Skin, body, self: the question of the abject in the work of Francis Bacon

Ernst van Alphen

Based on a common sense understanding of the abject and of abject art – which I will complicate later – the paintings of Francis Bacon can easily be understood as abject. The effect of the abject on the viewer is usually seen as discomfort, repulsion or even nausea. This is an aesthetic judgment. To many viewers Bacon’s work is repulsive or frightening, which could imply that his paintings are abject. His works have, however, other characteristics, themselves of an aesthetic nature, that complicate such a judgment. To begin with, his paintings always have a vertical format, and the figures in his paintings are usually represented vertically; they are standing or sitting. This vertical format mirrors the viewer’s own bodily dimension. It functions as a Gestalt, ‘a whole body from the outlines of which nothing is missing’ (Krauss, 1997: 240). This counters a consideration of Bacon’s work as abject. But, of course, and in support of the position that his work is abject, it is precisely the wholeness of Bacon’s figures that is under siege. His figures are losing their contours; it is as if their bodies dissolve into the space that surrounds them.

Other elements support these paintings and their figures to function as perfect Gestalt, however. Bacon was very outspoken about how he wanted his works to be shown. He wanted his paintings to be covered by glass. To hide paintings by glass is a kind of curse in the art world. It is only done in the case of extremely valuable paintings, which need to be protected, as required by the insurance. But Bacon thought that his paintings looked best when they were covered by glass. The glass in front of the painting tends to mirror the viewer’s body. It is as if the paintings’ potential functioning as a Gestalt for the viewer is emphasised, or made easier. The viewer has difficulty seeing the painting as paint. The glass dissolves the materiality of paint and what can be recognised is only the represented figure and space. It is only after some effort, after the viewer has positioned herself at the right spot and angle, that
she can look through the glass and see the skin of the figure as well as of the paint.

But this Gestalt effect, too, is reversed. It is the skin of the represented figure as well as of the paint that undermines, in turn, the functioning of Bacon’s paintings as Gestalt. Whereas the spaces in which the figures are located are usually painted in flat, uniform paint, the figures are tooled and worked on. Bacon often used all kind of tools to belabour not the surface of the whole painting, but just that of the figures. As a result the skin of the paint as well as of the represented figure becomes ambiguous. The distinction between the two can no longer be made. The materialities of paint and of the represented body are undifferentiable. The fact that the boundary between matter and representation has been crossed produces yet again the affect of abjection.

So far, the works’ leaning towards the abject after all, is based on a somewhat simple notion of what abject is. In order to assess if Bacon’s work is a prime example of the abject or not, we first have to understand what the abject entails more precisely. Julia Kristeva’s notion of the abject developed in her book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* has been the most influential, so I will discuss hers (Kristeva, 1982). The abject is what the subject-in-becoming must get rid of in order to become an I. According to Kristeva the protection of the boundaries of the body is the main function of abjection. The anxieties triggered by the abject are first of all anxieties resulting from the end-products and by-products of the body, such as body fluids, blood, urine and fecal matter. What defines these end- or by-products of the body is that they are neither subject nor object. They embody the transition between the body and what is outside it. Although we treat them as objects outside of us, they were once inside or part of our body but we got rid of them. And while we distance ourselves from these bodily discharges they remain a constant threat to a consistent body identity. It is through socialisation that we learn to mark the boundaries of our self. By removing waste and creating a clean, obedient body we safeguard these boundaries. This happens at the cost of, or thanks to, abjection.

According to Kristeva, abjection can be traced back to the first rejection, that is, to the separation from the mother helping her baby to establish him/herself in the symbolic order. Abjection preserves some of that pre-objectal relationship and some of the ambivalence that is experienced by the subject when it becomes an independent body separated from the mother. Kristeva’s psychological notion of the abject has, however, social ramifications and has been developed further into a theory of abjection. Abjection, no longer referring to an ambiguous object but to a process or activity, refers to cultural mechanisms that exclude certain groups of people or individuals by stigmatising them with loathing. Xenophobia is usually fuelled by abjection. But not only foreigners, also other marginalised groups within a society are often
considered to be ugly, dirty or frightening, which evoke aversive responses in the rest of that society. Homophobia, racism, sexism and ageism are also structured by the mechanism of abjection. Subjects react to the abject with repulsion and loathing in order to restore the border separating self and other. The other is ‘abjected’ from the self, because the abject is seen as not respecting borders, rules and positions of a society. These abject others are not only abjected by means of exclusionary mechanisms but they are simultaneously needed and produced by societies. This is so because subjects are formed by the exclusion of what they are not. In the words of Judith Butler: ‘the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is after all, “inside” the subject as its own founding repudiation’ (Butler, 1993: 3).

This short account of the abject and abjection reveals a slippage between the condition to be abject and the operation of abjection, in other words, to abject. In Hal Foster’s words: ‘To abject is to expel, to separate; to be abject, on the other hand is to be repulsive, stuck, subject enough only to feel this subjecthood at risk’ (Foster, 1996: 156). This distinction makes clear that the work of Francis Bacon has little to do with abjection, even though it can possibly be understood in terms of the condition of being abject. For, it is clear that the figures in his paintings demonstrate subjecthood at risk. Bacon is then representing figures from the experience of having no boundaries, that is, from the position of being abject.

Especially in the 1980s and 1990s, not long after Bacon had become one of the most prominent international artists, the abject became an important notion in the understanding of contemporary artworks. Foster has argued that abject art of those days has tended in two directions:

The first is to identify with the abject, to approach it somehow – to probe the wound of trauma, to touch the obscene object-gaze of the real. The second is to represent the condition of abjection in order to provoke its operation – to catch abjection in the act, to make it reflexive, even repellent in its own right. (Foster, 1996: 157)

An example of the second direction is the work of Andres Serrano, whose *Piss Christ* (1987) represents the condition of abjection, provoking evangelical senators like Jesse Helms to complete the work of abjection negatively. The first direction, identification with the abject, has developed, according to Foster, a division of labour according to gender. Artists who probe the maternal body repressed by the paternal law tend to be women. Examples are Kiki Smith, Maureen Connor, Rona Pondick and Cindy Sherman (after her turn to the grotesque in the mid-1980s). Artists who assume an infantilist position to mock the paternal law tend to be men. Examples include Mike Kelley, John
Miller and Paul McCarthy (Foster, 1996: 159). In spite of this difference, the art objects of both female and male artists embody the abject and the feelings raised by the abject such as loathing or disgust. Those feelings are imposed on the viewer.

Francis Bacon is not part of this generation of artists from the 1980s and 1990s obsessed with the abject and abjection. And, although some viewers consider his works as horrifying and repulsive, it is not so evident that the feelings raised by the abject are imposed on Bacon’s viewers. In the introduction to my argument I pointed out how Bacon’s work functions in some respects as Gestalt of and for viewers, which opposes the possibility that abject feelings are imposed on them. Perhaps we should make a more precise distinction between horrifying and repulsive: the fact that the tormented look of many of Bacon’s figures can be horrifying does not imply that they are repulsive in the way the abject can be. If the viewer is horrified by his figures, this effect is not the result of the sight of something abject, but rather of identification with figures who experience themselves as abject, in the sense that their subjectivities are at risk. For the viewer, Bacon’s figures are not an abjected outside, or abjected others, but they represent an abjected condition viewers can identity with. This identification is stimulated, rather than undermined, by their Gestalt form.

This is a problematic statement because identification is in many ways the opposite of horror or repulsion. How is it possible that the viewer will identify with figures who look horrifying or repulsive; in other words, what kind of sinister case of identification is this? What is the point of identifying with figures that seem to lose their self and whose subjectivities are in the process of dissolution? This identification is not only remarkable in its target, but is also qualitatively different from the common understanding of identification. But as Kaja Silverman has argued, identification takes one of two forms (Silverman, 1996). One form involves taking the other into the self on the basis of a (projected) likeness, so that the other ‘becomes’ or ‘becomes like’ the self. Features that are similar are enhanced in the process; features that remain irreducibly other are cast aside or ignored. Silverman calls this idio-pathic identification. The other form is heteropathic. Here, the self doing the identification takes the risk of – temporarily and partially – ‘becoming’ (like) the other. This is both exciting and risky, enriching and dangerous, but at any rate, affectively powerful. This distinction can help to get more clarity about the relation between Bacon’s paintings and the abject. When the viewer of Bacon’s work identifies with figures that experience themselves as abject, the kind of identification that is at stake is heteropathic identification. The viewer takes the risk of temporarily and partially putting her or his subjectivity at risk.

If the viewer of Bacon’s paintings identifies (or not) with figures from
the position or experience of being abjected and as a result having no clear boundaries, we must assess how this dissolution of boundaries in Bacon’s paintings is realised. As remarked earlier, this dissolution concerns the skin of the represented figures as well as of the paint. In the former case we remain within the representational domain: it is as if the figures dissolve or fall apart within the represented space that surrounds them. In the latter case the materiality of the paint and that of the represented body become nondifferentiable. The boundary between matter and representation is being blurred, or crossed. A good example of such boundary crossing can be found in the triptych *Three Studies for a Portrait of John Edwards* (1984). As the title announces, we see Bacon’s friend John Edwards on each panel, sitting on a stool, but from different angles: the left hand panel from the right, the middle panel frontally, and the right hand panel from the left. The space in which Edwards is located is ambiguous: it can be an empty room, but the curved edge between wall and floor also suggests that it is open space. The curved line is then an allusion to the horizon of an open landscape. The space in which the three figures are represented is painted in thin paint, covering the canvas with homogeneous colour fields.

The figures are in sharp contrast with the space that surrounds them, especially their faces. The three figures are not just representations. We notice how they are built, constituted by paint, hence, matter. The paint is sometimes wiped or whisked away. This belabouring of the paint does not result in a representational illusion. It does not transform the paint into representation; the paint remains matter. The skin of the face of all three figures is covered with regular stripes, usually pink but also in dark grey, almost black. These stripes look like footprints, the sole consisting of a striped pattern. The patterned surface of the figures’ skin can also be the result of a kitchen tool used for the treatment of meat. Whatever the tool has been that Bacon has used for making this striped pattern on the face of the three figures, the pattern never crosses the border of matter to representation. It remains paint.

This example demonstrates the importance of skin in Bacon’s work. Bacon’s notion of skin is grounded in a phenomenological and psychoanalytical view of skin, although not limited to such a view. I invoke this view to complicate the standard conception of abjection. French psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu explains this view in his book *The Skin Ego: A Psychoanalytic Approach of The Self* (1989). According to Anzieu the skin serves the purposes of containment, protection and communication:

> The primary function of the skin is as the sac which contains and retains inside it the goodness and fullness accumulating there through feeding, care, the bathing in words. Its second function is as the interface which marks the boundary with the outside and keeps that outside out; it is the barrier which protects against penetration by the aggression and greed emanating from others, whether people
or objects. Finally, the third function – which the skin shares with the mouth and which it performs at least as often – is as a site and a primary means of communication with others, of establishing signifying relations; it is moreover, an ‘inscribing surface’ for the marks left by those others. (Anzieu, 1989: 40)

Anzieu is not speaking of the physical properties of the skin but of the metaphoric qualities of flesh. His concept of ‘skin ego’ articulates this beautifully. By ‘Skin Ego’, Anzieu explains, ‘I mean a mental image of which the Ego of the child makes use during the early phases of its development to represent itself as an Ego containing psychic contents, on the basis of its experience of the surface of the body’ (Anzieu, 1989: 40). The skin’s functions of containment, protection and communication are the result of a dual process of interiorisation. Two spatial aspects of the skin need to be internalised. First of all, the subject needs to internalise the interface between the bodies of the child and the mothering figure (what Anzieu calls the ‘psychic envelope’), and second, the mothering environment itself with all its verbal, visual, and emotional properties. Anzieu articulates this concept of skin ego and this dual interface by means of the somewhat odd word combination ‘the goodness and fullness accumulating there through feeding, care, the bathing in words’.

Clearly, this psychoanalytic notion of skin is closely related to Kristeva’s psychoanalytic notion of the abject. They presuppose each other. The skin’s functions of containment and protection can only be realised by means of exclusion and abjection of that which threatens the safety of this bodily and psychic envelope. This view of a psychoanalyst can surely not be unproblematically brought to bear on works of art. But to the extent that it represents a philosophical conception as well, it can be brought into dialogue with art. And that is exactly what happens here, so that Bacon, not Anzieu or Kristeva, complicates the notion of abjection. I contend that Bacon’s work engages a dialogue with this rich conception of skin. The artist’s work ‘on the skin’ seems to propose a notion of the subject, which is not ‘contained’ to use Anzieu’s term, nor does it need abjection in order to establish its borders. The condition of the abject is not seen as repulsive, but as a mechanism that is needed for maintaining ‘open borders’ between self and (abjected) other.

This assessment implies a paradoxical re-evaluation of the abject. When the skin is not the body’s envelop, then skin and body can no longer adequately be distinguished from each other. Body and skin permeate and sink into each other. This seems to be the condition of most of Bacon’s figures. Elsewhere, I have explained the relationship between body and self of Bacon’s figures by the difference between the form in which a human subject experiences her or his body and the way it is perceived by others.1 Simply stated, one does not see oneself as one is seen by others. While others see the subject’s body as object and as whole, the subject has only inner experiences or fragmented views of
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her or his body. This view complicates Kristeva’s notion of the abject. Within her theory body and self are seen as self-sufficient. She does not take the visual dimension of existence into account. Instead, by means of the mechanism of abjection the subject is itself able to maintain and safeguard its wholeness and borders. In this alternative view, inspired by the ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin and Roland Barthes, the relationship between self and other is a new element, and so is its visual dimension. As Bakhtin writes:

The body is not something self-sufficient: it needs the other, needs his recognition and form-giving activity. Only the inner body (the body experienced as heavy) is given to a human being himself; the other’s outer body is not given but set as a task: I must actively produce it. (Bakhtin, 1990: 51)

Others create an external shape and form for the string of inner sensations of self: they create a perception of the body as ‘whole’.

If we look at Bacon’s images in light of this understanding of the self/other relationship, it becomes immediately clear that the subjects/figures in Bacon’s paintings are all represented as trapped in a solely inner sensation of self. Again and again we see bodies as series of fragments, dangling on the string of the inner sensation of self. Bacon’s subjects seem to lack the wholeness the self-other relationship would produce. This lack is particularly strongly foregrounded in Three Studies for Portraits including Self-Portrait, 1969 (Figure 6) While in most cases the fragmented bodies are clearly distinguishable from the space that encircles them, in the three panels of this triptych it is not exactly clear where the body ends. The faces are fragmented in such a way that we cannot decide whether the formless appendices belong to the subjects’ faces or not. Even in the middle and left panel, in which the appendices are directly contiguous with their faces, differentiating the subject from its context is not easy. Subject and non-subject become one visual field constructed upon contiguity, making it impossible to speak of a subject or self.

Similarly, although in a less radical manner, the faces in Studies of George Dyer and Isabel Rawsthorne, 1970 (Figure 7) are not clearly delineated. This painting, belonging to the genre of the diptych that Bacon practised less frequently, shows two figures facing each other. Bacon makes here ironic use of a genre in which husband and wife, facing each other, are traditionally represented to preserve for posterity the identity of the bourgeois couple in early capitalist Europe. While in the conventional couple each partner derives his or her identity from the allegiance to the figure they face, in Bacon’s diptych the visual relationship is not defining but undoing the characters. Facing each other with blind eyes, these figures seem to lose their boundaries from the confrontation. Dyer’s face is extended by a strange pointed element that seems to be reaching toward Rawsthorne; she, on the other hand, displays one of the characteristic substantial shadows, characteristic because occurring in
6 Francis Bacon, *Three Studies for Portraits including Self-Portrait*, 1969. Private collection. 35.5 × 30.5 cm. © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved, DACS 2015. Photograph: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd.
Bacon’s work almost systematically. Here, again, Bacon’s representation of the inner experience of self ends up deconstructing the idea of self: if there is only an inner-self there is in fact no self at all.

If we try to describe these two examples of Bacon’s work in light of the abject and abjection, the only way is then to contend that Bacon has represented the figures from the position of being abject, from the experience of having no boundaries. The question is then if we should consider this as a negative or a positive experience. The conventional idea of the abject would suggest it to be negative, because subjectivity depends on boundaries, distinctions and differences. I will argue, however, that Bacon’s figures do not suffer from their loss or lack of self. Their abject condition is privileged above the wholeness of a contained self.

In order to make this argument I will first provide another dimension to Bakhtin’s account of self-other relationship by adding the one of Roland Barthes. In the case of Barthes self-other relationships are not seen as form-bestowing, as in Bakhtin’s account of these relations, but rather as the cause of the loss of self. At first sight Barthes’ view of the self-other relationship is very similar to the early Bakhtinian position. In both accounts the subject’s experience of self is determined by the position of her body in the world and by the very limited perspective she has on her body. In both stories about the creation of self the other has a strong hold over the subject through her ability to represent the body of the subject, an ability the subject herself lacks. While in Bakhtin’s account, however, this relationship of dependence on the other

7 Francis Bacon, Studies of George Dyer and Isabel Rawsthorne, 1970. Private collection. Oil on canvas, each panel: 35.5 × 30.5 cm. © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved, DACS 2015. Photograph: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd.
is sweet, loving and desirable, in Barthes’ account the subject is sentenced to this dependence.

In *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (notice, in this title, Barthes’ effort not to be defined, represented by the other: par Roland Barthes) he expresses the pain of this dependence: ‘You are the only one who can never see yourself except as an image …: even and especially for your body, you are condemned to the repertoire of its images’ (Barthes, 1975: 82).

In *Camera Lucida* he even describes the dependence on the form-bestowing relation with the other as mortifying: ‘I feel that the photograph creates my body or mortifies it, according to its caprice’ (Barthes, 1982: 11).

In Barthes’ view the objectification of the subject is not the work of another individual subject. For him the other is discursive. The objectification of the subject that bestows on her or him the experience of wholeness is a discursive transformation that translates the subject into the terms of the *doxa*, the already-said, the platitudes of public opinion (Jefferson, 1989: 170). The dependence on the other to achieve wholeness is unbearable for Barthes, because

it is through the other that the subject falls prey to a representation that constructs him in terms of the stereotype. The Barthesian subject is alienated not merely by becoming an image in the eyes of the other but through this assimilation into the *doxa*. (Jefferson, 1989: 170)

There is no longer a question of a loving and shaping self-other relationships, but of a grim conflict between discourses.

The only thing the subject can do in order to fight the mortifying images of the *doxa* is to try to undo the objectification and mortification of the self through the practice of writing or representing. But the assertion of an alternative discourse that would be her or his own is impossible because the subject cannot avoid using the elements of the discourse which preceded it to build up a ‘private’ one. Even behind a very particular style or discourse, developed by the subject itself, the *doxa* will be lurking. Only the practice of representation as an ongoing bodily activity with no special object as its goal besides this movement, succeeds in destabilising the objectifying transformations of the other, of discourse: ‘In this practice the body’s relationship to language is altered from being the object of its representation to becoming the support and condition of a certain linguistic activity’ (Jefferson, 1989: 170).

Instead of allowing the *doxa* to objectify the body, Barthes proposes to keep the body in a movement that asserts its resistance against, even if through the use of, the *doxa*. This movement re-subjectifies the body, thus escaping total colonisation through full awareness of the dependence on the discourses of the other.

Barthes’ account of the self-other relationship as a conflict between dis-
courses makes it possible to reconsider Bacon’s paintings as so many efforts to unsettle representations of the self (of the body) that mortify any experience of the self. In his interviews with David Sylvester Bacon’s incessant emphasis on the need for distortion in order to represent the ‘real’ appearance of somebody can be understood as a fight against stereotypical representations of the body:

FB: What I want to do is to distort the thing far beyond the appearance, but in the distortion to bring it back to a recording of the appearance.
DS: Are you saying that painting is almost a way of bringing somebody back, that the process of painting is almost like the process of recalling?
FB: I am saying it. And I think that the methods by which this is done are so artificial that the model before you, in my case, inhibits the artificiality by which this thing can be brought back. (Sylvester, 1987: 40)

It seems that Bacon wants to represent the self of a subject without the mediating, form-bestowing role of the perspective that the other, here meaning discourse, offers.

His remarks about the effect on the viewers he strives for, and very incessantly too, shows that he aims for the opposite of an objectifying discourse: ‘It’s an attempt to bring the figurative thing up onto the nervous system more violently and more poignantly’ (Sylvester, 1987: 12).

His paintings try to avoid offering the objectifying, healing effect that makes the onlooker’s self feel whole; instead his images should evoke a violent, direct response in the onlooker.

The gaze of the other, represented, embodied in the image, is not allowed by Bacon to offer an image of the subject’s self as whole. The presented image should cling to the fragmentation and shatteredness that the subject previously knows as inner-self experience. By calling on the nervous system, Bacon tries to fragment again the experience of self in order to ‘re-call’, ‘bring back’ the real ‘appearance’ of a subject. And that real appearance is the condition that people have called abject because it is lacking in boundaries. And like Serrano who provokes evangelical senators like Jesse Helms to complete the work of abjection negatively, Bacon provokes his viewer to complete the mechanism of the abject. He re-shatters the viewer’s sense of self by refusing to offer the projections of whole bodies that enable the onlooker to experience her- or himself as whole.

This refusal manifests itself, of course, literally by representing bodies as clearly fragmented. Bacon’s recurrent subject matter of disfigured people like the paralytic child or the dwarf, can, however, also be understood in this light. The strange posture of the paralytic child in Paralytic Child Walking on All Fours (From Muybridge) (1961) has a very uncanny effect. It is as if his limbs do not fit his body. Bacon’s choice for this subject could be explained by arguing
that the paralytic child is already fragmented by nature. There is in fact no need
to fragment this body by representation. The short legs and big head of the
dwarf in Portrait of a Dwarf (1975) make up a body which is already not ‘whole.’
The shortness of his legs is even emphasised by his being depicted as sitting on
a barstool. His limbs do not ‘fit’ together, so the body remains fragmented. At
the same time there is no radical difference between the dwarf, the paralytic
child, and the ‘normal’ figures in Bacon’s paintings. All figures are fragmented
as if they were dwarfs or paralytics. Every figure, deformed or not, is disfigured.

Bacon’s position, then, appears highly ambivalent. On the one hand, he
militates against the mortification of the subject by the objectifying force of
the gaze of the other, folding the subject back onto itself and endorsing the
resulting fragmentation as the inevitable consequence of this denial of the
power of the other. His statements in the interviews emphasise this denial.
This is the side of mortification, the price to pay for this autonomy undeniably
present in the painted figures. Struggling his way out of the either/or mecha-
nism of discourse, Bacon fights the domination of the other by drawing the
other in. The viewer cannot resist the violently powerful figures whose whole-
ness is lost but whose presence is absolute. The endorsement of the loss of self
bestows on these figures a power of absorption that accounts for the strong
responses they solicit.

Notes
1 See the chapter ‘Bodyscapes’ in my book Francis Bacon and The Loss of Self,
2 For shadows in the work of Bacon, see the chapter ‘Perception’ in my book
Francis Bacon and the Loss of Self.
3 Jefferson argues that Barthes’ view is also strongly influenced by Sartre in this
respect of self-other relations. He has, as she calls it, ‘an undeniably Sartrian streak’
(p. 153). This is made explicit by Barthes himself in his dedication of Camera Lucida
as homage to Sartre’s L’Imaginaire.

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