This ancient motif clearly evokes male anxieties about the female genitals – a monstrous void that threatens to devour and maim. In the words of the critic Barbara Creed, 'the vagina dentata is the mouth of hell – a terrifying symbol of woman as the "devil's gateway".'¹⁶ But Moraes's mouth also takes us back, uncannily, to the birthplace of psychoanalysis. In his infamous 'specimen dream' of 'Irma's Injection', Sigmund Freud looks into the mouth of his patient Emma Eckstein and encounters the following:

A horrendous sight ... Everything blends in and becomes associated in this image, from the mouth to the female sexual organ, by way of the nose ... there's a horrendous discovery here of the flesh one never sees, the foundation of things ... the flesh from which everything exudes, at the very heart of the mystery, the flesh ... which provokes anxiety.¹⁷

In the dream, Freud takes flight from the monstrous scene. Bacon's whole corpus reminds us that we cannot. As if out-psychoanalysing the psychoanalyst, the artist's work insists that there is no turning away from the unconscious. What this structure reveals – every desire, every anxiety – is ours to bear.

In a series of remarks on Bacon's portraits, the writer Milan Kundera asks, 'Up to what degree of distortion does a subject remain itself ... Where is the border beyond which

a self ceases to be a self?’¹⁸ But this seems to get things the wrong way round. For Bacon, the truth of a subject is to be found *only* in the distorted recording of its appearance; indeed, the uncanny paradox of his work is that the greater the distortion – the more acute the monstrosity – the more alive the subject actually appears.

Yet to encounter this ‘life’ in Bacon’s paintings is to run up against a temporal ambiguity: a strange admixture of agitation and exhaustion, restlessness and paralysis. In the Moraes triptych, excess animation fuses with ice-cold stillness, producing a figure that is disturbingly, monstrously, *undead*. Borrowing a phrase from the poet Gottfried Keller, the philosopher Walter Benjamin calls this condition ‘petrified unrest’.¹⁹ For Benjamin, the simultaneity of movement and stasis is precisely what characterises the monstrous world of capitalist production and accumulation.²⁰ It is this temporal split, tied to the value-system itself, that Bacon’s paintings capture with extraordinary force.

Bacon would no doubt balk at the idea of himself as a political painter; but this, at least in one respect, is exactly what he is.²¹ He seizes the conditions of capitalist life like no other modernist, with the exception of Samuel Beckett, with whom he has much in common. What Beckett’s plays and novels present, Bacon puts onto the canvas: a frozen vision of the social world in which human relations are, in Karl Marx’s phrase, characterised by ‘reciprocal isolation and foreignness’.²² Both of these modernists refuse to use their works as vehicles for any kind of direct political message; but it is precisely this refusal that enables them to depict their socially damaged subjects with unique and unsettling accuracy.

Bacon makes good on the philosopher Theodor Adorno’s request that artworks articulate the state in which humans find themselves historically.²³ But he does so in a way that seems almost accidental. It is as if, had he known what he was doing, then he would not have been able to do it, or, more likely, would not have wanted to. What Bacon does – and what we, as spectators, must therefore respond to – is to render visible not vague ‘intensities’, but the concrete and impersonal capitalist forces of value and exchange as they operate on and through human beings, disfiguring them, mutilating their nature. *Look what this monstrous world has made of us*, Bacon’s figures appear to wordlessly cry out.

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Bacon and Picasso responded in markedly different ways to the political crises of their times. In 1944, Picasso became a member of the French Communist Party. This was, he said, a ‘logical step’, bound up with the realisation that he ‘had to fight not only with painting’ but also with his ‘whole being’.²⁴ Bacon, by contrast, maintained that he only ever painted for himself. In interviews, he disparaged the welfare state, deeming any sort of social justice ‘pointlessly artificial’.²⁵ And yet he also acknowledged the following: ‘I have lived, in a sense through a continuous state of [political] crisis ... It’s not consciously

reflected, but it may be reflected in me as I may, without knowing it, be aware of the violence of life in an extreme way.’²⁶ Despite the artist’s own ideological position, this sense of enduring crisis might be seen to reappear in Bacon’s work as an unconscious utopian impulse: *our world should be other than it is*.

It would of course be politically naïve to assume that art can model a better world or help negate the existing one. And yet, as Picasso and Bacon both demonstrate, art still has the capacity to make us see things otherwise, to think philosophy and politics in a new key. In our own time of monsters, as we struggle against the forces of human and planetary destruction, modernism remains an essential companion: not just a measure of the past, but also, and more importantly, a means of *foreseeing the present*.

¹ Dore Ashton (ed.), *Picasso on Art: A Selection of Views* (New York, 1972), 149.

² This version of Gramsci’s remark is given by Slavoj Žižek in his essay ‘A Permanent Economic Emergency’, *New Left Review*, 64 (September/October 2010), 95. For the original version of the phrase (‘The crisis [today] consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear’), see Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London, 1971), 276.

³ Georges Canguilhem, ‘Monstrosity and the Monstrous’, in *Knowledge of Life* (New York, 2008), 134.

⁴ Gertrude Stein, *Picasso* (New York, 1984), 9.

⁵ Cited in John Richardson, *Life of Picasso: The Triumphant Years 1917–1932* (New York, 2007), 499.

⁶ See John Berger, *The Success and Failure of Picasso* (New York, 1989), 130–1.

⁷ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Formalism and Historicity: Models and Methods in Twentieth-Century Art* (London, 2015), 121.

⁸ Cited in Buchloh, *Formalism and Historicity*, 131.

⁹ For a different reading of this work, which has nevertheless influenced the one presented here, see Timothy J. Clark, *Picasso and Truth: From Cubism to Guernica* (Oxford, 2013), 204ff.

¹⁰ Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (New York, 2007), 35.

¹¹ Günther Anders, ‘Mourning the Future’, *Journal of Continental Philosophy*, 5, 1 (2024), 169–77.

¹² This famous incident is referenced in Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Commitment’, in *Notes to Literature: Volume Two* (New York, 1992), 89.

¹³ David Sylvester, *The Brutality of Fact: Interviews with Francis Bacon* (New York, 1987). Bacon makes numerous references to boredom throughout the interviews.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 133. For a philosophical elaboration, and endorse-

ment, of Bacon’s affective modernism, see Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (London, 2013). A criticism of this position is given in Ben Ware, ‘Looking the Negative in the Face’, in Ben Ware (ed.), *Francis Bacon: Painting, Philosophy, Psychoanalysis* (London, 2019).

¹⁵ Sylvester, *The Brutality of Fact*, 43, 56, 104, 141. See also Michael Peppiatt (ed.), *Francis Bacon: A Self-Portrait in Words* (London, 2024), 26, 44.

¹⁶ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London, 2024), 116.

¹⁷ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis* (New York, 1991), 154. For Freud’s own account of this dream, see Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychoanalytic Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume IV: The Interpretation of Dreams* (London, 2001), 107.

¹⁸ Milan Kundera, *Encounter* (London, 2010), 7.

¹⁹ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, 1999), 319.

²⁰ Marx conjures up the idea of monstrosity in the opening lines of *Capital*. See Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1 (London, 1990), 125.

²¹ For an extended argument about the politics of Bacon’s modernism, see Ben Ware, ‘Bacon in the Cold World: On Wagers, Wounds, and Real Abstraction’, in Ben Ware (ed.), *Bacon Disfigured* (London, 2026).

²² Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 182.

²³ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetics: 1958/59* (London, 2018), 77.

²⁴ Pablo Picasso, ‘Why I Became a Communist’, *New Masses* (24 October 1944).

²⁵ Sylvester, *The Brutality of Fact*, 125.

²⁶ Martin Harrison, ‘Lost Words: Unpublished Bacon’, in Martin Harrison (ed.), *Francis Bacon Retrieved: Lost Words / New Writing* (London, 2025), 80.