



# Francis Bacon and Fetishism: Queer Tastes in a Time of Rationing, 1940–1954

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## Francis Bacon and Fetishism: Queer Tastes in a Time of Rationing, 1940–1954

This article, building on previous work, explores the ways in which eroticism and material culture interacted in Bacon's early paintings by situating his work in the context of religious, commodity and sexual fetishism. It focuses on flesh, seen as something that connects the raw commodity with the desiring body and Christian notions of sexual sin, to rethink the artist's fascination with the depiction of meat. Fetishistic approaches to material objects, driven by anti-religious scepticism, help to explain the fleshy nature of Bacon's art during a time of food rationing in Britain when prodigal appetites for men and meat were criminalized.

**Keywords:** Britain, commodities, fetishism, London, queer, sexuality

It was in Soho in 1963 that the young Michael Peppiatt met Francis Bacon for the first time.<sup>1</sup> Over three decades later the title of the art historian's important study *Francis Bacon: Anatomy of an Enigma* signalled the ongoing challenge of understanding the painter and the bodily nature of his work.<sup>2</sup> Since then Bacon's relationships and sexuality, including interests in BDSM, have been extensively explored, as has the fascinating paradox of why an avowed atheist in a 'godless world' was so fascinated with Roman Catholic imagery.<sup>3</sup> Figural art was out of fashion in the post-war West, and it was crucial for Bacon's reputation that he was seen as expressing deeply felt truths about the human condition. I now seek to build on this prior research by focussing on the entanglements in Bacon's life and work between religion, sexuality and capitalism. This involves making a case-study of early art that he produced in the 1940s and 1950s that includes imagery of bodies and meat. These works are then put into their contemporary British context in which anti-Catholic prejudice remained widespread, criminalization aimed to prevent queer access to the pleasures of male bodies and rationing restricted access to food. This approach also involves decoding pleasures of the flesh that were not then seen as suitably respectable topics for serious art.

Post-Marxist studies of materialism, including those with a queer focus, have developed from the late 1990s as a form of radical critique that has become particularly influential amongst feminist environmentalists.<sup>4</sup> The radical ecological movements that fed into the development of these new materialisms were connected with a range of modern art practices in the later twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> But how was it that Francis Bacon seems to have painted related images despite the fact that he was not an ecologically aware feminist but rather a privileged urban-

dweller with a fascination for masculine power? On the face of it he seems an unlikely candidate to align with the likes of Carol J. Adams, who, in *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (1990) denounced practices of meat consumption as being rooted in gender stereotyping, patriarchal authority and violence against women.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, a major (negative) signification of fetishism in feminist art theory has been the commodified exploitation of women and their bodies by male artists, critics and viewers.<sup>7</sup>

Yet I will go on to argue that the queerness of Bacon's life and work can be interpreted as placing it in relation to strands of materialist critique that question heteropatriarchy, and with it 'sexual and gender subjectivities in both a normalization regime and a capitalist accumulation regime'.<sup>8</sup> He can thus be understood as an heir to the more subversive side of surrealism that delighted in the radical implications of 'parodic perversions'.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Bacon did arguably erase the human versus nature divide by emphasizing shared animality and elaborating a sexual politics in which powerful men, precisely through being erotically objectified, were reduced to their constituent flesh. Explaining these aspects of his art, therefore, requires consideration of precursor forms of materialist thinking, particularly those related to fetishism in its religious, commodity and sexual forms. The subject of flesh serves as a focus for this discussion since it juxtaposes meat as a commodity and the desiring body seen against a backdrop of Christian attitudes to sexual sin.

### Fetishisms

Francis Bacon, from his name to his treatment of the human body, leads us to wonder about meat. So, if *Painting* (1946) was partly inspired by looking at crucifixions, the result is a peculiarly fleshly (as opposed to a spiritual) one (Figure 1).<sup>10</sup> In place of the body of Jesus Christ, there is some sort of animal's remains garlanded with sausages or entrails. At the base of what might elsewhere have been a cross, and instead of the expected mourners, there sits an anonymous figure under the cover of an umbrella and behind a rounded structure upon which are placed joints of apparently raw flesh. The concept of fetishism, in its religious, commodity and sexual forms can help us to understand this material assemblage.

The word *feitiço* ('spell') was originally employed by the Portuguese, who visited Africa, to describe the way in which local people, to their Western eyes, over-valued particular objects or images for religious reasons and regarded them as magical 'fetishes'.<sup>11</sup> This critique of non-Christian religious materialism was redeployed by Protestants towards Roman Catholicism before Karl Marx developed it into an attack on capitalism. Anti-Catholic discourse justified attacks on religious images and objects on the basis that they were idolatrous alternatives to devotion to God. Catholic emancipation in mid-nineteenth-century Britain was duly opposed on the grounds, amongst others, that the Roman

Figure 1. Francis Bacon, *Painting* (1946), oil and pastel on canvas, 198 x 132 cm, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 229.1948. 2026 The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved. DACS.



Church was a fraudulent business that sold worthless goods and its art was regularly dismissed as a spectacle that was simply 'meretricious' (a word for 'worthless' which originally referred to the qualities of a prostitute).<sup>12</sup> Bacon's family was of the British Protestant ruling class that typically regarded the religion of the Roman Catholic majority in

Ireland as primitive and superstitious. Allusions to Christianity in Bacon's paintings can be understood to function in the manner of religious fetishes that provoke atheist fascination connected with their traditional spiritual (over)valuation. They were also, as I will go on to explore later, associated with deviant forms of sexual desire.

In Karl Marx's reformulation 'commodity fetishism' refers to a disconnect between the labour involved in producing something and its resulting misleading valuation on the market. Such commodification blurs the distinction between humans and the things they make, since, to give an example, 'the table, as a commodity, is not an immaterial substance made of wood, but a living thing made up of human parts and human sensibilities [...] the table comes to life as a human thing with human capacities because congealed within its essence is the worker's unpaid labour'.<sup>13</sup> In *Painting* (1946), as in many of Bacon's works, attention is drawn to the troublingly unclear boundaries between persons and things. The result is a focus on the sweaty material realities of the objects which the believer – in religion or in capitalism – looks past in their search for other values.

Marx does not regularly appear in twenty-first century discussions of the history of sexuality, and yet it was the image of the sex worker as exemplary of capitalist relations that inspired the image from *Das Capital* of 'the bedroom eyes with which commodities wink at money'.<sup>14</sup> One reason why this has not been sufficiently acknowledged was suggested by James Penney when he argued that 'Foucault's decisive turn away from the Marxist tradition before he undertook his *History of Sexuality* project is significantly responsible for queer theory's general allergy to materialist analysis'.<sup>15</sup> Yet Kevin Floyd's contention, in *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism* (2009), was that desire is constructed and exploited, bought, sold and valued as a commodity.<sup>16</sup> This is something that Bacon, who at various times in his life was both a sex worker and a paying consumer of sexual services, understood. At the same time, he benefitted from the capitalistic fetishization that drove the ever-rising valuation of his paintings. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that just as he stood queerly to one side of patriarchal power structures based on family relationships, so he also positioned himself outside capitalist respectability. His life was focussed on a cycle of ostentatious earning and spending – not for him the delights of capitalist accumulation at interest.

The third form of fetishism that is relevant to Bacon's work is that focussed on sexual fascination with material objects. It has taken a sea-change in public attitudes towards homosexuality for the importance of sexual desire in Bacon's work to be acknowledged as other than a peripheral issue. Rina Arya wrote in 2012, concerning Bacon's sexuality, that his work shows us 'the pain and isolation of [sexual] encounter, the urgency of fulfilment and the insatiability of desire' at a time when queer sex between men was criminalized in Britain.<sup>17</sup> She also noted Bacon's interest in particular body parts as fetishistic.<sup>18</sup> In his detailed discussion of *Two Figures* (1953), Simon Ofield also drew

attention to the fetishization of class differences, particularly in relation to the muscled body of the labouring man, which was widespread in queer circles at the time.<sup>19</sup> It is now widely recognized that this painting, depicting a couple entangled on a rumpled bed, is a daring depiction of queer sex.<sup>20</sup> It belongs to 'a moment when the comportments of masculinity and the sites of representation, interpretation, and encounter had just begun to become identified with a recognizable community of men with shared social, sexual, commercial, and aesthetic interests'.<sup>21</sup> In other words, it is the product of a moment of emergence to potential queer visibility and for that very reason long had to be discreetly referred to as 'The Wrestlers'.

This work was produced in the aftermath of World War II which had brought sexual excitements during the blackout and exposure to American cultures of bodybuilding and the glamorized male body. Pursuing masculine men was a dangerous activity since the law would not assist were you to be a victim of theft or assault, but, for a masochist, such as Bacon, this could be part of the thrill. There has been extensive discussion over whether BDSM colludes with conservative power structures or radically subverts them.<sup>22</sup> Alex Dymock has also carried out important work that distinguishes between more conformist and radical forms of eroticized power play.<sup>23</sup> Public and academic discomfort with such topics led Nicholas Chare to assert that 'the perversions in Bacon have struggled to be heard' and that that fact was a key factor for wanting to explore issues of sex, power and violence in his book *After Francis Bacon: Synaesthesia and Sex in Paint* (2017).<sup>24</sup> It is not my aim to single Bacon out as an exceptional and exemplary pervert but rather to argue that his sexuality was rooted in widely established paradigms including scepticism towards organized religion, the reification of desire and the sexual fetishization of material objects.

Interestingly, fetishism had been theorized in France during the late nineteenth century as the basis on which homosexuality could be understood. The sexual cultures of Paris were important to Bacon's self-fashioning as they had been to another man who had grown up among the Irish upper orders, Oscar Wilde. When that disgraced writer was in prison for homosexual offences in 1896, he asked to be declared insane on the grounds of 'erotomania' and to be delivered into the hands of a private doctor.<sup>25</sup> Erotomania had been identified in nineteenth-century France as a condition that derived from a sexual fixation on objects such as women's clothing instead of on the woman herself. By extension, this provided an explanation for male same-sex passion which, it was thought, might come from the desire to wear such garments, and hence in some way to think of oneself as female.<sup>26</sup> Some of the blame for this was, misogynistically, heaped on women who were thought to adorn themselves to such excess that male desire shifted from them to their clothing. Thus, alluringly fashioned, they misled men into a landscape of amorally seductive products.<sup>27</sup> Queerness was, thereby, born out of the uncanny animation of goods produced by commodification. It is this spirit that I now propose to explore the three interlinked fields of

religious, commodity and sexual fetishism in more detail as a way of understanding works such as *Painting* (1946) with a particular focus on Britain during World War II and its aftermath – a period when legal regulation of sex was, in the form of food rationing, supplemented by the criminalizing of other forms of excessive appetite.

### Religion

Western art in the medieval and early modern periods was, to a considerable extent, a product of Catholic patronage. Francis Bacon's use of Christian visual imagery in the 1940s has typically been read as the expression of an atheist's experience of having lived through the horrors of an apparently God-forsaken world during World War II. Rina Arya suggests 'the Baconian tradition be labelled as post-Christian. Bacon refers to the symbols of Christianity not with the intention of upholding the narrative but as a way of drawing our attention to the situation of the viewer in the twentieth century, in a world of pain without redemption'.<sup>28</sup> This involves reconnecting with the pre-Christian meaning of the word '*sacer*' ('sacred') with its associations of spiritual force beyond morality and its evocation of the sacrificial temple as a kind of abattoir.<sup>29</sup>

Bacon's atheism could best be understood as a stance taken in relation to theist affirmation precisely because Britain in the mid-twentieth century was not entirely a godless world.<sup>30</sup> It has been suggested that a substantial decline in organized religion only set in from the 1960s and this had been preceded by significant revivalist attempts in the previous two decades.<sup>31</sup> In the 1950s nine out of ten Britons identified with a Christian denomination and four out of five said they believed in God.<sup>32</sup> Religion had also been an important issue during Bacon's upbringing in Ireland by Australian and English parents who were members of the British imperial elite that framed itself partly through anti-Catholicism. Bacon would, therefore, have been acutely aware of the sectarian resonances of Catholic imagery. It was not simply that Christian moralizers were wont to dwell on the sins of the flesh, since it had been the *Protestant* state, in the form of King Henry VIII, who had made sodomy a capital offence in England at a time when he was suppressing the country's monasteries. This meant that Catholicism was understood, then and for centuries after, as a cradle of fleshly, sodomitical perversity by many Protestants.<sup>33</sup> As Timothy Jones has commented,

taking theology seriously in the history of sexuality shows how religious sexual knowledge was not displaced by new scientific regimes, but continued, and continued in a dynamic, rather than a static manner. A growing acknowledgement of the persistent relationship between the spiritual and the sexual in the 20th century is thus beginning to erode the secularist assumptions undergirding British sexual historiography.<sup>34</sup>

Bacon's 'a-theology', seen in this context, was a process of queer exploration in which the painting of godless crucifixions asserted distance both

from the pieties of Romanism and from Protestant iconoclastic anti-materialism.<sup>35</sup>

In the view of Bacon's recent biographers, Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan, the crucifixion was the artist's essential subject.<sup>36</sup> In light of this, it is interesting to note that Bacon's breakthrough work consisted not of a crucifixion but of studies for figures at its base.<sup>37</sup> Such was the originality of *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* (1944) that it caused consternation when exhibited at the Lefevre Gallery in 1945 alongside more conventional work by, amongst others, Matthew Smith. The daring abstraction of the background bears some similarity to *Fitzoy Street Nude 1* (1916) by Smith, who was one of the few contemporary painters that Bacon admired.<sup>38</sup> Bacon said that his figures were not Christian at all, but represented the Greek Furies, who were goddesses of vengeance. That did not, however, account for their extraordinary appearance as greyish blobs with long necks. A similarly bulbous, long-necked creature appears in *Figure by Bath* (1934), by Bacon's queer friend and admirer, Roy de Maistre. These mouthy figures are generally interpreted as representing gross appetites for food, but sex may also be in the frame too, seeing as how the central figure, in particular, might be viewed as penile and testicular in form.<sup>39</sup>

There were two particular ways in which appetite for meat was sexualized in Britain: as a symbol of potent masculinity, and in relation to the flesh of Jesus in the Mass. British Protestant identity, as it had developed since the eighteenth century, made a particular association between masculinity, patriotism, and the eating of substantial quantities of good beef.<sup>40</sup> Crucifixes, meanwhile, were traditionally banned in Protestant churches, and the adoration of the body of Christ was thought to be sinful and perverse. The original use of the word 'pervert' in Britain was with reference to those who converted to Catholicism.<sup>41</sup> Seen in this light, Francis Bacon's interest in crucifixions can be viewed not simply as a choice of a traditional subject in high art but as a transgressive and bold engagement with the adoration of flesh.

It is this context that we can view the fact that, if judged by the dozens of versions that he produced, Bacon fetishized the image of the pope.<sup>42</sup> Most famously, starting with *Head VI* (1949) (Figure 2), he was inspired by Diego Velázquez's *Portrait of Innocent X* (c.1650). Bacon told Michael Peppiatt, that he had a 'crush' on the portrait and became obsessed with it.<sup>43</sup> That pontiff had acted as an important political player during the English Civil War (1642–1649), offering arms and finance to support Ireland in the hope that it might establish itself as a Catholic-ruled nation. Fears referencing such past treachery drove twenty-century inter-war anti-Catholicism on the grounds that the papacy had allegedly colluded with the enemy during World War I and had inspired the Irish to resist conscription in the British Army.<sup>44</sup> None of this is to say that Francis Bacon was in any sense a devout Protestant, but his work benefits from acknowledgement that he came from a culture that cultivated an eroticized, materialistic interpretation of Roman Catholicism and regarded it as a store house of religious fetishism.

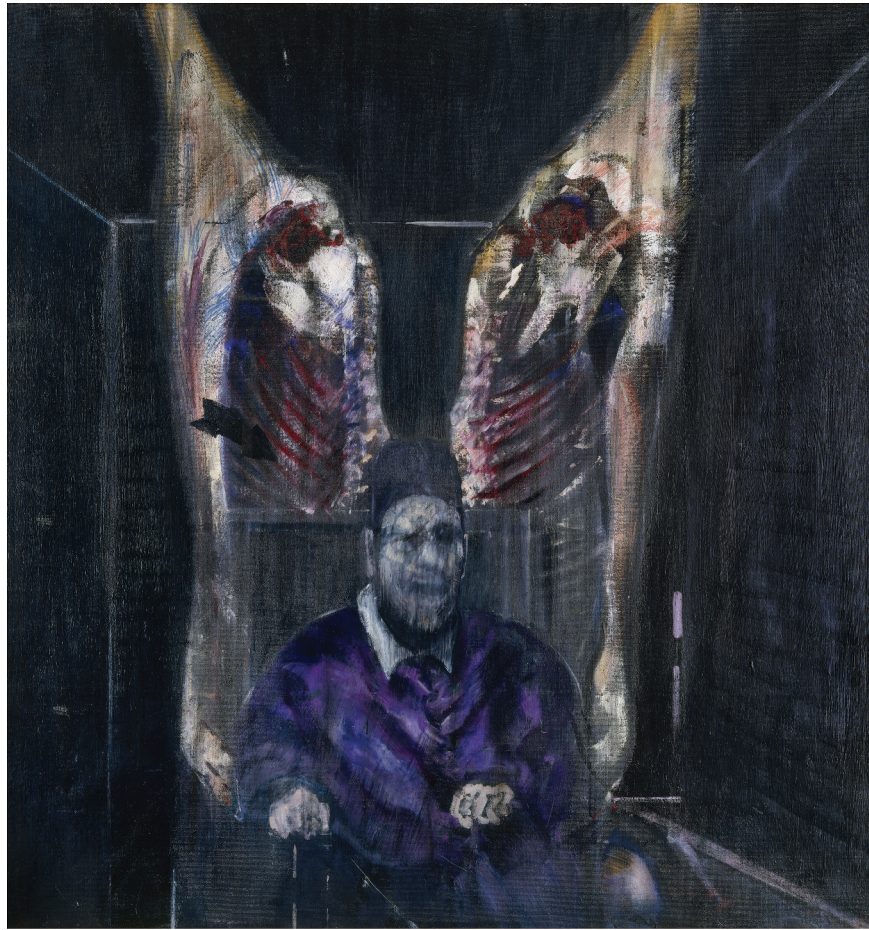
Figure 2. Francis Bacon, *Head VI* (1949), oil on canvas, 93.2 x 76.5 cm, Arts Council Collection. © 2026 The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved. DACS.



### Commodities

In *Figure with Meat* (1954) (Figure 3) the pope appears seated before suspended butchered flesh.<sup>45</sup> Inspiration may have been provided by the butcher's shop that was adjacent to the studio in Henley-on-Thames, near London, where Bacon painted this work, and by a photograph, taken in 1952 by John Deakin, of the artist standing shirtless while holding two sides of meat. Although this image was not published in *Vogue* until 1962, Bacon could certainly have seen prints of the image.<sup>46</sup> The ostentatious display of sides of meat needs to be understood in the context of meat rationing, which restricted people to a few rashers of bacon and a couple of chops per week – restrictions that were brought in 1940 and not fully lifted until 1954. Long before this, the allegedly

Figure 3. Francis Bacon, *Figure with Meat* (1954), oil on canvas, 129.9 x 121.9 cm, Art Institute of Chicago, 1956.1201, Harriott A. Fox Fund. 2026 The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved. DACS.



excessive consumption of goods had been moralized as stemming from a lack of personal self-control. In wartime, it was thought unpatriotic to resort to the black market for extra supplies and the political left, in particular, looked down on the use of private wealth to get around rules made for the general good.<sup>47</sup>

While food was heterosexualised by rules that ensured its regulated preparation and use in feeding fighting men abroad and the family on the home front, artists found ways to use the genre of the still life in strategies of 'avant garde experimentation'.<sup>48</sup> In the USA Marsden Hartley, who had eroticized the soldiery of pre-war Germany, painted images of fruit that have been seen as 'veiled, eroticised self-portraits'.<sup>49</sup> *Painting* (1946) (Figure 1), I argue benefits from being seen not only as a figural study but also as an assemblage of material commodities ripe for consumption. Still, life, as a genre, had its origins in classical art but was particularly developed in the Netherlands in the early modern period. Its purpose was partly to show family wealth but also to make moral asides over matters of

*vanitas*, life and death, including through the inclusion of the carcasses of animals. The butchered animal was the subject of interest for a number of Dutch artists such as in Joachim Beuckelaer's *Slaughtered Pig* (1563) and *The Butcher's Shop* (1568). Bacon was an admirer of Rembrandt and could have found inspiration directly in his *Slaughtered Ox* (1655) or indirectly via the carcasses painted in Paris by Chaim Soutine in the mid-1920s.<sup>50</sup>

The visual appearance of meat was a lifelong fascination for Bacon. After his death, images from post-war reportage of the slaughterhouses of La Villette in Paris were found in his studio amid mounds of other photographs from which he drew visual inspiration. Precursors of these images had been published in the interwar Parisian literary review *Documents*, which included depictions of pigs with their back legs forced apart by spreader bars to get them ready to be cut open.<sup>51</sup> In his teens, he liked to go to butchers' shops to look at the hanging carcasses.<sup>52</sup> He was not alone in this, since Peter Coker, who grew up in East London and Essex, also enjoyed spending time in his local butcher's shop. This inspired a series of still lifes of meat in the early 1950s that are realist works of the so-called 'kitchen sink' school of proletarian realism.<sup>53</sup>

The degree to which Bacon, by contrast, blurs the distinctions between men, clothing, furnishings and meat in *Painting* (1946) becomes more obvious if this work is compared with another meat painting, *Smithfield Market* (1962), by Stuart Ray. Ray was born in London in 1916 and taught art at the Walthamstow School of Art until his retirement in 1983. Smithfield Meat Market was the London equivalent of La Villette. In Ray's depiction, sides of meat hang on hooks and by their colour and placement are shown as clearly separate from the workers whose glowing, unstained white coats almost suggest that they are scientific researchers rather than butchers. Their slim bodies are clearly different in form from the wider sides of meat. In Ray's picture the meat – and not the men – is quite clearly the commodity, but his aseptic vision seems insipid when seen in comparison with Bacon's delight in bodily interaction (unfortunately I do not have copyright clearance to reproduce it here).

### Sexuality

'Medico-moral' panics arose from the idea that physical dirt, disease and immorality were apt to spread in tandem across densely populated cities such as London, a place that mingled wealth and poverty, magnificence and squalor.<sup>54</sup> It has been referred to as a giant 'meat market' in which the labour – and sometimes the bodies – of men and women were bought and sold.<sup>55</sup> Sex workers, referred to as 'prostitutes' or 'fallen women' had been the subject of fetishized erotic objectification by many writers and artists working in Victorian London. As Linda Nochlin argued of one prominent instance, 'certainly the theme of the fallen woman may be said to have interested Dante Gabriel Rossetti almost to the point of obsession'.<sup>56</sup> The queer poet Wilfred Owen, in 'Shadwell Stair' (1918),

evoked the spirit of a cruising homosexual or, perhaps, a male sex worker who haunts ‘the wharves by the water-house, / And through the cavernous slaughter-house’ near London’s docks.<sup>57</sup> The connection between the meat and sex trades was present in several cities around the world at the time, including New York. There, the Meatpacking District of Manhattan boasted over two hundred and fifty independent slaughterhouses by 1900, and the stench that emanated from them drove out middle-class inhabitants. As this activity began to wind down in the 1970s, nightclubs, particularly those catering to a queer clientele, began to open. By the end of the century, the streets – especially the stretch of West 14th Street known as ‘The Stroll’ – were populated by many Black, Hispanic, and oftentimes transgender sex workers, as depicted in the film *The Stroll* (2023), but also by gay men out cruising.<sup>58</sup>

In London, it was the West End rather than Smithfield that developed into the centre for the sex trade and for sexual minorities. Men selling sexual services loitered around the statue popularly known as Eros at Piccadilly Circus and the location was duly dubbed ‘the meat rack’ in queer circles.<sup>59</sup> Danger and violence were very much a part of this scene in the mid-twentieth century when gay sex was criminalized in Britain. Police attempts to restrict ‘moral laxity’ on the home front and in the armed forces were hindered by the blackout during World War II.<sup>60</sup> One Canadian serviceman, Bert, found the area around Piccadilly ‘jam-packed’ with bars where, despite, or perhaps because of, his masculine self-presentation, he would be swiftly propositioned by other men.<sup>61</sup> That notwithstanding, it was a time when, for homo- and heterosexuals alike, the ‘snatched love’ of casual sex and hurried romance was far easier to come by than any kind of sustained relationship. Queer sex, although more plentiful than hitherto, still needed to be hunted down and love was a scarce commodity.

It was during this time, and with such inspiration, that Bacon was at work on what would become his breakthrough paintings. He was in a seventeen-year-long relationship with patron and businessman Eric Hall, but this did not mean that they always behaved like respectably discreet gentlemen. Hall, for example, enjoyed ‘picking through the rubble of the pleasure-starved city – with Francis – for the best food and wine’.<sup>62</sup> Such behaviour was, almost needless to say, in contravention of the strict rules on food rationing. Illegally acquired ingredients were also potentially hazardous since, like prohibited drugs, there were no official checks on their quality. This was wittily and campily illustrated in Agatha Christie’s novel *Murder is Announced* (1950), which served up a ‘delicious death’ involving a chocolate cake made of off-ration ingredients.<sup>63</sup> The allowance for meat was distinctly meagre, but additional quantities were available illegally on what was then termed the ‘black market’—which was viewed with a similar official disapproval to the market for sexual services. Evasion of the meat ration was considered more difficult to police than was the case for other types of goods such as eggs because it was rationed by price rather than quantity. Butchers became known as potential

criminals who might fake losses in transit, conceal home production or alter the quality of cuts they offered according to the customer.<sup>64</sup> And, rather like the men one might pick up in the bars, the quality of the bootleg meat available was also variable and liable to be a little past its prime.<sup>65</sup>

In his article 'Phenomenology of the Scream', Peter Schwenger, envisions Bacon's pope sitting, his robes shading off into semitransparency, cut off from contact with the ground or as if in a wheelchair.<sup>66</sup> The figure's open mouth, gaping with seeming appetites for food, sex and pain, appears as something animalistic and beyond the personal. Abjection has been identified by Rina Arya as a key element in Bacon's art that is involved in his blurring of boundaries between things and persons, humans and animals.<sup>67</sup> Ageing was an abject state for queer men in the twentieth century which was associated with a decline in sexual desirability that could set in as early as thirty-five.<sup>68</sup> Francis Bacon reached that age in 1944. While he had once earned money from selling sex, from now on, as an ageing homosexual, he might be expected to pay for his pleasures.<sup>69</sup>

Virginia Woolf confided to her diary on March 12, 1922, on having met a sick and morose E. M. Forster (who was then in his early forties), that 'the middle age of buggers is not to be contemplated without horror'.<sup>70</sup> But for those into abjection, this need not mean an end to the excitement, as is suggested by the picture of the young Rickie Masters painted by Rosamond Lehmann in her novel *The Echoing Grove* (1953):

They got their rotten rotting teeth in him. They've got the belts and ties and rings and bracelet watches. And all the words. *Avant garde* passwords. And the freedom of the hunting grounds. All the happy hunting grounds mapped out, combed over. Barracks, pubs, ports, tube stations, public lavatories. How could he possibly be missed! The classiest piece of goods on the market. Bought and paid for.<sup>71</sup>

It has been argued that in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries both the feminine queer or 'queen' and casual same-sex acts on the part of masculine men were, to some degree, acceptable in urban working-class communities.<sup>72</sup> However, as understandings spread of homosexuality as a form of alleged male effeminacy, so it was increasingly only the criminal amongst the 'real men' who would agree to have queer sex in return for cold, hard cash.<sup>73</sup> In this way the monstrous operations of the market saw men consuming one another in acts of human commodification. Bacon's art only *alludes* to this, of course, since spelling it out too obviously would have been publicly unacceptable.

Francis Bacon was not the only artist of his time who used interacting commodities to stand in for more overt sexual juxtapositions. The juxtaposition of meat, umbrella and figure in *Painting* (1946) (Figure 1) benefits from being understood against the background of earlier twentieth-century experimentalism from Dada to surrealism.<sup>74</sup> It also reflects the eclectic, collagist logic with which Bacon collected and assembled imagery from books and magazines.<sup>75</sup> It is perhaps significant, therefore, that the comparison between carcasses on racks and the bodies of

desirable men was not a perspective unique to Bacon, but was present in contemporary visual culture. The British magazine *Lilliput* enjoyed mass circulation during World War II and Martin Hammer has claimed that the artist was almost certainly familiar with it.<sup>76</sup> The periodical often featured photographic juxtapositions. Many of these had queer implications such as that between an image by the queer photographer George Platt Lynes, captioned 'Slumbering Sailors', that showed them sleeping head to crotch, on one side of a double-page spread across from an image of 'Restless Cattle'.<sup>77</sup> Another spread contrasted animal carcasses with male gymnasts under the captions 'Dead Mutton' and 'Live Beef'.<sup>78</sup>

Lawrence Alloway, writing in *The Listener* in 1962, argued that 'Pop art begins in London about 1949 with work by Francis Bacon'.<sup>79</sup> Many of Bacon's early paintings could be read, therefore, as having prefigured sexualized pop art depictions of consumer abundance such as Richard Hamilton's *Just What Is It that Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?* (1956). This collage featured a bodybuilder, a pin-up girl and—on the coffee table between them—a giant can of ham; it was produced for a Whitechapel Art Gallery exhibition two years after the end of meat rationing in Britain.<sup>80</sup> It is clear, however, that Bacon took the depiction of commodification a step further, as indicated by his statement to David Sylvester in 1966 that 'well, of course, we are meat, we are potential carcasses. If I go into a butcher's shop, I always think it's surprising that I wasn't there instead of the animal'.<sup>81</sup> The implication of this is that it was Bacon himself who has become commodified and readied for sale to the consumer.

## Conclusions

Francis Bacon enjoyed going to public baths in poorer districts of the East End. Such a scene appears in the posthumously published novel *Love, Leda* (2023; written c.1965) by the working-class poet Mark Hyatt: 'One man has a body like a young man, but his legs are like match sticks. Another has a hollow chest. Another, two bellies. Everyone is distorted. As for myself, I notice that I am colourless and conclude that we are all freaks and in this pit of hell I cannot service my body to make myself a god'.<sup>82</sup> Bacon's own godless freaks mingle with apparently incongruous objects that are juxtaposed with a collagist logic inspired by surrealism. It is hardly surprising that the sexual nature of such work was not immediately evident; after all, as Chris Waters has commented, 'the male homosexual [and the same was true of lesbians] in Britain had a relatively invisible social presence prior to 1945'.<sup>83</sup> Since society did not provide a ready-made template for queer culture, other than those deriving from concepts of sin and crime, queer people constructed their own culture through strategic acts of appropriation (including from religion), juxtaposition and exaggeration.

José Esteban Muñoz has proposed the term 'disidentification' to suggest the ways in which queer creative practice – 'a way of shuffling back

and forth between reception and production' – can be successfully carried out so as to avoid both fully identifying with its oppressive cultural context and being marginalized as a result of rejecting it.<sup>84</sup> Bacon was painting his early works decades before lesbian and gay liberation made its demands for the end of sexual shame.<sup>85</sup> Pride itself has since been critiqued for assimilationist selling out to mainstream culture, for example, by David Halperin when he wrote that 'the only kind of gay pride that is endurable is a gay pride that does not forget its origins in shame, that is still powered by the transformative energies that spring from experiences of shame'.<sup>86</sup> In an age before pride, Bacon's creative energies sexually fetishized bodies made shameful by oppressive forms of religion and under capitalism. His art, therefore, benefits from being thought of not simply as figural but also as a series of queerly coded still lives composed of commodities, objects, and people whose bodies were fetishized, bought and sold. Bacon, moreover, in the process created a conceptual equality between homosexuals and the 'real men' such as the police who persecuted them, since he was able to 'reposition the punishment of queers as being, in itself, an act and expression of same-sex desire'.<sup>87</sup> Persecutors and persecuted, feeders and fed upon, were all part of one queer material assemblage.

The tension between art as material practice and its communication of immaterial truths was a prominent question from the early days of modern art in the mid-nineteenth century. But where, to take a prominent example of this, Gustav Courbet wished to be seen not as an 'ethereal intellect but rather ... [as] a physical man completely absorbed with concrete matters', the anti-figural art world of the mid-twentieth century denied this as a suitable public stance for Bacon.<sup>88</sup> This enabled Bacon's seemingly niche art to speak to great themes of its age such as godless alienation, but it could also be sexually decoded by those in the know. Thus, some inkling that Bacon's painting was not (or not only) about transcendent and universal human truths but also about queer pleasures, may have been implicit in post-war critique such as that of John Berger when he argued in the *New Statesman* in 1952 that this art 'describes horror with connivance ... the horror is stimulating because it is remote, because it belongs to a life removed from the *normal* world' (my emphasis).<sup>89</sup>

In comparison with spending on marriage for the sake of the next generation, queer sexual spending could be seen, from a heterosexual perspective, as a waste of money in so far as it involves a waste of semen on non-reproductive activities.<sup>90</sup> If Bacon was keen to participate in the market of sale and exchange he did so not for the purposes of capitalist accumulation and reproductive futurity but out of fetishistic desire.<sup>91</sup> In terms of queer theory, Bacon's stance bears comparison with that of Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004)—as José Esteban Muñoz's critique in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009) makes clear: 'Edelman recommends that queers give up hope and embrace a certain negative endemic to our abjection ... What

we get, in exchange for giving up on futurity, abandoning politics and hope, is a certain jouissance that at once defines and negates us'.<sup>92</sup>

Bacon's visual theatre of material interaction – that was critically perceived as an existential meditation – relied on the three types of fetishism that I have been exploring. Artistic forms originating in Roman Catholic spirituality, viewed as superstitious fetishes, were brought into the realm of the grossly material, following in the footsteps of a long tradition of anti-Catholic thinking in Britain that had taken root since the Reformation, and which also had a tendency to associate the priesthood with sodomy. Bacon's atheism fed his awareness of religious fetishism; whilst being both a creator of art and a criminalized consumer of men and meat gave him queer critical awareness of material commodification. While artistic sexual fetishization of the bodies of women, like much of organized religion and capitalism, participated in patriarchal oppression, Bacon's tastes centred on the fetishistic sexual objectification of the fleshly bodies of men.<sup>93</sup> Meat, as a rationed object of desire in contemporary Britain, played a crucially expressive role in this material drama, since it was both a religious symbol and a specific prized commodity, the hunger for which could be openly expressed when queer sexual passion could not. The obliviousness to this of his many heterosexual buyers and investors, by contrast, was rooted in their normative relation to the Christian tradition in art and to accumulative capitalism. This helps to explain why, being insufficiently attuned to the full diversity of fetishisms, many of his buyers failed to recognize and acknowledge Bacon's queer labour as he wrestled with men and canvases deep into the night.

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### Notes

1. This article is an expanded and revised version of my article 'Francis Bacon: Meat, Sex and Fetishism', in *Francis Bacon: The Beauty of Meat*, ed. Adriano Pedrosa, Fernando Oliva and Laura Consendey, 124–43. Sao Paulo: Museu de Arte de Sao Paulo/Kmec Books, 2024.
2. Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon: Anatomy*.
3. Arya, *Francis Bacon and 'Constructions of Homosexuality'*; Sinclair, *Francis Bacon*; Chare, *After Francis Bacon*; Ofield, 'Wrestling', with the review article Howe, 'Francis Bacon's Dominant Figure'.
4. See, for example, Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, and Harris and Jones, *The Queer Life of Things*.
5. Olmetti, 'Queer Lands'.
6. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat*.
7. See, for example, Amelia Jones, *Seeing Differently*, 63–116.
8. Noyé and Rebucini, 'Queer Materialism', 1755.
9. Suleiman, *Subversive Intent*, 148.
10. Harrison, *Francis Bacon*, 170–3.
11. Green, 'Thinking Outside the Body'.
12. Wollfe, 'Change and Continuity', 71.
13. Kaplan, *Cultures of Fetishism*, 140.
14. Réé, 'What about the Workers?', 3.
15. Penney, *After Queer Theory*, 73, and see also Liu, 'Queer Theory'.
16. Floyd, *The Reification of Desire*.

17. Arya, 'Constructions of Homosexuality', 60.
18. *Ibid.*, 58.
19. Ofield, 'Wrestling', 123.
20. Salter, *Art and Masculinity*, 53–54.
21. Ofield, 'Wrestling', 130.
22. Janes, 'Eternal Master', 166.
23. Dymock, 'But Femsub is Broken' and 'Flogging Sexual Transgression'.
24. Chare, *After Francis Bacon*, quoted at 10, with discussion of BDSM at 33–39 and 87–96.
25. Janes, 'Oscar Wilde', 90.
26. Nye, 'The Medical Origins', 16.
27. Matlock, 'Masquerading Women', 39.
28. Arya, 'The Primal Cry', 282.
29. Arya, *Francis Bacon*, 144.
30. Arya, 'Religious Meanings'.
31. Brown, *The Death*.
32. Field, *Britain's Last Religious Revival?*, 107.
33. Janes, *Visions*, 16–17.
34. Jones, 'Postsecular Sex?', 924–5.
35. Arya, 'The Primal Cry'.
36. Stevens and Swan, *Francis Bacon*, 131.
37. Harrison, *Francis Bacon*, 142–6.
38. Gledhill, *Catalogue Raisonné*, 17, plate 9, cat. no. 50; Yorke, *Matthew Smith*, 89–90, 185 and 213, and Bacon, 'Matthew Smith'.
39. Fifield, 'Gaping Mouths', and Arya, 'The Primal Cry', 278.
40. Rogers, *Beef and Liberty*. For the more general background see Buscemi, *From Body Fuel*.
41. Janes, 'When Perverts'.
42. Arya, *Francis Bacon*, 84–99.
43. Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon: Studies*, 44.
44. Cuddy, 'The Irish Question'.
45. Harrison, *Francis Bacon*, 404–5.
46. Eisenman, 'The Animal', 52.
47. Hilton, 'The Legacy of Luxury', 112, and Hilton, *Consumerism*, 137 and 144.
48. Oehler, 'From Tabletop', 185.
49. *Ibid.*, 188.
50. Eisenman, 'The Animal', 49, fig. 37.
51. Peppiatt, 'Francis Bacon: Man', 17, fig. 4.
52. Harrison, *Francis Bacon*, 404.
53. Spalding, *British Art*, 155 and 158; Coker, *Peter Coker*, and Wootton, Taylor and others. *Peter Coker RA*, 41–44.
54. Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities*, 30.
55. Geier, *Meat Markets*.
56. Nochlin, 'Lost and Found', 139.
57. Owen, 'The Ghost of Shadwell Stair' (1918), quoted in Turner, *Backward Glances*, 42.
58. *The Stroll*, 2023, directed by Kristen Lovell and Zackary Drucker.
59. George Lucas, *Diary*, 1963 (unpublished), discussed in Janes, 'Naked Civil Servant', 31, fig. 3.
60. Houlbrook, *Queer London*, 79.
61. Jackson, *One of the Boys*, 187.
62. Stevens and Swan, *Francis Bacon*, 218.
63. Yiannitsaros, 'Delicious Death'.
64. Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity*, 171–2.
65. Kynaston, *Austerity*, 580.
66. Schwenger, 'Phenomenology', 387.
67. Arya, *Abjection*, 93.

68. Janes, 'Naked Civil Servant', 39, and Meisner and Hynie, 'Ageism with Heterosexism', 54.
69. Janes, *Picturing the Closet*, 155.
70. Woolf, *The Diary*, 171.
71. Lehmann, *The Echoing Grove*, 190, emphasis in the original.
72. Houlbrook, *Queer London*, 139–44, and Smith, *Masculinity, Class and Same-Sex Desire*, 1–4 (on northern cities).
73. Ofield, 'Comparative Strangers', 73.
74. Janes, 'Queer Juxtapositions'.
75. Stephens, 'Francis Bacon's Studio', 158.
76. Hammer, *Francis Bacon*, 66.
77. Lynes, 'Slumbering Sailors', and Reiss, 'Restless Cattle'.
78. Janes, 'Queer Juxtapositions', 287, fig. 7.
79. Alloway, 'Pop Art', 1085.
80. Whitechapel Art Gallery, *This Is Tomorrow*, and Massey, *The Independent Group*.
81. Interview 2, May 1966, in Sylvester, *Interviews*, 46.
82. Hyatt, *Love, Leda*, 86–87.
83. Waters, 'The Homosexual', 686.
84. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 25.
85. Weeks, *Invented Moralities*, 56.
86. Halperin, 'Why Gay Shame', 44.
87. Janes, *Picturing the Closet*, 161.
88. Desbuissons, 'Courbet's Materialism', 255.
89. Berger, 'Francis Bacon', 29, discussed in Mellor, 'Framing Bacon', 230.
90. Fisher, 'Queer Money', 1–23.
91. Bengry, 'Who Is the Queer Consumer', 31.
92. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 91, discussing Edelman, *No Future*.
93. Malabou, 'From Deconstruction', 91.

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