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Coexistent Perspectives

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**Q.10 Compare and contrast the work of two contemporary artworks,
providing a critical analysis of their approach to movement and time.**

Examples could be chosen from either 'static' or time-based art.



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Illustrations

Figure 1. Degas, E., 1878. *Dancers*. [image] Available at:

http://www.impressionniste.net/degas_edgar.htm [Accessed 30 November 2020].

Figure 2. Muybridge, E., 1887. *Figure Hopping*. [image] Available at:

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Figure 3. Rodin, A. (1889) *The Burghers of Calais*. [Bronze] Available at:

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Figure 4. Picasso, P., 1912. *An Example of a Collage by Picasso*. [image] Available at:

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Figure 5. Bacon, F., 1972. *Figure in Movement*. [image] Available at:

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Introduction

This essay will predominantly explore the works of Auguste Rodin and Francis Bacon with the main focus upon their approach to movement and time. In what follows, some of the major tendencies in contemporary art will be discussed. The contemporary sense of artwork depicting movement has been described by writers Alfredo Cramerotti and Neil Campbell as “boring [and] static” (Campbell and Cramerotti, 2013) and invites a closer look into the work of both Rodin and Bacon in order to investigate each individual artists’ approach to movement within their artworks.

Rodin, whom the historian and curator Catherine Lampert characterized as “a modeler and an interpreter of the afflictions of modern society,” (Lampert, 1986) and whose works the poet Rainer Maria Rilke said: “Never was the human body so bent by its own soul,” (Maria Rilke, 1967) attempted to infuse his convoluted but beautiful works with the modern psyche of fin de siècle France. “The sculpture of antiquity sought the logic of the human body. I seek its psychology,” Rodin said (Frisch and T. Shipley, 1939). In a similar way, the writer Anita Brookner described Bacon as the “Post-Freudian painter of trauma,” (Harrison, 2005) and said about himself: “I would like in my arbitrary way to bring one closer to the actual human being.” (Gale, 1999)

Rodin's contribution as a sculptor was to find a way to convey the brute materiality of sculpture to the transient versatility of the contemporary sculpture. To do this, he abandoned the flawless and idealised figures of academic sculpture and created harsher, more imperfect

surfaces that better articulated restlessness, corporeality, and movement. Although this also can indicate psychological agitation, it often evokes the continuous motion typical of everyday life. Rodin explores the impression of the supra-momentary: the eternal impression, not of some specific side or instant of a thing, but of the entire human being. Rodin "blazed" (Simmel, 2020) a new path to monumentality—a monumentality of being and going, no longer bound to any classical ideal level of substantiality. Precisely this is what Rodin himself once identified as one of his goals: the "latent heroism of each natural movement." (Elsen, 1960)

In his paintings, it is evident that Francis Bacon was open-minded when it came to philosophical ideas; the influence of philosophical figures in this essay can be seen clearly in his approach to the ontology of art and the depiction of the figure in motion. It is apparent that Bacon was conscious of the dualist sensibilities and phenomenological manifestations that drove the latter's investigations into time, space, life and matter. The central question that Bacon discussed was how to represent movement, or the passing of time, independent of the constraints of the two-dimensional picture plane. It may be argued that the techniques of Bacon, which will be explored in this essay, were successful in undermining the traditions of painting and playing with the capacity of painting as a means of articulating the action of both the figure and the body of the painter. Critics generally regarded the body to be the main aspect of Bacon's work, suggesting that his key interest is the body in motion. Bacon's high regard for Rodin was well known, and when he moved to St. Ives in 1959, Bacon was heard in conversation with fellow artist Brian Wall, asking what he was doing. When Wall responded that he was a sculptor, Bacon's sharp-tongued reply was: "How interesting, actually there are only three: Michelangelo, Rodin and Brancusi."

This essay aims to examine the motion of the figure, in accordance with the temporal, to determine what both Auguste Rodin and Francis Bacon is ultimately achieving in relation to the theoretical concepts of numerous theorists.

1. Auguste Rodin's *The Burghers of Calais*, 1889

Today, Auguste Rodin is seen as the central figure at the beginning of modern sculpture, and his artistic legacy is marked by the emergence of a diverse and creative avant-garde. His mature pieces inspired sculptors to re-create sculpture from the material's elemental nature, but also to analytically begin to handle space, time and movement. For Rodin, there are two central moments in his creative process. These two moments are: 1) the practice of the way of seeing, and 2) the transferral of a vision of things into a compositional piece of art. The creative process of which the sculptor follows includes the interpretation of objects or models – the human figure, landscapes, artefacts etc. The sculptor then aims to translate what is revealed in his vision into his chosen medium. Both these moments are closely related and hardly divisible when it comes to the artistic process. "Movement," said Rodin, "is the soul of all things" (Hale, 1970). Rodin's notion of movement in sculpture called for the convergence of various different phases of movement over time into a single piece of art. Rodin thus dismissed the instantaneousness of two of his contemporaries: Edgar Degas who beautifully captures ballet dancers in pastel, oil and bronze; and Eadweard Muybridge, whose photographs of horses in motion pioneered stop-motion sequential photography. Art historian Kirk Varnedoe states that Rodin "seeks to show gestures that lift the figure out of time into universal psycho-emotional states" (Varnedoe, 1980).



Figure 1. Edgar Degas' *Dancers*, 1878

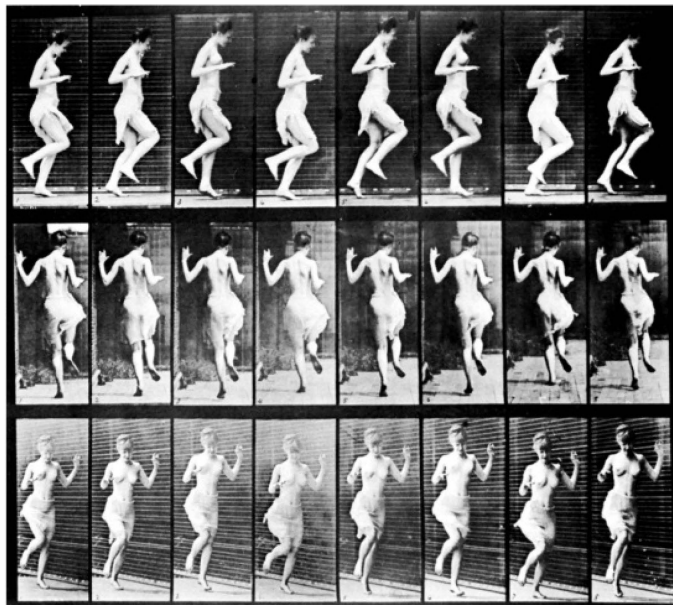


Figure 2. Eadweard Muybridge's *Figure Hopping*, 1887

Poet and friend of Rodin's, Rainer Maria Rilke, writes of Rodin's sculptures as primordial, indicative of inward-looking forms untouched by the architectural situation (Maria Rilke, 1967). Rodin's creations emit a homelessness of becoming, deserted to themselves and without a place of rest, suggests perhaps of the yearning of the self for deathlike peace in transient time in a way that Rilke conveys more wholly in his *Sonnets to Orpheus* (Rilke and Marks, 1923). For Rilke, it is only Rodin who fully renders and emancipates sculptural bodily mass in motion - Rodin had the incredible capacity to inaugurate a "new monumentality of becoming and movement " that dissolves "artistic timelessness in pure motion as such" (Maria Rilke, 1967). In his study of Rodin in 1902, Rilke tried to understand sculptural form as the rhythmic movement of light and shadow and furthermore, to comprehend the significance of the torso in Rodin's work as a means of condensing expression in the pathos

of space unfolding. Rilke sees Rodin's sculpture as the art of balancing the living planes in which the shadow, the shifting surface of the statue, shows a sense of weight. What is important to Rilke is the way in which Rodin deals with the contrasting effects of light and dark, weight and lightness, repose and movement. Rilke writes as follows:

[...] There was movement in the course of the lines and in the grade of the planes. The shadows played as if in sleep, and light passed softly over [the sculpture] [...] There was always motion in nature, and art that wished to present a conscientious and faithful interpretation of nature could not idealise a motionlessness that exists nowhere (Rilke, 1974).

Often in mid-flow or flight, his figures are in every action and gesture, "really movements of a fleeting moment" (Simmel, 2020). To Georg Simmel, what made Rodin so unique was not just his Zeitgeist, the essence of modernity; and one of his few notions of modernity can be found in a comment about Rodin - Simmel, more specifically points out the aspect of movement in Rodin's sculptures and says that it is a representation of modernity (Simmel, 2020). When it came to *The Burghers of Calais* (1889) Rodin aimed to immortalise the moment that the burghers were about to embark on their journey to the camp of the King of England. What made this moment so intense, Rodin felt, as though the burghers had to conquer their last traces of fear, and this was something that could be depicted in the movements and expressions of each individual burgher. However, there is more to Rodin's notion of movement and the role it plays in *The Burghers of Calais*. It was important to Rodin that the viewer could be free to move very closely to and around the sculpture, allowing them to better connect to the villagers and understand their willingness to give up their lives. This is the main reason that Rodin removed the pedestal from the initial model and planted the burghers flat on the ground. The composition of *The Burghers of Calais* reconciles the individuality of each figure with the solidarity of the whole. Professor Mary Jo McNamara

observed: "Each figure is allotted the amount of space he physically and psychologically needs and no more" (McNamara and Elsen, 1977). Therefore, according to Rilke, Rodin has made every burgher "live again the last concentrated moments of life" (Rilke, 1945). When one studies the gesture of each figure, one must step in the counter-clockwise direction to truly appreciate the element of movement and the relationship as an entirety.



Figure 3. Rodin's *The Burghers of Calais*, 1889

Rodin had an innate ability to stimulate palpable sensations, only making the experience of encountering sculptures like *The Burghers of Calais*, feel all the more complete. The evidence of touch in Rodin's sculptures, in particular, *The Burghers*: "Instead of trying to smooth away evidence of the sculptural process, he often chose to retain the seams, tool marks, fingerprints, breakage, and excess deposits of the medium" (Brooklyn Museum). Rodin appeared to always be seeking for ways to document the act of creating a sculptural piece, unifying the estrangement from the execution to emergence. Rodin started to experiment with scale, making works larger and smaller than real figures and wanted his work to bear evidence that everything was made by hand. In spite of Rodin's attempt to transfer sculptural matter into increasingly controversial and new material, it is this reality show that has always been seen as the most noticeable symbol and generational influence on contemporary sculpture - the action of Rodin's fingers as he scooped, squashed and smeared clay is still prominent to viewers, and it is this personal touch that makes Rodin's work so moving. Rosalind Krauss described it well when she wrote, "Rodin's figures are also branded with marks that tell of their rites of passage during the modelling stage" (Krauss, 1977). In his book *The Language of Sculpture*, Scholar William Tucker shows how the different sculptors worked and the language used for sculpture. Tucker writes, "[...] it remains a surface, a skin. In Rodin, one senses the identity of an external event with internal force: clay is felt as a substance, not on the surface, but through an ever-cubic inch of volume" (Tucker, 1974).

2. Francis Bacon's *Figure in Movement*, 1972

Francis Bacon was intrigued by the human form in motion from the time of his early depictions of screaming popes. Movement, he thought, allowed him to glimpse the 'emanation' of the human spirit—the inherent physical gestures that make up 'all the pulsations of a person' (Peppiatt, 2008). Created in 1972, *Figure in Movement* is part of an extraordinary collection of works painted in the wake of Bacon's lover, George Dyer's tragic death the previous year. Dyer had taken his life shortly before the launch of Bacon's spectacular retrospective at the Grand Palais in Paris. In the years that followed, his likeness would come to haunt the work of the artist more intensely than ever before. With nods to Muybridge, *Figure in Movement* turns the distinctive features of George Dyer into a commentary on the fleeting essence of life. The newspaper, showing the early use of Letraset by the artist, acts as a memento mori of sorts. As the figure's writhing shape threatens to recede into oblivion, it clings to his forehead, as if desperately trying to stay in the present. Scrambled letters, reminiscent of Picasso's Cubist collages, scatter onto the floor alongside him, like scraps from a discarded novel. For Bacon, who consumed mythology and literature, the narrative of George Dyer's death was as profound as any great tragedy he had ever read. Set against a geometric void, the present figure is caught in a transitional stage: from the domain of reality to the realm of fantasy and nostalgia.



Figure 4. An Example of a Collage by Picasso, 1912

In order to understand how perception and representation interact, it is important to investigate the closure of Bacon's perception narrative. It is this attribute that is the subject of Bacon's work: the deformed bodies. There are other motifs which heighten the deformed body. One of which is movement – if a figure is in motion, it is typically in a downward movement, in the middle of falling. The figure featured in *Figure in Movement*, is diving headlong into the ground. Gilles Deleuze (1981), noting the downward motion in many of Bacon's figures, does not read this as a simple movement in space; it is seen as a passage in the experience of sensation, with a decrease in the strength of sensation typically exhibiting

itself as a precipitous fall. Deleuze continues to see a downward motion in the deformation of the body, and relates this to the way the deformed figure also implies a decaying body:

The flesh falls away from the bones, the body drops away from the upright arms or thighs. The sensation is developed through falling, sinking from one level to the next (Deleuze, 1981).



Figure 5. Francis Bacon's *Figure in Movement*, 1972

In *Figure in Movement*, George Dyer's spectral similarity is an ode to sensual pleasure: Bacon revels in the tactile act of deforming, embracing and moulding his oil paint, almost as though modelling clay with his hands. Striking flashes of white and pink cover the crevasses of Dyer's body, while rampaging tracks of black elevate his quivering figure into the third dimension. The upper half of the body conveys the robust presence much like that of a marble bust – it is Dyer's lower half that blurs into a dramatic, holographic swirl that pulsates much like a moving image. In comparison to this brushwork, Bacon creates a flat abstract chamber,

intersecting blocks of paint, producing a fluid spatial interplay. This example is indicative of the general method demonstrated by Bacon's figures. Their unwillingness to sit or stand still for even a moment foreshadows the indeterminacy of their configuration. Francis Bacon's version of realism goes further than the portrayal of the figure as static - the figure is not shown as still, nor is the progression of movement represented as a sequence of instants or concealed moments. Instead the observer is met with the simultaneously presented flux and successive motions. In an interview with art critic David Sylvester, Bacon describes how his concept of a life form supersedes the mere physical definition of what a person looks like - that is, their appearance - and is instead enmeshed with a whole host of non-material elements that are inescapably related to 'living quality' (Sylvester, 1975) and it is this-appearance plus 'living quality' - that he strived to depict in his paintings. Bacon says:

There is the appearance and there is the energy within the appearance. And that is an extremely difficult thing to trap. Of course, a person's appearance is closely linked with their energy. So that, when you are in the street and in the distance, you see somebody you know, you can tell who they are just by the way they walk and by the way they move. But I don't know whether it would be possible to do a portrait of somebody just by making a gesture of them. So far it seems that if you are doing a portrait you have to record the face. But with their face you have to try and trap the energy that emanates from them (Sylvester, 1975).

The photography of Eadweard Muybridge was perhaps the most significant influence on Bacon's execution of movement. Muybridge studied motion by setting up an array of electro-shutter cameras that would be activated by movement. Separate instantaneous images were then sequentially shown in the reconstruction of successive phases of motion. Muybridge's motion-sequence photograph was substantial for Bacon, who wished to express movement. Bacon recognised that these images were a "recording of human motion - a dictionary in a sense" (Sylvester, 1975). The consecutive and progressive nature of movement in the Muybridge series may have inspired Bacon's decision to convey a series rather than a single

photograph. Where movement is formed as a series of successive phases or durations by Muybridge, Bacon endeavoured to take this further by multiplexing appearances that merge into an effortless whole and "merges all the "frames" into a single composite image" (Schmied, 1996). Unlike Muybridge's pictures, Bacon's displays a lack of progression. He dismantles the idea that in order to depict movement, one must portray motion as a widespread phenomenon, and seeks for an alternate understanding of time and motion. Weiland Schmied suggests that "Bacon's figures are mobile, but they cannot move forwards. Their movements are in abeyance, as if they were revolving around their own axis [...] the movement [...] in Bacon's pictures [...] turns back on itself and revolves around a hidden centre of gravity" (Schmied, 2006). Daria Kolacka captures a sense of this in her expression "constant vibration" (Kolacka, 2006) in order to explain Bacon's relation to movement. These different configurations of the figure suggest that while Muybridge's work was invaluable to Bacon's depiction of figures in motion, the latter's interpretation involved a criticism of the instantaneous representations of the former rather than a development of them. In a way, Bacon ended up defying Muybridge's representations by knocking down discreet barriers between pictures and demonstrating how motion is not a linear progressive phenomenon but undermines a single point of view.

Francis Bacon's view on life, as depicted in his works, was not about portraying static figures, but instead about representing reality as interpreted by the senses and the manifestation of how things appear-where the surface of the paint is equal to the skin of the figure. One might take from this that his paintings are not easy to read literally because life is not clear cut (in the sense of being linear) and straightforward to read. Bacon's figures are not stabilised entities, but instead, creatures that are in the midst of becoming and melding from one form

to another. Equally, the narrative is formed through viewing and is conveyed between the viewer and the figure(s). Bacon aimed to neutralise the body – Ernst van Alphen believes that the bodily movement in Bacon's figures with the identity of the “self” and sees the impression of development and transformation as “uplifting” (van Alphen, 1992) However, it would be negligent to disregard the more grim and nihilistic perception of Bacon's paintings. He could be seen as creating a negative representation of man in the twentieth century, where the abject portrayal of amorphous bodies that decompose is a reflection on the rootless and groundless sense of purpose in contemporary society.

Conclusion

Rodin's oeuvre consists solely on the body's motion. Its combination of movement and corporeal substance is measured on an immense scale, beginning with a high degree of motion. In Rodin, movement now occupies entirely new domains of predominance and expressive methods compared to those of his predecessors, Michelangelo, for example. A new suppleness of joints, a new freedom and vibrancy of surfaces, a new tactility of points of interaction between one figure and another, a new use of light, and a new way of letting planes meet, struggle or even converge – Rodin simply had the innate quality to “inject into the figure a new quantum of movement [...]” (Simmel, 2020). Francis Bacon is concerned with the elements of body, composition and motion that are combined in a rather different way. More than any other painter, Bacon conveys a life so impetuous, so pulsating and frenzied in his paintings; and most puzzling and astounding is that this does not happen by the suggestion of movement. What characterises Bacon's paintings is actually a state of becoming, dissimilar to Rodin, a persistent coming and going from place to place, distress. Overall, both artists' attempt to capture movement, psychology and pathology – the exposure of the subconscious,

and the portrait of the soul, as opposed to the outer. Where Bacon lifted directly from Rodin, he made the pieces, very reverently, in his own unique manner, with brushstrokes and bold colours instead of tool marks and unparalleled sexual audacity. "Art can only emerge from the inner truth," Rodin said, "may all your forms and colours express feelings." (McNay, 2013) This statement applies very well to Bacon's work just as much as his own.

Without a shadow of a doubt, the movement inside us is the one that most thoroughly evokes expressions from us. There is nothing else that is common to our being in both body and soul; movement brings together these two otherwise unconnected artists and their work as if it were under one common denominator, a single element: motion.

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