



**Francis Bacon's *Sphinx* and its Influence on the Work of David Lynch**

Daniel Kruze

Herron School of Art and Design

Prof. Stephanie Doty

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When one thinks about abstract expressionism, one typically jumps immediately to the most extreme ends of the spectrum to picture it: the colorful and indistinguishable miasmas of Jackson Pollock, the drab and terrifying collages of Jean-Michel Basquiat, things of that nature. However, overseas, the legacy of one such expressionist has dominated in his respective world of art, but only trickled into the collective knowledge of Americans. That artist—Francis Bacon—has left quite the impression on a select few American expressionists (I'll be discussing that, don't worry,) through his harrowing and miserable imagery, and the strange method by which he conveys it.

Bacon was born in Ireland, though an Englishman,<sup>1</sup> to the family of noble descent, spending a lot of his youth living on trust-fund pennies and being taught about the arts and humanities. His sexuality was very troubling to him, with his interest in art and difficulty with his identity leading to his father mistreating him, and eventually kicking him out of his childhood home. It was in this troubling period of hopping alley-to-alley living like a ruffian that Bacon found himself in Paris, and truly began to start focusing on the art that was, perhaps unknowingly to him, paving the way for his later work. He saw quite a few paintings from the post-Renaissance masters, including Nicolas Poussin's *Massacre of the Innocents*, as well as a host of renowned silent films, most notably Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* in 1925.<sup>7</sup> he soon moved back to London in the 1930s, where his painting career properly began, and immediately began to raise eyebrows.

Bacon has always had a tendency toward using historical or religious imagery in his work and juxtaposing it with inhuman body horror or disturbing and violent imagery, all overlaid with a confusing pattern of lines or hatchings, and the piece in this essay's question is no different. *Sphinx*, from 1953,<sup>2</sup> is an oil painting on normal oaken canvas that depicts his slighted

and hellish interpretation of the façade of the Egyptian Sphinx—torturously obscured by otherworldly white lines and stripped of its most notable features until the basest recognizable skeleton exists. This sort of painting was typical of Bacon in the 1950s;<sup>3</sup> having gotten his foot in the door with horrific and twisted religious mockeries like *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* in 1944, his paintings moved from recognizable horrific figures quickly into the realm of the nearly unrecognizable following his return from voyages abroad to Africa,<sup>7</sup> as the textbook clearly illustrates with 1954's *Figure with Meat*.<sup>8</sup> This particular painting (*Sphinx*) has the same sort of color palette of most of his 1950s work, which is to say dark blues, purples, and black in the background with lighter blues and greys making up figures in the foreground of varying degrees of clarity, with visible geometric patterns distorting the view.<sup>3</sup> In particular, *Sphinx* is arranged in this fashion, but finds its focus more to the left of the center, with the largest recognizable feature that draws the viewer's eye being the approximate "face" of the sphinx that rests gently on the wire frame about its body shape.<sup>2</sup> Notably, the perspective seems to take the figure of the sphinx at a  $\frac{3}{4}$  angle from the right of its body, which is illustrated by faint lines below its outline that suggest a view of the pedestal on which it rests.<sup>2</sup> This composition, combined with the messy and imprecise brushstrokes, seems to make the work seem in a way alive, but not in the way one typically considers alive. It feels askew and imperfect, almost incorporeal almost morbidly like a ghost, which is the best approximation of the general visual cadence one could get from analyzing the way the work is structured.

Unique as it is, this is unmistakably a work of abstract expressionism with a bit of an uncharacteristic fixation on the human figure. Abstract expressionists contemporary with Bacon, or before the time of *Sphinx* typically employed less recognizable human figures, choosing to represent feelings or aesthetics through geometric shapes or manipulations of objects and words,

but it's the evident obsession with the human form that permeates Bacon's work and sets it apart as a provocative and beautiful part of the expressionist tapestry.

The figure of the sphinx stands out in the minds of the average viewer as it has for hundreds of millions over centuries—a titanic achievement of architectural strength and masonry knowledge that predates most other large stone statues by an impressive amount of years. But it isn't the size of the sphinx or the dedication with which it was made that stand out to Bacon...the might and power associated with the figure and the culture of ancient Egypt don't interest him nearly as much as the inexplicable and uncanny humanity that permeates the sphinx's physiology, which by no coincidence has perplexed anthropologists for years and years. His rendition of it seems to strip down the exposed stone construction of the sphinx and the animal component of its body, leaving only the face—the human face—exposed for emphasis in the composition. The face seems to be conjured from thin air where once the body of the sphinx laid, and it barely scans through as a human face when obfuscated behind the beams of pale light, seeming almost ghostly.<sup>2</sup> Ghostly, but comforting when considering the brutal inhumanity in the dark and fading negative space around the face where the body is implied to be resting. This is, to me, the “point,” as it were, of the painting; it's a portrait of a figure that we all know well, but it's torn apart and handed back to us barely recognizable through a filter of bars, leaving us scrambling to find something to associate with (the face) in the composition to avoid having to confront the confusing blackness (the negative space.) This isn't uncommon for abstract expressionists, to play on the viewer's emotions by inverting beloved images into dark, foreboding versions of themselves, thereby forcing the viewer to struggle to look at what they don't immediately visually understand. After sitting with a work like that for a while, one begins to think about the implications of that struggle, asking themselves why they avoid the disturbing

parts of the image, and why they've been subconsciously directed to focus on one part over another.

Certainly, sitting with *Sphinx* for a while begins to give this impression. What we know as the sphinx is deconstructed before us and left only a haunting face that we can't help but focus on. Like Bacon, we're made to avoid the hideous, inverted body and pay attention only to the salvageable face, which is even still a small comfort when it's put behind bars and restricted...seem familiar? I don't think this rough interpretation is too far-fetched considering Bacon's upbringing; a young man who was scorned by his father for being too effeminate and feeling inadequate about his body<sup>1</sup> grows into a confused man who is afraid to confront the realities of the body's shape, choosing instead to dance around it's true form and contort it to make it easier for himself to cope with, yet all the while feeling constricted by his own inability to face the human body as it naturally is. Am I saying that *Sphinx* is about being a repressed transgender woman? Not necessarily, no, but what I am saying is that *Sphinx* represents, in essence, the nigh-indescribable anxiety associated with being unable to confront the form of the body, developing, then, an obsession with the face, and being caged by the repression that comes with obsession and avoidance. Bacon felt that pain,<sup>7</sup> and through *Sphinx*, and indeed through all his work that concerns the dehumanization of the human body, he wants to convey it to a non-descript audience in the hope that his pain—his obsession—could be put into words and understood.

Understanding being, of course, the one thing it seems that all people long for, whether you're a normal person longing for love or security or fulfillment, or whether you're a repressed and tortured maniac with an incessant need to torture oneself for one's inability to accept their surroundings, like Bacon. Quite an enigmatic personality, comparatively, and that is likely to

what his lasting legacy owes. I, for one, find his work incredible and frequently beyond words, as somebody with a very obsessive personality, but not necessarily “beautiful” in the classical conception. Obviously I don’t think blue shrieking specters surrounded by infected shanks of beef is a very beautiful sight to behold, but as a piece of art history, Bacon’s work is remarkable in its ability to convey horror and anxiety that words fail to adequately describe. Further still, within the movement of abstract expressionism, Bacon remains to this day, 28 years after his death, an incredible piece of the puzzle that is abstract art, with his application of strange configurations of shapes and cold colors to the classical techniques of figure rendition being a prime example of how the movement works to provoke the viewer through no particular insistence on technical proficiency, relying instead on raw emotion to create discourse where once it was impossible. *Sphinx* is no different, and I think the subconscious effect the grim tableau has on me is the kind of provocation I seek from art, which is to say that it inspires me to think about the complex feelings I have in the background of my day-to-day thoughts. Which may be something to discuss with a therapist...but who says art isn’t therapeutic?

It would probably be easier, though, to analyze Bacon’s influence through the direct inspirations he’s had on the artists who came after him, using *Sphinx* as a baseline. After all, Bacon himself took significant inspiration from film<sup>7</sup> as noted earlier, so perhaps film then has taken inspiration from him in the intervening years. As it turns out, this is true in one specific case (although there are certainly others,) that case being the postmodern visionary and Renaissance man David Lynch. Lynch, an American painter, film director, musician, and writer, has personally cited Bacon as a significant influence in his painting and his film career<sup>4,5</sup> and it’s certainly not hard to tell when one analyzes his paintings that Lynch has been following the master of abstract expressionism since he was born in the 1940s. The influence of Basquiat on

*Boy Lights Fire* and *Philadelphia* (pictured below) is obvious, and the work of Bacon's later work on paintings like *He Has His Tools and Chemicals* (pictured below) is also unmistakable. In his film work, though, is where the influence from Bacon permeates the most significantly, with nods to works like *Sphinx* present in Lynch's film and television everywhere from his first films in the 70s to his most recent film work in 2017.<sup>4</sup>

But where, precisely, does *Sphinx* fit in? To be blunt, it fits into Lynch's 2006 film *Inland Empire*, the last conventional film—well, not really conventional—that Lynch has released to date. Filmed entirely on a Sony camcorder, *Inland Empire* is a bone-chilling 3-hour odyssey of love and self-acceptance that surrounds the mystery of the production of a cursed polish film, which drives its lead actress insane. The film itself is celebrated by critics (and by me) for its unconventional shooting and insane imagery coupled with an incredibly diverse color palette and, would you believe it, a strange fixation with the human face and the contortion of human features. The immediate visual cadence of *Sphinx* is most evident in the intermittent shots Lynch includes of what appears to be the needle of some kind of scientific instrument as it laboriously draws a graph on a piece of paper with a woman's despairing face superimposed over the top as pale bars of light obscure the scene as a whole, all in black and white (one such still will be included below.) Lynch takes directly from *Sphinx*, and in general from Bacon, the insistence on obscuring the image of a face with light patterns, and the juxtaposition of vaguely human features against a disturbing or unrecognizable backdrop. However, Lynch differs from Bacon insofar as his backgrounds and negative space don't seem to contain stripped down or twisted interpretations of the human body, but rather those figures with which Lynch is obsessed: machinery. Lynch has made no bones about his obsession with the factory motif, making it a common visual theme in nearly all of his works,<sup>5</sup> and *Inland Empire* is no different, using the

hollow and alien visage of a spectral human face obscured by white light, just like in *Sphinx*, to draw inadvertent attention to a negative space of cold, inhuman machinery, much like Bacon used his sphinx's face to draw inadvertent attention to a demented and corrupted version of a natural body.

Many different paintings of Bacon's went into *Inland Empire* as far as inspiration goes, and so too did countless abstract expressionist works, as well as classical religious texts,<sup>6</sup> evidently. But this isn't the only place where *Sphinx* finds itself creeping into Lynch's work; in his 1980 film *The Elephant Man*, confusingly considered his most "conventional" film, Lynch again employs the visual stylings of *Sphinx* when depicting the visions the titular man has of his own mother. These visions include images of ghostly white elephants moving in slow-motion across an eerie black background, placed in sequence with off-center shots of a screaming woman adorned in white, only instead of being covered up by bars of light as Bacon did for *Sphinx*, Lynch used the advantages of film to simulate the bars by having the woman move back and forth so that the motion of shaking her head would give the illusion of line-distortion when played back at a low frame rate (one such still will be included below.) Less direct, maybe, than the influence in *Inland Empire*, but noteworthy in that it represents Lynch synthesizing the clear influence from Bacon's work into his film by seamlessly "translating" visual motifs in a painting into the "language" of film,<sup>6</sup> by using the advantages of moving pictures to express the same ideas that the still painting did.

This suggests a very important lesson not only about how Bacon has influenced the work of Lynch, or even how either artist fits into the history of abstract expressionist art, but rather about how the stylings of still works can be transposed into moving works. Surely with moving pictures like movies or video games it would be derivative and even self-defeating to just show a



series of flat images...that's just painting with a few extra steps. What Lynch does in his films by giving motion to the ghastly brush strokes and deathly figures in Bacon's *Sphinx* is exemplify how the themes associated with a painting can be conveyed just as plainly without any paint at all, but rather recorded visual reality; art imitates life when Bacon renders a real-life statue as a freakish and brooding mockery of itself, but then life strikes back to imitate art when Lynch's camera captures real people and animals moving and posing in such a manner to recreate that mockery which Bacon provided us. In general, Bacon's influence on Lynch is obvious in Lynch's frequent and harrowing visages of tortured people (usually women, if we're still looking for things to bring up to therapists,) robed in black and white and covered in unnatural lights, but as well as being obvious it's significant in that it portrays that confluence of media where two forms of art can reflect each other, even when they're about as different as they can conceivably be.

Big-picture-wise, Bacon's *Sphinx* and Lynch's films that draw inspiration from it come together to form only a small component of the abstract expressionist movement, but with an enormous and terrifying presence. As I mentioned, Bacon hasn't had the presence in America that a lot of his contemporaries have, but one place where his legacy is alive and well is with David Lynch, whose own eccentricities reflect and reinforce the themes of Bacon's work perfectly. Francis Bacon, though tortured and troubled his entire life, found a way to express himself, his sorrows and his fixations, through his own perturbing cornucopia of paintings, one of which being the phantasmagoric *Sphinx* that, as one can see, encapsulates every quirky aspect of the man's psyche. As a piece of abstract expressionism, *Sphinx* is a multifaceted heavy-hitter that, while not monolithic in sphere of influence or public perception, is a wonderful little tiramisu of abstract art—as in, it has many layers of equal importance that all perfectly embody

the individual parts of the movement that come together to define it as a whole. Clearly it has nothing to do with tiramisu, but it *could* taste like coffee, I suppose. I wouldn't know, because I don't think anyone's ever tasted it...but that's not important. What is important is that Bacon's messy brushwork and crazy color schemes don't get swept under the rug when looking at abstract art and its impact on modern culture, because people like David Lynch certainly haven't glossed over it when creating masterpiece films that millions of people watch even today.

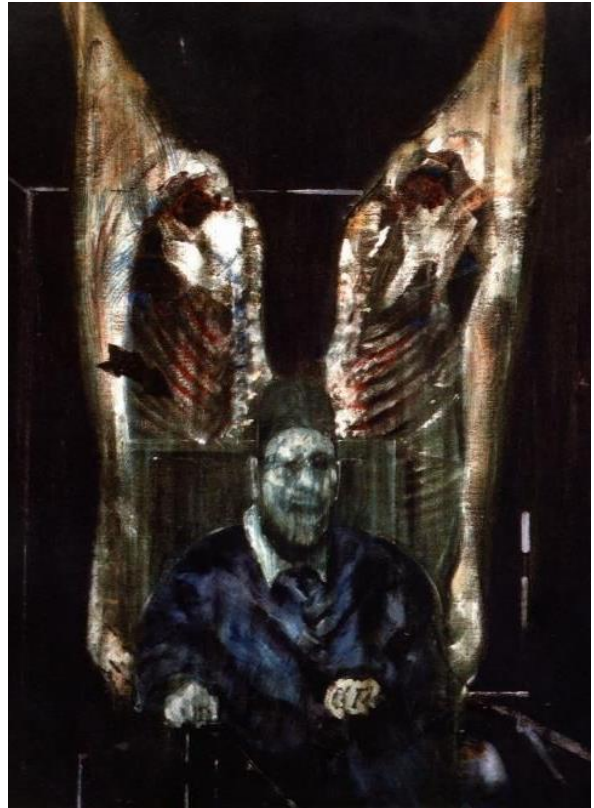
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REFERENCE IMAGES



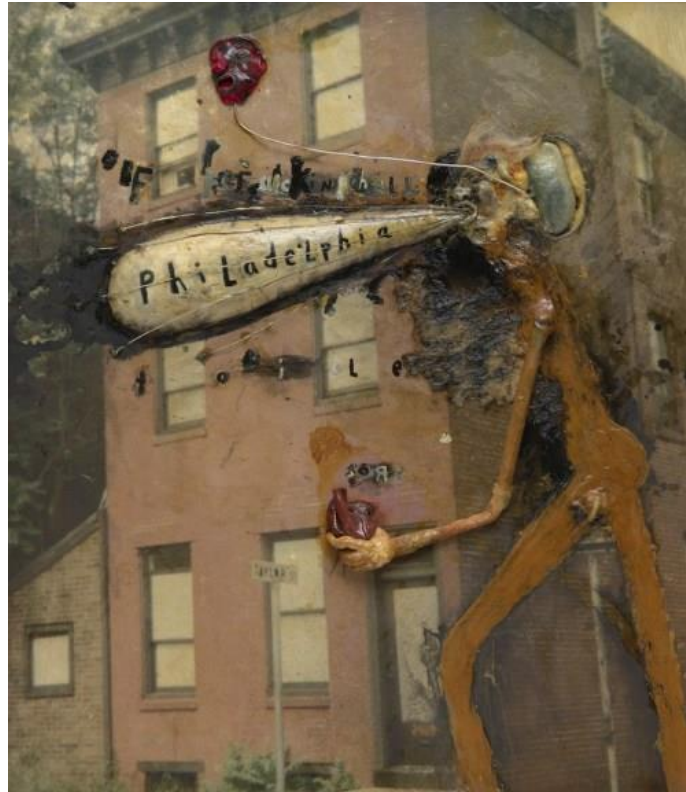
*Sphinx*, Francis Bacon, c. 1953, Oil on Canvas



*Figure with Meat*, Francis Bacon, c. 1954, Oil on Canvas



*He Has His Tools and Chemicals*, David Lynch, c. 2013, Oil on Canvas



*Philadelphia*, David Lynch, c. 2017, Mixed Media



*Boy Lights Fire*, David Lynch, c. 2010, Mixed Media



*Inland Empire*, David Lynch, 2006



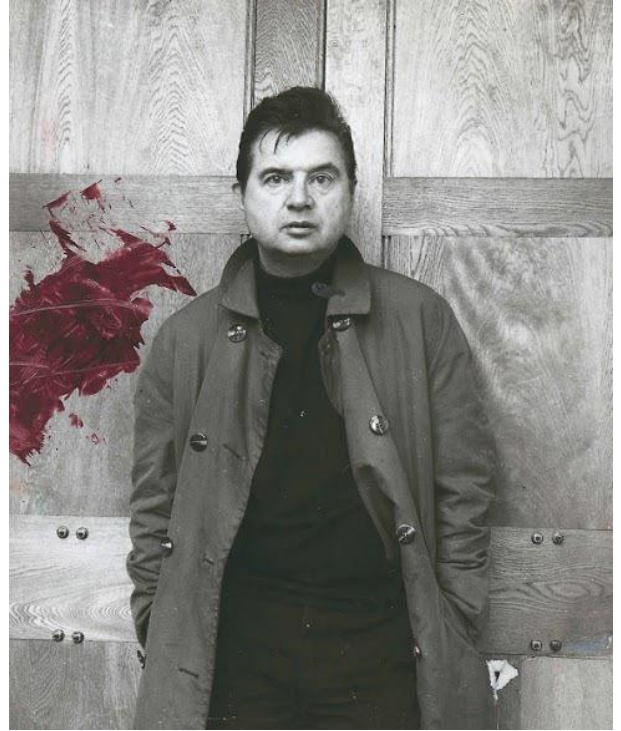
*The Elephant Man*, David Lynch, 1980

(Crazy that you can put gifs into word documents now, hopefully  
you can see it moving like I can!)





David Lynch



Francis Bacon



A typical tiramisu