

FRANCIS BACON'S FAG-ART SOHO

LOVE IS THE DEVIL - is a hell of a fine film. It's a bio-pic about Francis Bacon: the last great figurative artist, and a predatory queer, who died in 1992. The movie opened a potential minefield of problems; many of Bacon's associates are still alive, manifesting a tendency to sue and bruise easily. Then there was funding to consider. Approaching mainstream financial backers would, most likely, have spun a hollow eulogy, completely out of touch with its subject. (Remember those risible, Hollywood, great-artist epics? Tortured artist inspires tortuous performance, from the likes of Kirk Douglas, painting-off-his-ear!) Thankfully, such *faux pas* were precipitated.

John Maybury directs it: a veteran, queer, art-circuit director, who (in the absence of Derek Jarman) was surely the right man for the job. As was casting Derek Jacobi as Bacon, not only a character-actor capable of unsurpassed performances, with a track-record for portraying sensitive gay sensibilities; but also bearing an uncanny resemblance to Bacon.

A major hurdle was presented - courtesy of the Executors of the late Francis Bacon's Estate, who refused to have anything to do with the film, or allow any of Bacon's paintings to be shown.

Never mind, film is not fine art, and Maybury (who also wrote the script) overcomes this problem with innovative visual embellishments, capturing the spirit of Bacon's work, by utilising techniques appropriate to cinema. Recalling his previous, experimental film and homage to Marcel Proust: *Remembrance Things Past*, Maybury presents fragments from Bacon's life, in a non-linear concatenation of fleeting glimpses.

Flashbacks recreate Bacon's Soho circus in the early 60s cautiously depicted with bitterness as well as nostalgia. The bulk of the plot concerns Bacon's tempestuous affair with George Dyer, a small-time East End crook, whose sordid, drug-fucked suicide finally ended the saga ... Or was it accidental death? He's allowed a more sympathetic portrayal than most accounts credit him, wracked by vivid nightmares and embittered by the booze-sodden, bitchy vitriol of Bacon's circle; a touch of pathos, that vigilantly avoids mawkishness. Running through the 60s, the film picks-up on the 'right' Baco-phile trivia (boxing-fan, gambler, tenuous association with the Krays, et al). Also worthy of mention, is the immaculately detached and non-judgemental handling of Bacon's 'algoragnia' (neat word to impress friends with, what? It's the technical term for deriving pleasure from being whipped; sure sent me scurrying for a dictionary!) Maybury also subtly acknowledges his own cinematic influences, such as Jean-Luc Godard.

Go-on, be a Devil! Treat yourself to a view of real-life, magnified and distorted through the lens of an empty cocktail-glass.

'Soho and its characters in the 1950s and 60s witnessed the most exhilarating period of his life and work ... If the spirit of a place can stimulate an artist ... Soho did so for Francis.'

- **The Gilded Gutter Life of Francis Bacon** by Daniel Farson

Lazy afternoons, drinking Champagne in Dean Street's Colony Room, was Francis Bacon's favourite muse throughout the 1950's; meanwhile his reputation grew from low-life rent-boy to the world's greatest artist. Here he was surrounded by an entourage - not the bitchy queens, snooty art critics and aspirant artists, whom he loathed and later claimed, harangued him out of Soho (he hated the insincerity of fans) but his real friends; Soho eccentrics of a bygone age. As he put-it, *'Champagne for real friends, real pain for sham friends!'*

The Colony was a shabby little bar, accessible via a steep, grimy staircase. Bacon called it Muriel's, after Muriel Belcher: the landlady. She was a swarthy, belligerent woman, and every regular knew it was her domain.

Always perched at her bar, she would decide whether or not she liked you the moment you entered. If your luck were in, then you were welcome - regardless of whether you were a hobo or Mogul, if not, you would be out before your coins touched the bar. Her charm lay in her witty tongue, regularly bellowing "members only" and "cunts" at customers.

Back in 1949, before its splendour had decayed, Bacon first stepped into the Colony and met Muriel. She had recently taken over the establishment for £10 rent per week and desperately needed customers. The young artist was impecunious, but she quickly assessed his potential and offered him free booze in return for encouraging custom from his friends. Her instincts served her well and Muriel's became the home from home for Bacon's crowd. 'I loved Muriel enormously and for some reason we both got on very well.' He also painted her portraits *Miss Muriel Belcher* (1959) and *Sphinx* (1979).

Bacon's *real friends* included Daniel Farson, then a struggling journalist who went on to become a distinguished writer - largely through chronicling Bacon's Soho. Lucian Freud was Bacon's closest straight compatriot and a renowned artist in his own right, whose copperplate portrait of Bacon was procured by the Tate. Entranced by young Freud's good looks as well as his intellect and friendship, Bacon painted at least twenty-five portraits of him. John Deakin began the Colony years as a *Vogue* photographer, but was sacked from his prestigious job after turning-up with one too many hangovers. Michael Andrews, an artist, whose 1962, painting *The Colony Room I* depicts the whole crew. John Minton was a teacher at the Royal Academy and a fine illustrator, he was a closet bohemian, guilt ridden over his homosexuality. Other notable bohemians, queers and artists in what became known as 'the Colony Room Club' included Frank Auerbach, Tim Behrens, R.B. Kitaj, Bruce Bernard, Michael Wisehart and Bobby Hunt (who began as the cloakroom attendant, while he learned to paint).

These were the wild young men that augmented Soho's cultural renaissance in the 50s and 60s, which *Art International* dubbed the 'School of London'. But their primary concern in being there was to consume as much alcohol as possible and, according to Bacon, talk about anything but art. Considering the plethora of painters present, leaving art works strewn around in careless abundance, one wonders why the interior decor decayed. Surely they could have given the place a lick of paint!

'Old Compton Street at the base led into Brewer Street, lined with restaurants and food and wine stores ... Blocks of ice outside the shuttered restaurants started to dribble across the pavements, and kept the fish fresh at Richards. The markets were alive with fruit and vegetables: Rupert Street smaller and posher; Berwick Street, heading north, cheaper, noisier and more crowded.'

There were other local hangouts. Having tanked-up on Champagne at the Colony, Bacon would tread the footsteps of Oscar Wilde, leading his friends to his favourite restaurant Wheeler's. The speciality was oysters - unsurpassed for succulence. Bacon was always welcomed by the manager, despite the tendency of his rambunctious crowd to scare off wealthy tourists, and his credit tab running into thousands of pounds (which he eventually settled with a painting).

Dressed in a leather biker jacket, his hair neatly swept back, always suave and urbane in demeanour (despite lacking sobriety) Bacon would stagger from bar to restaurant to casino, his arm extended casually around Freud's or Farson's shoulder...

'When I first knew Soho the prostitutes were all over the streets. The streets were more fun, more amusing. The prostitutes gave a living sense to the streets.' - Bacon to Farson.

Known as the French pub, the York Minster was appropriated as rendezvous for Free French forces in the war. Post-war, Gaston Berlemont stayed in London as landlord. But reported goings-on in the downstairs lavatory blackened the pub's reputation! Precisely the pedigree that Bacon's entourage sought. Draught beer was

not served only fine French wine and Champagne. Fading photographs of long forgotten boxers, acrobats and minstrels covered the walls. The doorstep was co-opted as a stage by a one-armed accordionist.

Two doors along from the Colony was the Caves de France, a long, ground-floor bar. This established a reputation for attracting all manner of eccentrics, loonies and scoundrels. One 50's regular was Gerald Hamilton, the model for Christopher Isherwood's cad in *Mr Norris Changes Trains*. Here Bacon used to drink with the Scottish painters, Robert MacBryde and Robert Colquhoun. Known as the Two Roberts, after meeting at the Glasgow School of Art in 1932, they lived together for the rest of their lives. Their artistic inspiration waned somewhat in Soho, when they realised they could use their broad Scottish accents to intimidate tourists into buying them drinks.

All Bacon's favourite spaces were socially diverse and only exclusive of convention. They were playgrounds for ambiguity and androgyny. He was contemptuous of Soho's bitchy homosexual clubs, (those halfway houses between cottage and closet) and usually kept clear of them. However he occasionally allowed Deakin to drag him along to the Rockingham Club, where effete fags would eye him suspiciously and whisper to one another. One night Deakin was particularly loud and obstreperous, drinking himself into a stupor. The manager quickly told him, Bacon and Farson to leave and never return. Carrying Deakin out, Bacon turned, shouting at the milling queens: 'Even unconscious, he's more fun than you lot!'

More appealing to Bacon was the Golden Lion, which he increasingly frequented in the 70s & 80s. He was only interested in rough trade, ideally with extremely bad lads. A firm, no-nonsense whipping in the morning was Bacon's ideal start to a hard day painting.

Finally there was the Gargoyle in Meard Street, where you could party until 2am. This was a loush affair, a grand ballroom initiated in the roaring 20s. Matisse designed the interior with two murals. In its heyday rich and famous ladies, dared to cut their dress-skirts above the knee, showing-off they're black-bottoms while shamelessly dancing the Charleston! The war stopped the party and it never regained its former glory. Yet somehow it never completely lost its dazzle either, and its Big Band sporting white tuxedos and pencil-line moustaches, rattled-on ebulliently throughout the 50s. Queer spies Guy Brgess and Donald Maclean, passed through its doors and perhaps its secrets. Existentialist Philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre and feminist Simone de Beauvoir, graced the Gargoyle with their presence (although the moment was already passed when they reached it!) They were joined by Bacon, Freud and entourage, and whiled away the night unable to freely choose which wine to order...or not to order?

Bacon loved to stage dramatic rows there with Peter Lacy, before buying drinks for drunken sailors. Then the short voyage home, stopping-off for coffee at Mrs Bill's stall on Dean Street, where it was all hands on dick!

In 50's Britain, Soho offered a unique enclave. Decadent, bohemian and lugubrious, it served as a beacon attracting social outcasts, rebels and criminals regardless of class or persuasion. Draconian drinking laws enforced a 2:30pm curfew, which was flaunted by places like the Colony. The zone had long facilitated a select homosexual club underground. Sadly these establishments conformed to the rules governing the aggregate, by reflecting its fear and paranoia. Racism, class-ism and obsequiousness were unequivocally engendered. Vigilance and a healthy mistrust of all rules was Bacon's philosophy. He deserves reverence not only as a monumental artist and honorary queer, but because even in these spheres, he angrily swam against the trends of his time.

Life of the Artist

Francis Bacon was born in Dublin of English parents in 1909. By his teens, he loathed his parents and everything they stood for. Leaving home at the first opportunity, Bacon lived in decadent Berlin and gay Paris, developing his interest in Art. He returned to London very decadent and very broke, but wealthy admirers

supported him. Although now determined to become an artist, he was too capricious for Art School. While sharing a flat with acclaimed painter Graham Sutherland, Bacon worked tirelessly to develop his technique. In the 30s he began publicly exhibiting paintings. For relaxation, he acquired a gambling obsession at the Monte Carlo Casino. Wealthy businessman Eric Hall - Bacon's first affair, supported this expensive hobby. But his affair with Chance - on green-baize, would outlast all others. To most Londoners the war-blitz blackout meant fear, death and carnage...For Bacon it was one long backroom party (try viewing his paintings from this perspective!) Post-war: gallery patronage, Sainsbury buys first picture, sustained critical attention, assent to International fame (Soho years)...

After Soho, Bacon was excessively generous to friends...and casinos! There were erotic nights and exotic adventures in Tangiers, with William Burroughs and Paul Bowles...Old friends to fall out with, and doomed affairs with Peter Lacy and George Dyer. Happier days with John Edwards and crates of Lafitte-de-Rothschild 1970. Triumphant exhibitions in Paris, New York and Moscow...Old age, loneliness, embittered decay...Death, alone in Madrid 1992.

FAG-ART THREAT

And so to the paintings...

Predictably, critics supplied reams of pretentious crap about Bacon's work (both venerating and deprecating) also some excellent analysis. Equally, the artist's own interpretation should be considered misleading. Aesthetic theories are best approached as keys to help understand something - not explain it. It cannot offer any final insights, because ultimately there are none.

The artist was most revealing of his influences outside of painting. T.S. Eliot, Sartre, Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Aeschylus, Proust, and with particularly 'powerful' 'recurrence' - Nietzsche, each left their trace. Early photographer Eadweard Muybridge, provided Bacon's 'focus' for *Two Figures* (1953). Eisenstein's film *Battleship Potemkin* 'sails' into *Studies for the Nurse* (1957). Adolf Eichmann was a Nazi, tried in a glass cubicle and 'clearly' influenced *Study for Crouching Nude* (1952).

Bacon's art... *'Offers extreme disquiet. Its vision of man is of an animal trapped and tortured in the awareness of his mortality. Human appearance is attacked accordingly - violated and brutalised with what might seem a sadistic fluency of invention. ... That potency is by its mysterious, quicksilver nature impossible to define. If it could be explained, it would not exist.'* - Michael Peppiatt in *The Connoisseur* (September 1984)

Anyone familiar with Sam Beckett's novels and plays is likely to recognise Bacon's empathy. Jane Alison Hale made this connection:

Their human figures tend to spill over into their environment, even as the beings are stripped down, laid bare, exposed, they seem to melt into the décor around them ... it is impossible to tell where the body ends and the inanimate object begins.

Theodor Adorno could have meant Bacon, when he defended Beckett's works:

Everyone shudders at them, and yet no-one can persuade himself that these ... are not about what everyone knows but no one will admit ... As though with eyes drained of tears, they stare silently out.

Abstract Art and Picasso in particular, became the main target of Bacon's bombast. This infuriated critics, who detected some convergence between both artists' work. In his last interview, Bacon finally conceded his affinity for selected Picassos.

The frame of reference within Bacon's works stretches back at least to the Renaissance - his *Pope* portraits are ironic homage to Michaelangelo and Velasquez. Post-Impressionism and Expressionism are movements to which Bacon was indebted. Van Gough remains an artist admired by every Modernist painter and surely left an 'impression' on Bacon. However, Bacon rejects the flat-surface technique, constructed through the equal distribution of paint on canvas, which is essential to Van Gough. One of Bacon's early techniques was to begin slapping lumps of paint on the reverse surface of canvas, prior to deciding what he would paint. Only after careless brush strokes had distributed the paint, would he consider what form was emerging from this abstraction.

Perhaps the German Expressionist Ernst Ludwig Kirchner is the most discernible trace in Bacon's painting. This, I would argue, offers the queer spectator a special perspective. The uneven paint surface, distorted and broken lines, blocks of colour merging into one another, confuse the perimeters of figures, suggesting to the viewer a tricky game of hide and seek, or now-you-see - now-you-don't. This is how the homosexual gaze has been socially defined. For example, the quick glance around the changing room, cautiously watching-out that no one is watching you... This, for me, is the very special quality in Bacon's work.

Chris Barber