

English 2020 – 32

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Reflections In The Void: Francis Bacon's Grotesque Mutations of Self

“In the end, of course, we remain puppets and our smiles are still painted ones.”

Thomas Ligotti

During my more vulnerable years I had a dear friend who could not stand the sight or thought of clowns. Even a simple mention or reference to them elicited the most repulsive reaction I could imagine and one that I personally did not understand at the time. In fact, I do not think said friend really understood what made her fear them as much as she did, but it did not seem to matter. They were horrible in some abstract and grotesque way that did not need to be fully understood. As I have grown, I have noticed this kind of fear to be present in a large number of people from small children to grown adults.

Clowns are not the only ones that seem to elicit such a response. As we have seen throughout most artistic mediums, various types of human imposters have been main sources of grotesque horror throughout the years. The deranged puppets in *Puppetmaster*, the strangely familiar yet unrecognizable masked men in *Day of The Locust*, and the paintings of warped yet recognizable faces like

those of Francis Bacon all share the common thread of being humorous and relatable on the surface, yet horrific and repulsive upon realization of what they represent. As Martin Gore of Depeche Mode so chillingly put it in his lyric for the song "More Than A Party," "The failed magician waves his wand and in an instant the laugh is gone". Upon the surface of these grotesque figures lies a set of humorous, illogical qualities but as we begin to peel it back the horror begins to rear it's ugly head to turn what was once playful laughter into disconcerting seriousness.

Up until a few years ago I had no real insight into what these entities could represent other than outlandish and ridiculous creations for the telling of ironic, humorous horror stories. Then, I was introduced to the author Thomas Ligotti. Ligotti is a writer of cosmic horror with an emphasis on puppets and existential distortions that can, as he claims, potentially undermine everything we think we know about our reality. What if puppets in all their lovely humanness were suddenly no longer puppets? What would this mean for our beloved reality we so fervently rely upon? In Ligotti's only work of non-fiction, *The Conspiracy Against The Human Race*, he expands upon this idea by saying, "...a puppet would exemplify just such a horror, because it would negate all conceptions of a natural physicalism and affirm a metaphysics of chaos and nightmare"(17). This idea can extend through the other mediums I mentioned earlier, but there is something peculiar about the self-portrait that brings it into a much sharper and more intimate focus.

The differences between the way people see themselves and are seen by others often differs greatly. I have always been deeply interested in these different perceptions and after being introduced to Francis Bacon's work, I spent a significant portion of a Sunday morning staring at his 1971 "Self-Portrait"(Fig. 1). Bacon's self-portrait is interesting in that it isn't immediately disturbing. At first glance it seems like a weird and oddly funny painting that does not beckon further examination because a human face is easily recognizable. There is some resemblance to his natural form in the smooth and bulbous attributes of his facial dimensions. A few swipes of tan paint are placed to remind us that behind all the chaos, there is an actual human being. In this resemblance there is a comforting feeling of being able to identify with the face of another person even in the midst of confusion and chaos. From a "Ligottian" standpoint these feelings of comfort and intimacy are enough to shrug off the chaos and keep it in the playful realm of the grotesque rather than the daunting realm of horror. But those horrific elements certainly exist in the mutation of what we recognize as normal.

The more disturbing elements of Bacon's self-portrait are not as openly apparent. I will admit that a lot of what Bacon presents here is very much open to interpretation, as with many other forms of abstract art. But the thing I love most about this type of art is the challenge it presents; not necessarily the challenge in deciphering a particular work, but the challenge of taking it and attempting to find personal meaning in what appears to be complete randomness. Trying to decipher this randomness usually comes by projecting my own thoughts and

feelings onto it and seeing what emerges. I do not know if I would have been as drawn to look at this particular painting more closely if his eyes did not radiate such a deep sadness. This sadness along with the warped depiction of his own face that seems to be submerging into pure blackness resembles that of something once human but is no longer; a man whose reflection in the void is that of a grotesque human puppet who has awoken to a reality of a more chaotic and ridiculous horror. In the grotesque mix of normal and abnormal elements there is a sense of confusion about what is really being presented and in that confusion is the very thing Ligotti warns us about: when the attributes we consider normal and expected go awry they have the possibility to open up new and greater vistas of unimaginable disorder.

As I touched upon earlier, viewing Bacon's work can be a wholly subjective experience but with this particular painting I think there are certain elements that are immediately noticeable as objectively obtuse and unsettling. Like the puppets of *Puppetmaster*, the masked men of *Day of The Locust* and the clowns so many of us fear, Bacon's self-portrait is, to me, something resembling normalcy that makes me smile in an oddly disturbing way. But as I look deeper into what opposes this normalcy my smile begins to slack and straighten as his begins to mutate into some sort of sardonic abomination, creating a grand dichotomy that is the epitome of grotesque.

Works Cited

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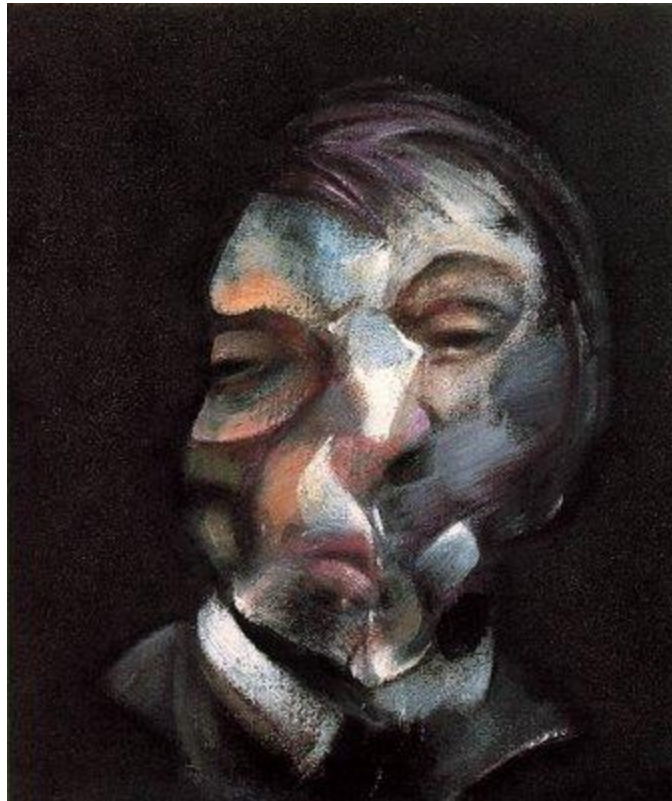


Figure 1. Francis Bacon, "Self-Portrait". Photo. Theartwolf.com. 26 Oct. 2011.

<www.theartwolf.com>