Dialectics, Spiritualism and Perspective: Exploring the intersection between psychoanalysis, spiritualism and mental illness as expressed through the works and approaches of Ellis, Burroughs, Bacon, Hiller and Viola.

List of Illustrations:

Photograph of restaurant named “Dorsia’s” in Boca Raton, Florida…….9

Screenshot of business cards from “American Psycho” (2000)……...……10

Screenshot of Bateman’s apartment from “American Psycho” (2000)……13

Francis Bacon, 1976. *Figure Writing Reflected in a mirror*. Oil on canvas. Private Collection, USA…….……14

Screenshot of typewriter from “Naked Lunch” movie (1991)……...……..15

Francis Bacon, 1971. *Self Portrait,* Oil on Canvas. Centre Pompidou, Musée national d'art modern-Centre de création industrielle, Paris……..…20

Francis Bacon, 1981. *Triptych Inspired by the Oresteia of Aeschylus*, Oil on canvas. Marlborough International Fine Art, Vaduz…….……21

Francis Bacon, 1976. *Figure in Movement*. Oil on canvas. Private Collection……...……23

Pablo Picasso. *Portrait of Dora Maar(?),* Oil on canvas. (sourced from “Images of Horror and Fantasy”)……....26

Pablo Picasso, 1962 *Tête de femme,* Oil on canvas. The Picasso Estate (Fig 1)……...27

Pablo Picasso, 1963. *Tête de femme,* Oil on canvas. Sotheby’s (Fig 2)……..….27

Pablo Picasso, 1963. *Tête de femme,* Oil on canvas. Private Collection. (Fig 3)…….27

Francis Bacon, 1976. *Portrait of Michel Leiris,* Oil on canvas. Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris…….29

Francis Bacon, 1981. *Metropolitan Triptych (Left Panel).* Etching and aquatint on Guarro paper. Catalogue Raisonné: Tacou no. 13, Sabatier no. 4 ……..31

Susan Hiller, 2008. *Homage to Marcel Duchamp: Auras.* 50 colour archival dry prints. ……..34

Susan Hiller, 2013. *Channels*. Multi-channel video installation, 106 television sets ,9 media players, 7 dvd players, signal splitters. (Image courtesy of thisistomorrow.info) ……...……37

Bill Viola, 2000. *Ascension*. Video/sound installation (image courtesy of www.barnesfoundation.org/whats-on/bill-viola).....39

Bill Viola, 1983. *Room for St John of the Cross*. Video/sound installation. The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles ……..42

Contents

Preface/Introduction…5

American Psycho….7

William S Burroughs/Naked Lunch….14

Francis Bacon……19

Susan Hiller….33

Bill Viola…38

Conclusion/Summary…42

The word “dialectics” often refers to the Socratic method in philosophy in which false beliefs are exposed through dialogue and questioning - eliciting truth. The definition of “dialectic” that I was provoked by, however, and the definition I intend in my use in the title is one referring more specifically to “tension”, “opposition” or, as Oxford languages puts it, “inquiry into metaphysical contradictions and their solutions”.

Hold

]

American Psycho

American Psycho by Bret Easton Ellis (1991) is a book I read at the start of September this year.

One of the first things I noticed about it compared to previous works of fiction I had enjoyed was it's pace. It's lack of emotional affect gave it a brisk readability; judgements were quick, decisions made using top-of-the-mind thinking. Location and subplot did not weave in and out dreamily like that of, for example, Murakami's Wind-Up Bird Chronicle, a book I was impacted by earlier in the year– but rather, the reader would follow in the protagonist's forward-thrusting, activated body in a world totally comprised of elements for **use** or **disuse**.

This mindset could be seen within most of the characters surrounding lead Patrick Bateman with characters such as Timothy Price standing out as particularly icy and arrogant- more so than the lead despite Patrick being an actively murderous psychopath - Bateman is a relatively unremarkable character in his social surroundings.

I mean this in that he is rarely paid much attention to at depth, although there is not much depth being shared to begin with. His name is often mistakenly

swapped out with other wall street guys - acquaintances mis-recognising Bateman is a common occurrence throughout the novel.

This is entirely reciprocated, however, for example in the quote:

"I've forgotten who I had lunch with earlier, and even more important, where." (Ellis, 1991: 91)

There is not so much of a tension here, as seemingly everyone involved is emotionally detached from one another. This is written as a dark satire but, for me, reading it was unexpectedly comforting.

Throughout the novel, social interactions are merely a structure within which to convince others of ones' own superior value and thus usefulness for securing career success. Genuine display of emotion is replaced with signifiers such as taste in clothing or attention to detail in the print of business cards; however, such tastes are also formulated in the form of regurgitations of the opinions of critics in magazines.

Humorous compilation of business cards featured in the famous scene from the 2000 movie adaptation of American Psycho displaying the detail that each card contains identical job title and contact information.

Even in private, full chapters dedicated to Bateman's taste in music read the most mechanically of all. Many readers have reported feeling bored by the apparent meaningless drole of such chapters; I found them to be necessary pauses – breathing space between the gut-wrenching tension found in Bateman's actual life. In these chapters, the remaining vital characteristics of Bateman fade away to pure informational regurgitation, pure analytical processing.

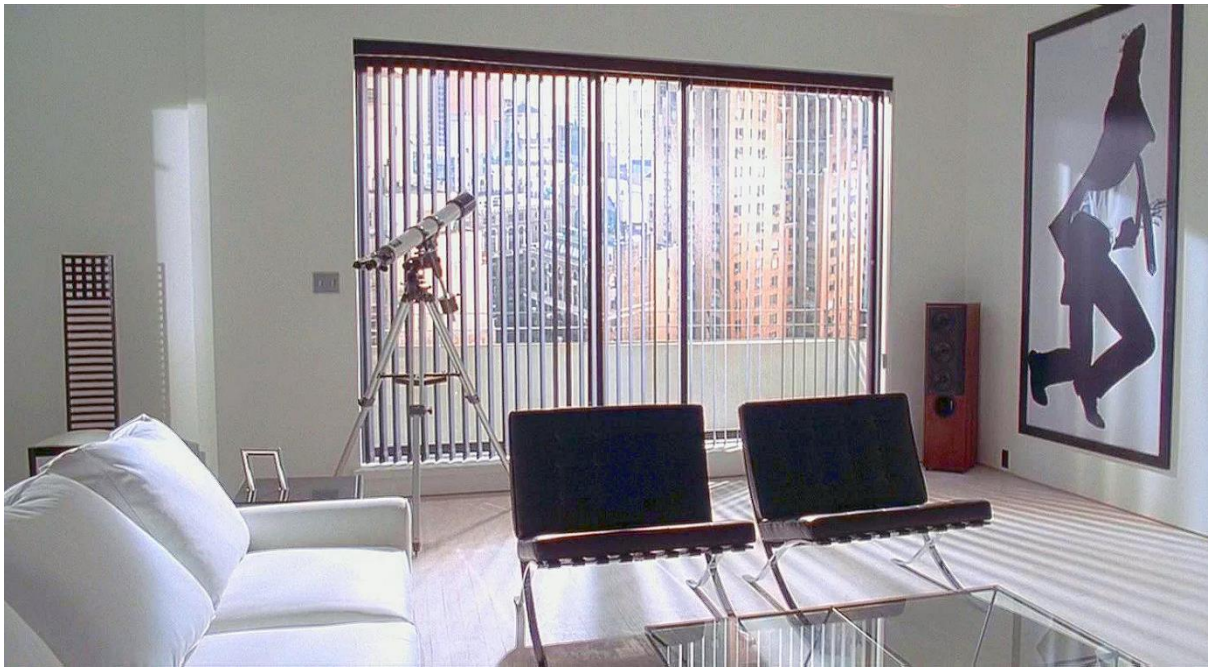
To be nothing- truly passive in the flow of information- is the only way to rebuild strength after chapters of such brutal restraint of humanity.

By restraint of humanity, I am referring to that which is repressed inside Bateman. Perhaps there was a time in Bateman's life (probably his time spent in Harvard Business School,) that he learned that his own innate animality was not compatible with Wall Street success.

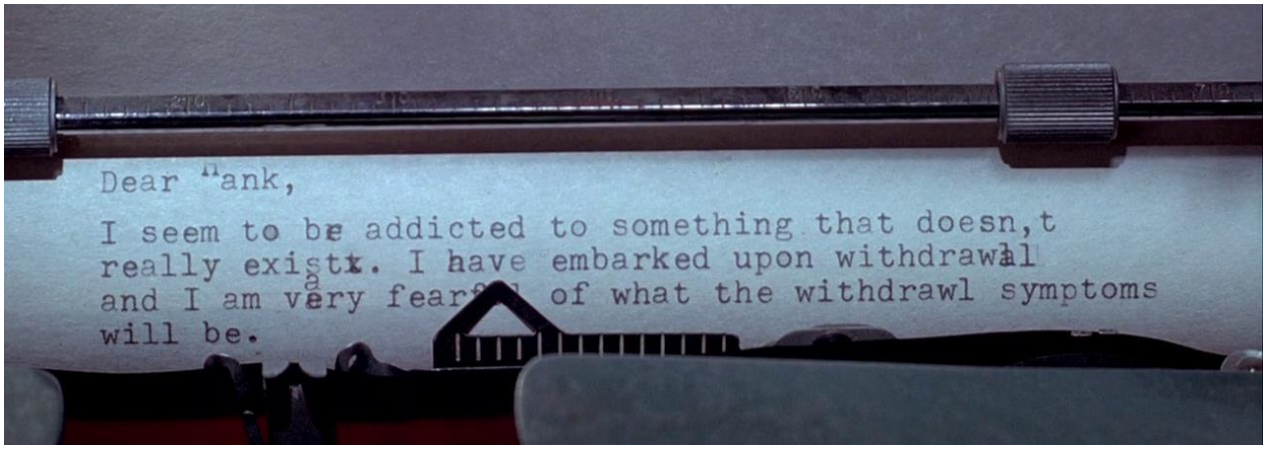
A Jungian perspective may conclude that the anima- the repressed feminine that he identified in opposition to, the deep feeling factor that was conceptualized as a weakness and a liability - was being projected onto the women of his life and it was so deeply ingrained in him to deny and eliminate all traces of this aspect of his own psyche that this manifested outwardly in a primal necessity to savagely brutalise women (and any men who showed sufficient "weakness", like Luis Carruthers who expressed attraction to Bateman,) in now ritualized events of… catharsis? However, one would find that when reading the book- Bateman's killings are not cathartic for the protagonist nor the author. They are accelerations of the protagonist's mindset to the extreme – a mindset whose success is powered by its endless hunger.

“There wasn't a clear, identifiable emotion within me, except for greed and, possibly, total disgust. I had all the characteristics of a human being – flesh, blood, skin, hair –but my depersonalization was so intense, had gone so deep, that the normal ability to feel compassion had been eradicated, the victim of a slow, purposeful erasure. I was simply imitating reality, a rough resemblance of a human being, with only a dim corner of my mind functioning. “ (Ellis, 1991: 171)

Once it has reached it’s maximum- attained the utmost power of taking another human’s life -absolute saturation in disgust (shoving a dead rat into a woman’s mutilated vagina, for instance), its purpose is unclear. It is at these points in the book that the narrative sweeps up quickly or chapters end abruptly before picking back up again having left obvious gaps after the author has evidently taken a break after reaching his own psychopathic anti-climax.



Naked Lunch.



William S Burroughs, born in 1914, had the published the book “Naked Lunch” in 1959 – although he had “no precise memory” of writing it. He explains this in the opening chapter which is a “testimony concerning a sickness”, that sickness being his fifteen-year addiction to opiates. His writing was not known to be of a novel, but “notes on sickness and delirium” and even the title that was suggested by Jack Kerouac was not understood by the author until his recovery, Burroughs writes. I find this opening chapter highly interesting as Burroughs explains the details of his addiction to opiates and condemns their use but goes on to talk about other drugs: mescaline, *Bannisteria Caapi* (now known as ayahuasca), LSD, and “Sacred Mushrooms”. He makes a point to share that “there is no evidence that the use of any hallucinogen results in physical

dependence”- a fact that is still accepted in today’s research.

The experience of reading the book was hallucinatory. If American Psycho was about a personality being driven to brutality by its repressed “soul” , then Naked Lunch was the soul bursting out in splutters through passages of sub-sense in which strange characters- some human, some grotesque freak come together to act-out the sensations of junk-sickness in the gutters where it resides along with the other crudities (or, crudités, if we are talking about lunch) lingering in the subconscious of an American male in the 1950s.

Burroughs’s mind was particularly guilt-ridden.
In 1951, he shot his wife (and mother to his four-year-old son) Joan Vollmer in the head, killing her instantly.

The story goes that it was during a “drunken William Tell stunt”, however, sources say his story later changed.

This was a pivotal moment in Burroughs literary career as it made him aware of a “possession” that greatly provoked his long career with writing that started with Naked Lunch.

He wrote about this between 1951-53 in the book “Queer”, published in 1985. An excerpt reads:

“I am forced to the appalling conclusion that I would never have become a writer but for Joan's death, and to a realization of the extent to which this event has motivated and formulated my writing. I live with the constant threat of possession, and a constant need to escape from possession, from Control. So the death of Joan brought me in contact with the invader, the Ugly Spirit, and [manoeuvred] me into a life long struggle, in which I have had no choice except to write my way out.” (Burroughs, 1985:23)

What I find interesting here is his recontextualization of the event as a total possession of his person by “Ugly Spirit”- spirit that in full possessive power would kill Joan Vollmer. He recognises a *constant* presence of this spirit – a threat that he is in *constant* effort to resist. A spirit that is "Monopolistic, acquisitive evil. Ugly evil. The ugly American", as he described it.

I use the term “spirit” here broadly, as like in “team spirit”, but I would like to point out that Burroughs wished that his reference to “possession” was to be taken very literally:

"My concept of possession is closer to the medieval model than to modern psychological explanations ... I mean a definite possessing entity." (23)

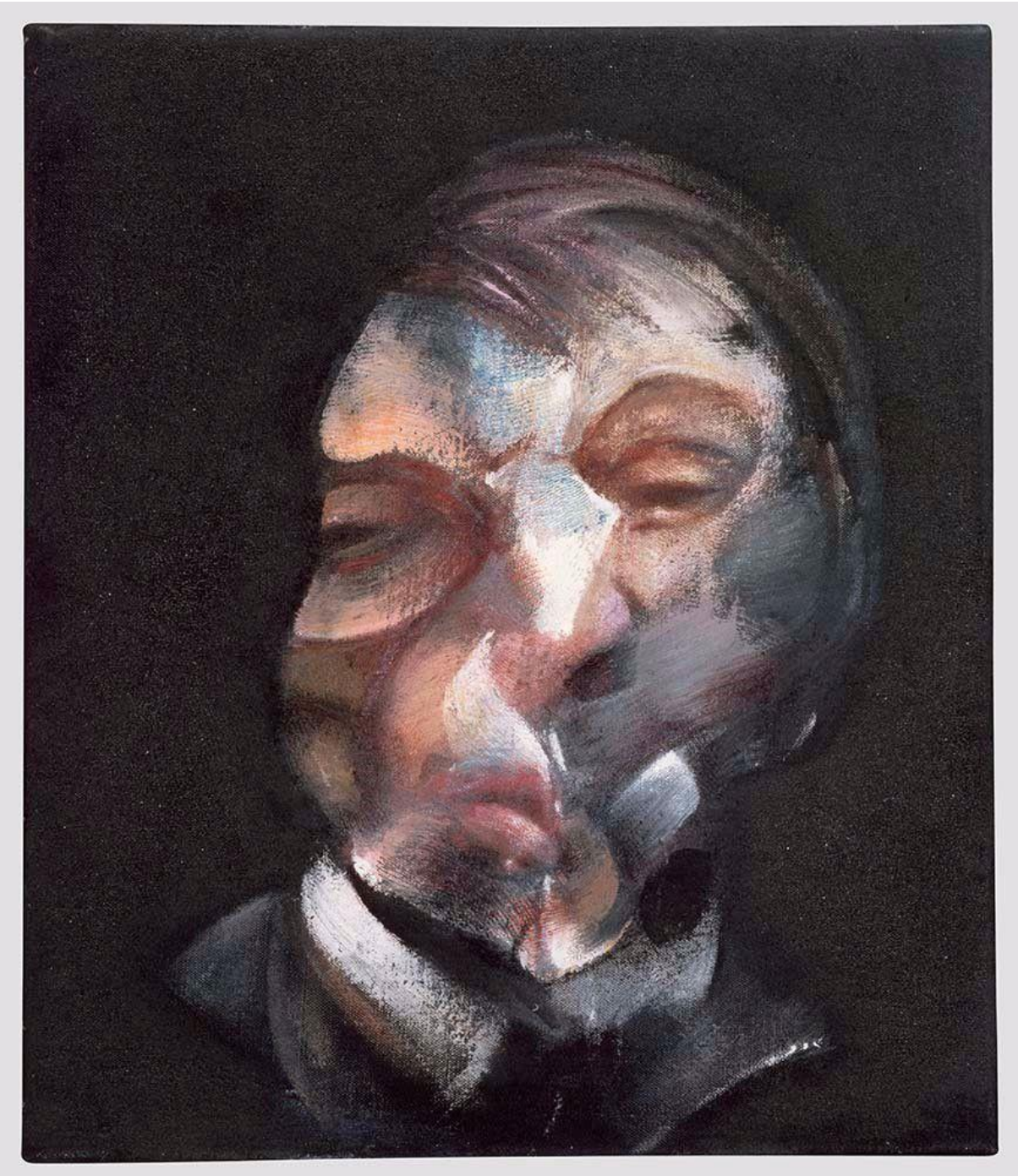
His approach to writing was one of religious dedication in some ways, however unlike seeking “God”, his dedication was to banishing, or “killing” the murderous force within him - the paradoxical nature of this perhaps creating this *constant* tension.

In an interview with Daniel Odier, published in *The Job* (1970) he said in relation to his influential cut-up technique :

"The word of course is one of the most powerful instruments of control ... Now if you start cutting these up and rearranging them you are breaking down the control system."

Language comprises most of our thought and conceptualisation. However, words were created to communicate to other people our experience. This resulted in the benefit of sharing large amounts of information between people – forming a massive overarching structure upon reality that is continually built upon. Ideology can be defined as the way we understand our reality through ideals and philosophies- it is how we justify our behaviours and understand our aims. It is when our ideologies contradict our wellbeing that problems arise – this is referred to as “false consciousness” by Marxists. It

refers to the cultural phenomenon in which a subordinate class wilfully embodies ideology of the ruling class – even though the goals of such ideology do not benefit the subordinate class.



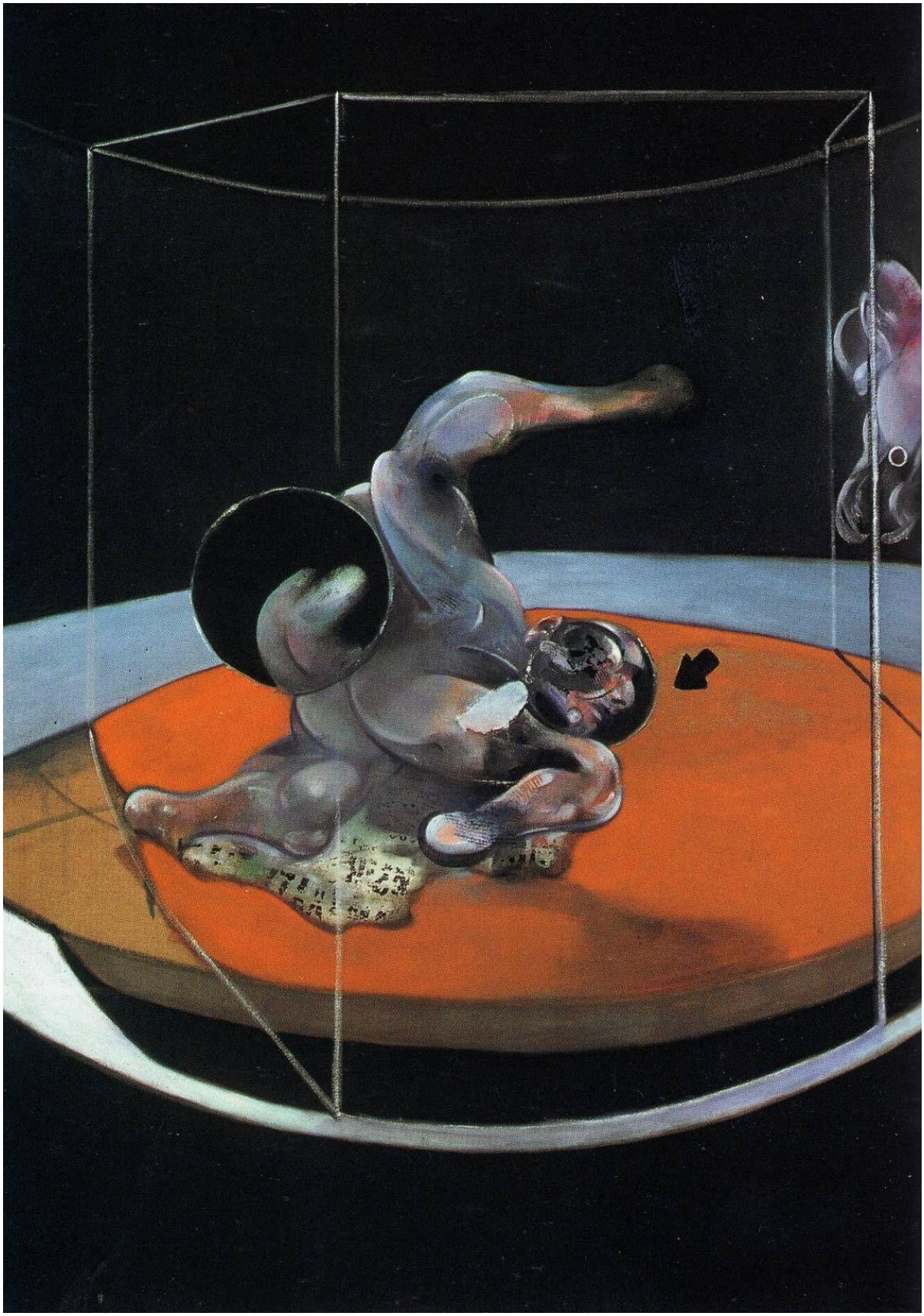
Francis Bacon

Francis Bacon’s paintings produce in me a mixed reaction. Much of the tormented distorted figures in empty spaces provide little satisfaction to look at, and my initial response is that the emotional effect of drowning in one’s own isolation can hardly be justified.

There is a prevailing sense of nihilism – his works lack a moral idealism or beauty that would elicit a life-affirming warmth within the viewer like that of much of classical art.

“That may be because I hate a homely atmosphere, and l always feel that malerisch painting has too homely a background.” Bacon said in an interview with David Sylvester. In relation to the harshly bare settings his subjects reside in, *“l would like the intimacy of the image against a very stark background. l want to isolate the image and take it away from the interior and the home.”* (1975: 120)

There is a tension between subject and background. Sometimes the background creates a cold starkness against the subject, as in the above triptych where harsh lines and dusty shades of beige create an environment reminiscent of an office corridor or otherwise public space. In other paintings, for example “Figure in Movement” (1976), the background is predominantly black.



Black is a colour unlike any other in its potent talent for creating space that is simultaneously empty and full. Unlike white, which suggests a pure empty space open to the possibility of contamination via occupant, black casts any potentially present occupants in darkness - creating an endlessly unknown.

In “Figure in Movement”, a spotlight shines on the image and the subject appears to be on a platform or stage of sorts. Straight lines cage the subject in - who appears to be crumpling under his own weight - struggling to remain structurally composed. A limb extends as if attempting a front crawl. The head is isolated by a lens-like circle and is accentuated further by an arrow that also contributes to the circular movement of the figure that both crumbles and persists. This lensing affect brings the viewer’s attention to the face which is visibly straining, reaching upwards as if for breath, however it’s main humanizing features- the eyes- are enclosed by another circle that reflects the darkness of the surroundings, obscuring the features. Overshadowing these, however, is a much larger circle to the left of the image that breaks the line of the cage-like structure, coming to the forefront of the image, pulling a large amount of the viewer’s attention to a part of the body that ambiguously resembles the buttocks, but it is isolated

from the rest of the form by black shadow. This focus seems to objectify the figure against its struggle for mere survival. Lastly, to the right of the image, a demonic horse-like creature with splatters of blood reaches its head into the frame from beyond the platform. At one point perhaps it was thrashing away from the viewpoint in pain – but a vivid white circle reminiscent to a ring-light used in filming (although I am not sure these were used at the time of painting, it only furthermore adds to the original effect of the painting) creates a pointing gaze at the struggling figure that also lines up with the black arrow.

Bacon’s portraits showcase a remarkable understanding of visual perception, carefully directing the viewer’s case across the canvas.

He employs a sensibility that harks back to Picasso’s portraits where distortions take the viewer *through* a portrait, transforming the planes of the face into a larger space with explorable depth.

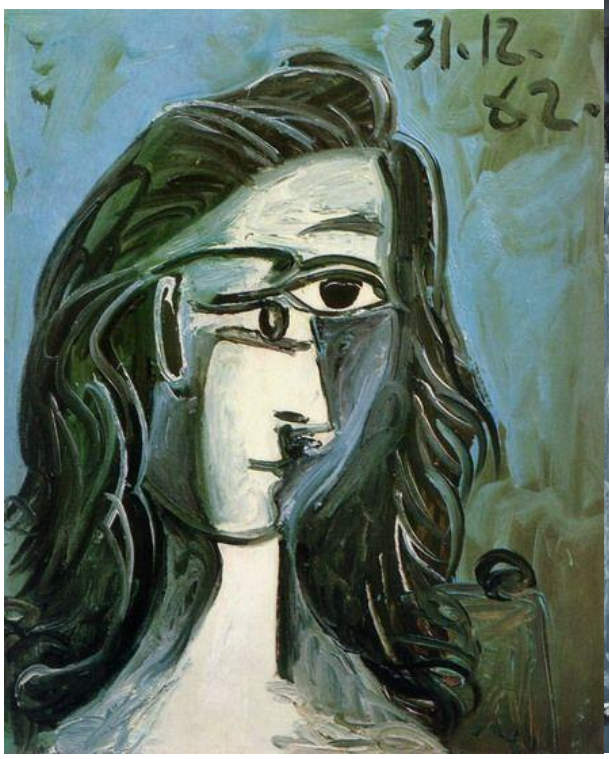


Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

This is exemplified in the above portraits of Dora Maar, in which Picasso demonstrates a “seeing right through” of the subject, knocking the doors down and inviting himself in, so to speak. The effect of these portraits is unsettling but also appeals to a child-like curiosity to explore a cordoned-off area.

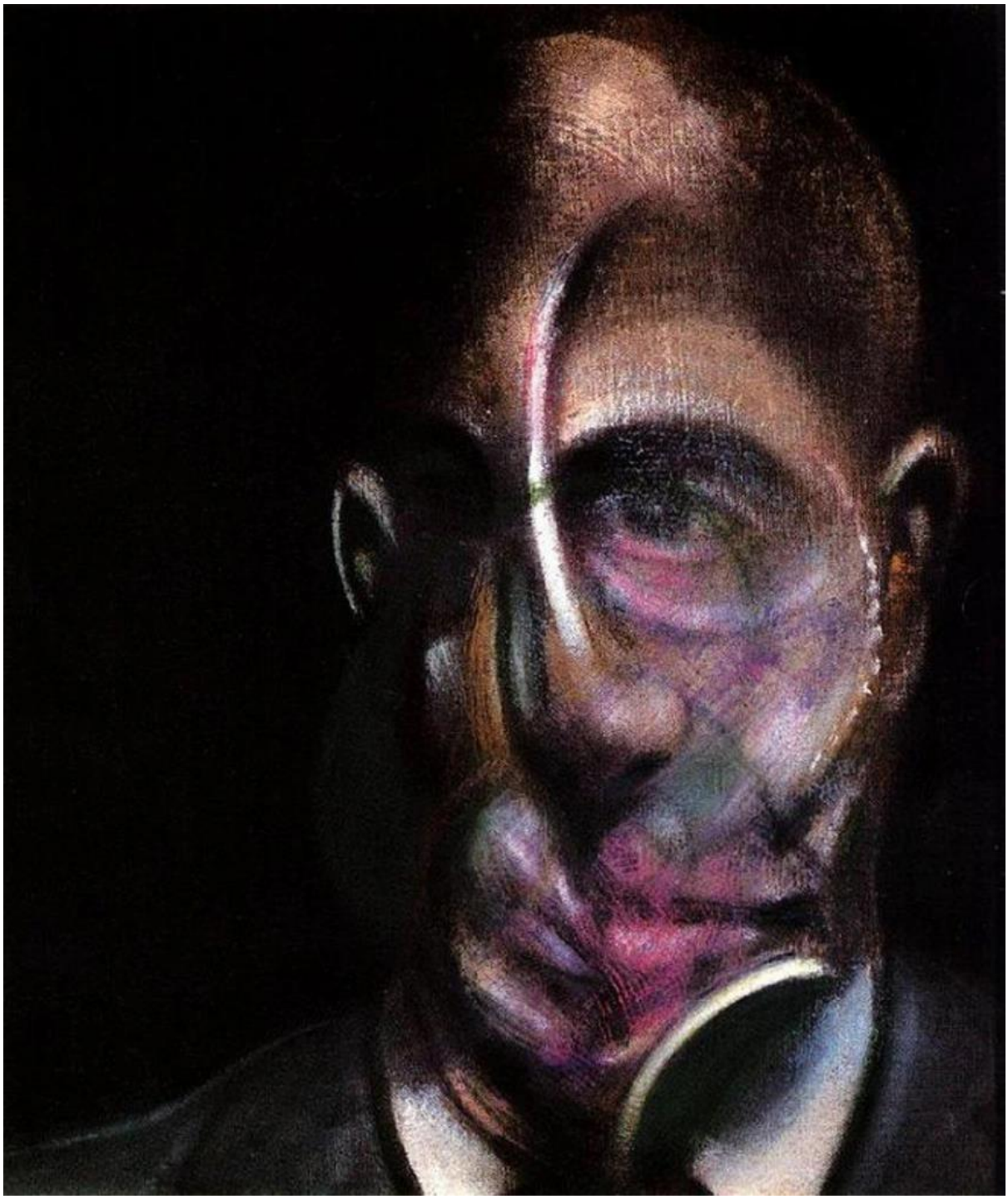
Like Picasso, Bacon also dismantles the “mask” of his subjects. However, this has an effect that is more intimate than invasive, I think.

Andrew Forges talks about Bacon’s portraits in his 1985 essay:

“Sometimes they seem to be made of nothing but their own expression: faces dominate heads, features dominate faces. Sometimes, the features themselves seem to be nothing but shine, sheen, surface, there in a flickering instant, not to be grasped. Sometimes they are holes.”(27)

The intimacy this creates is one between the eyeball of the observer and the face of the subject.

Distortions direct the movement of the gaze of the observer; spacial domination of certain features cause them to attract the most attention. In “Portrait of Michel Leiris”, for example, massive attention is brought to the right eye, with the entire left side of the face briskly turning away into oblivion. This painting captures, for me, a brief moment in which one’s focus is enwrapped in the impression of a person.



In the same interview with David Sylvester, Bacon said that this portrait, despite resembling Leiris's physical features (such as his bulbous head) less than the other portraits in the series, it is "more poignantly like him".

Discussions in portraiture like this hark back to Picasso (and undoubtedly many others) who talk about capturing the "essence" of a person through portraiture rather than a strict photographic likeness.

It is a bit of a segue away from the main themes of the essay to be discussing this, but it nevertheless raises questions about the subtleties of human experience and the "unseen" that is made visible through the visual arts.

Francis Bacon was a staunch materialist throughout his life. He shared a Nietzschean philosophy in which one creates one's own meaning in life, and he lived quite hedonistically, gambling away much of his earnings and consuming alcohol superfluously. Despite his success and influence as an artist, he described his own experience of life as being never relaxed. Again, there is a constant tension.

This tension is addressed in his work and in the interview with Sylvester in which he talks about an interaction between will and intuition. Throughout his painting process, there is a constant disruption of realism and likeness – for he finds it boring- by "chance" acts. In these moments, he acts intuitively- against the prescribed norm- to change the course of the painting.

I see a similarity with Burroughs here, as both artists consciously use their own will as a commanding agent for unpredictability and chance. Both use chance to their advantage, or at least the advantage of their intellect. And yet, both seem to experience a constant tension.

Listen

In this last part of the essay, I will discuss two artists who specialize in video and installation. I have not experienced either of their works in person and thus can only go off things I have read or clips I have seen on the internet (although I have not directly witnessed a Francis Bacon painting either, for that matter).

Susan Hiller

An interesting thing I noticed researching for this essay is that both Susan Hiller and William Burroughs studied anthropology originally- both dropping out before course completion.

Little can be found regarding Burrough's reasoning however Susan Hiller wrote about not wanting her research to contribute to an "objectification of the contrariness of lived events [that] was destined to become another complicit thread woven into the fabric of 'evidence' that would help anthropology become a 'science'" (Hiller, 1991:14)

A similar topic was written about also in Baudrillard's "Simulacra and Simulation" in which he spoke about the subject of 'ethnology', in relation to which stating that "the logical evolution of a science is to distance itself increasingly from its object" (Baudrillard, 1981:9).

The sentiment of these statements is once again related to the separation between ideology and a more direct lived experience- but also speaks about how ideology shapes our experience. When a scientific approach is applied to spiritual or mystical beliefs, the experience granted by such belief systems is fundamentally altered. In the 1960's, anthropologist and writer Carlos Castaneda tackled this idea in the researching for "The Teachings of Don Juan"* in which

he fully immersed himself as a student of the Yaqui shaman. During this experience, he was faced with the spirit “Mescalito” (a teacher who inhibited all peyote cacti) and turned into a blackbird using “humito”, a smoke containing the compound psilocybin. Such experiences – fully dependant on beliefs - simply would not have happened in a scientific setting as one knows that it is not physically possible nor societally acceptable to transform into a blackbird.

*There has since been much debate by scholars on the factuality of the book with the consensus generally being that they are mostly if not entirely fictional (with claims of plagiarism in some places too, *oops*) … however, Castaneda did make a powerful point about the value of human imagination and how vivid perceptual experience can enrich and bring meaning to a person’s life.

Spiritual and paranormal beliefs are a dominant subject in Susan Hiller's work, with many of her installations revolving around a compiling of primary accounts of such experiences – such as "Channels" (2015) which features a wall full of analogue televisions playing audio of people from across the world recounting their near-death experiences.

In an interview with Kasper Bech Dyg in connection with the exhibit, Hiller spoke about her use of analogue screens and how each one's stand-by screen appeared in a slightly different shade of blue. She also noted with amusement the phrase "blue screen of death" which refers to a blue screen that would appear on a Windows computer in the event of a fatal error.

When the audio of a person recounting their experience plays in the exhibit, the soundwaves are displayed on corresponding screens whilst the screens surrounding it fluctuate between blue standby and static, a state of being between channels.

Conceptually, this is symbolic of a person being "between channels" when they are in this experience being declared dead, but also the static screen is a long-standing symbol of ghosts and hauntings. Haunting also, is the effect of the recordings- being human voices recorded digitally and thus, separated from their original bodies, essentially left as ghosts.

I admire Hiller's attention to detail in *listening* to the qualities of the technology available to her and discovering links between that and her conceptual ideas. This is similar to Bacon leaving elements of his paintings up to "chance" and allowing the qualities of paint to speak for itself.

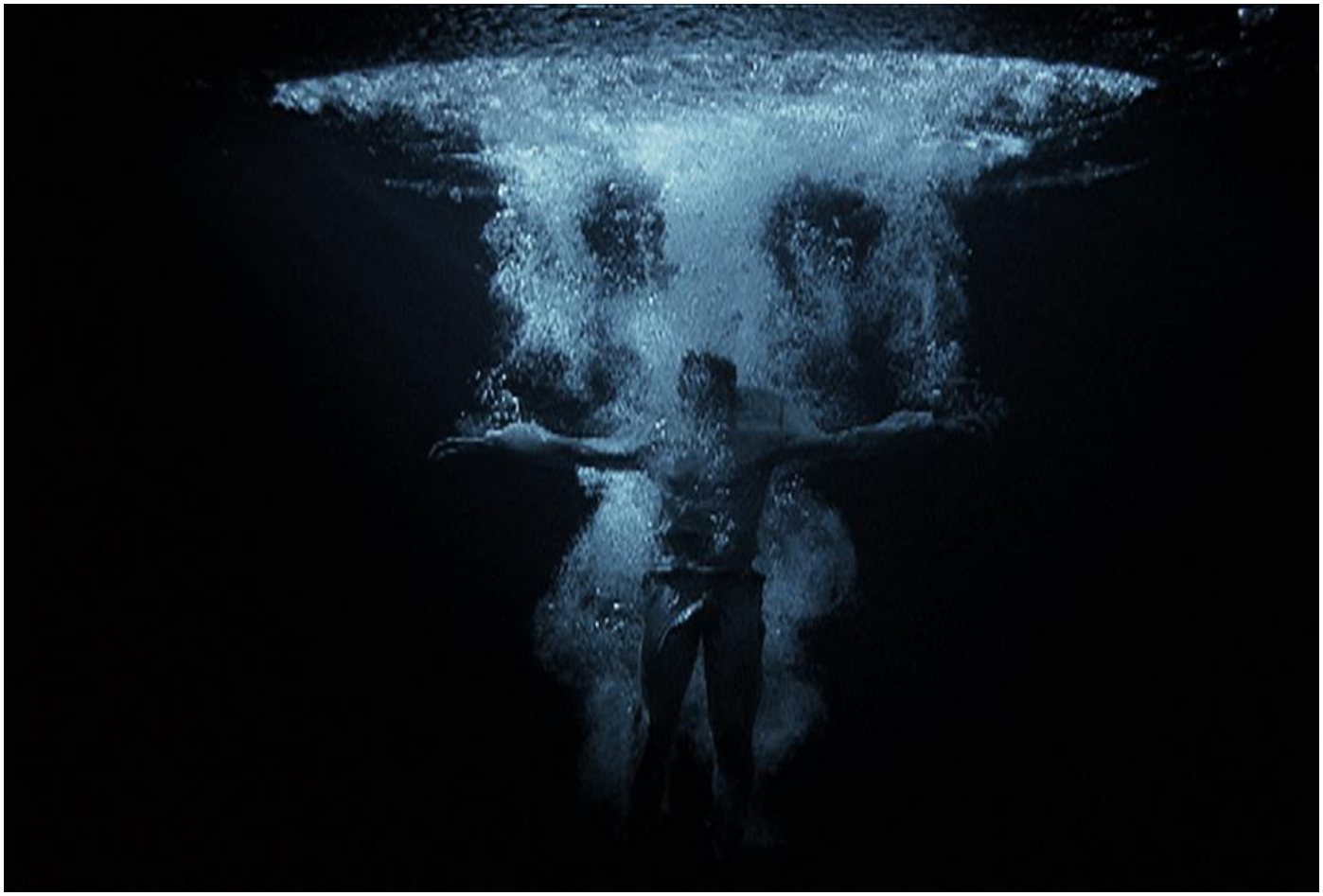
Some of Hiller's works also have a feminist impulse, such as the installation "Psi Girls"(1999) which features

five screens displaying 2 minute clips from feature films of young girls exhibiting telekenetic powers.

In her essay, *'An Extreme Tolerance for the Unknown: Art, Psychoanalysis and the Politics of the Occult'*(2017) featured by Tate, art historian and theorist Alexandra Kokoli writes of a suggestion of the "widespread cultural fear of young womanhood and its disruptive potential" by the exhibit. Hiller herself spoke about how "the spiritualist movement in particular made visible unacknowledged issues of gender and class relations" in an earlier interview with Kokoli (2013).

This points to a deeply personal relationship with the occult that is entangled with Hiller's own identity.

Bill Viola



Listening is a large part of Bill Viola's practice. In the 2019 interview, "Cameras are the Keepers of the Souls", he recalls an early memory of his uncle showing him the sound of the city through listening to the sounds from outside of the window of their apartment.

He speaks slowly, involved in every word. The title of the interview relates to words he uttered in relation to footage of his mother which he exhibited in the Guggenheim shortly following her death- which he

witnessed in person. In video, he realised that the "soul" of a person is captured and will remain for as long as it is looked after, technically.

Bill Viola's videos are a lot like paintings in that they tend to focus around a single image or scene, often slowed down and accompanied by the sound of a single whoosh of water or crackle of flames. Unlike narrativization that we are accustomed to expect from video, the videos of Viola encapsulate a single moment or emotion.

Often, the emotions are visceral moments of being somewhere between alive and dead. There are also a lot of references to religion in the titles, particularly to Christianity. Viola speaks of his interest in various religions including Christianity, Islamic Sufism and Buddhism in the 2019 interview, explaining that for a long time, this interest of his was kept secret because it was taboo in contemporary art.

He speaks of feeling liberated when he finally accepted this, titling an installation as he truly intended- "Room for St John of the Cross" which was done in response to reading the poems of St John of the Cross. These poems he wrote in the 15th century whilst being imprisoned in a 10-by-6-foot cell, receiving frequent lashings, without change of clothes and on a meagre

diet of bread and fish scraps. Viola remarked that this is not an isolated event- people are existing today in similar conditions around the world.

The piece itself features a small, constructed room the same size as the prison box with a small hole cut out of it for viewing and behind it is a massive screen with footage of a mountain blizzard and a howling of wind playing through the speakers. Inside the room is another speaker, playing in its original Spanish the love poems of St John of the Cross.

Viola's work functions on empathy, especially his later works involving water or fire. By slowing things down and removing narrative and capturing each piece in incredible definition, a space is created around the subject especially for the viewer's acute perceptual experience.

With empathy, we feel acutely aware of that which connects us. Viola, through his work, asks nothing more of us but to feel, and for that feeling to move us.

Conclusion

Each of these examples demonstrate a different approach to navigating the relationship between metaphysical contrasts, provoking thought about the human experience and an artist's role in finding a balance that allows them to both work efficiently and remain perceptive to that which gives them humanity.

Results of my findings have been inconclusive, as I have not discovered a solution to the contradictions nor have I been able to identify in words the core contradiction that connects each of the artists mentioned above.

However, I did come across a psychological therapy that addresses this very issue. "Dialectic behavioural therapy" aims to aid those experiencing psychological distress through an acknowledging of contradictions. In his article discussing the therapy, Dr Stephen Relbord references philosopher Hegel's universal dialectic: "thesis, antithesis, synthesis" in which he proposes that every "thesis, or proposition contains elements of its own negation".

In his book “Psychosemantics: The Problem of Meaning in the Philosophy of Mind”, Jerry A. Fodor writes:

“As Uncle Hegel used to enjoy pointing out, the trouble with perspectives is that they are, by definition, PARTIAL points of view; the Real problems are appreciated only when, in the course of the development of the World Spirit, the limits of perspective come to be transcended. Or, to put it less technically, it helps to be able to see the whole elephant.”(Fodor, 1987.)

The quote basically implies that in order to transcend problems, one must transcend their perspective- as it will always be only partial.

More research is needed.

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