

## Protopostrenaissancepense.

(Before After Again Before Birth Thought).

“The most thought provoking thing in our thought-provoking time is that we are still not thinking.”

Martin Heidegger on Instagram quotes.

I wasn't thinking about Francis Bacon when I went to Italy. I looked at a lot of paintings in Italy that I was really keen to see, that I had become keen to see over the past five years or so, pictures which I started off talking about in relation to photography, to teaching photography students about perspective, the discovery and use of perspective, how it changed how we saw the world and how it changed what we thought about the world on the basis of how that world looked and how one could be more or less “convincing” or seductive about telling people about things depending on how well you could show them a thing and make that thing seem to have meaning because it was really real looking.

To this end when we were standing in a big college class gang outside of the museum on the mound in Edinburgh, ready to see some OLD paintings and all that, I was trying to describe what the world looked like when perspective “didn't exist” yet. It wasn't going very well so I went inside to the book shop and bought a Fra Angelico book so I could describe to them more clearly this moment when things changed. The book had some older things and some renaissance things and lots of Fra Angelico's somewhere in the middle things. It was really a beautiful book, actually, even after the class and after its usefulness and I tore out some of the pages and stuck them on my wall. They are still stuck on my wall, in fact. In a different flat now, but the same pages from the same book.

The Fra Angelico paintings started to mean more and more to me, and I read the books, bought another copy so I could take more pages out of the old copy and stick more things on my wall and read all the other pages of the book too. I bought more books. And decided that when I had sold a few of my own paintings for a few quid I would get a sleazyjet to Italy and go and look at the paintings. So that is what I did. That is what I have done now.

When I was there I noticed a few things which I have been speaking to my friends about, some of which they seemed to find interesting so here they are, in case anyone else wants to find it interesting. I am sure all of these thoughts are somewhere already written down and that if you wanted to research this fully then you could find a LOT written about them in more detail and in better order than they are here, they are offered as personal reflections and because the experience of realising the following was pleasurable for me and I hope some of that

enthusiasm might inspire someone academically capable to write more about this properly.

Francis Bacon did a load of interviews with David Sylvester at some point which they made into a famous book which I remember reading several times when I was at art school in Dundee. I really liked it. I really liked Francis Bacon. I really do, still, now, like Francis Bacon. They really work on me very well and resonate with all sorts of things which seem very important to me. I can't name the things very precisely but it seems to me that passion (suffering), photographic secularism and lots of very sub-political, sub-language, sub-criticism and philosophy and things are really in there. Something very primal or genesis like about being. And also something very present. In the book of interviews Francis talks about going to Italy to look in the museums and how much he likes being in the museums and looking at things there. I think he names some of the things he likes looking at.

So I like Francis Bacon. And Fra Angelico. But did not stick the two things together until I got to Italy.

I have mostly thought about photography. I think a lot about how photography happens at the same time that god died, in the 1840-1880 period, the two seem to me to be related, I have written about this a lot though and maybe it is already boring. The basically useful idea for me is thinking of photography as the unwitting weapon with which we murdered god. This informs how I think of the enlightenment and renaissance to some extent too. That here are these extraordinary and wonderful developments in technology and thought and so on and that they emancipate us (as photography does) and destroy us (as photography does), perhaps. There is a lot that has already been written about all this. Although I hate that shit idea of "The Endarkenment" that they made a show out of here a few years back with loads of really shit art in it.

But photography and technological progress and the impact of science in and on art have been important in how I have thought about the development of things, thinking via looking and all that. In the last ten years religion and religious thought and belief have become more important about how I think too. It is not that I believe in god as such, rather than I believe she is necessary despite not existing. With these things in mind I went to see the things that Francis has seen, in the Pinacoteca di Brera and the Uffizi and in the San Marco museums.

I noticed a few things. In the Pinacoteca I noticed that the underpainting on the altarpieces was orange or red. To make the gold look really warm and resonant and lovely you paint orange or red underneath. I remember my dad telling me about

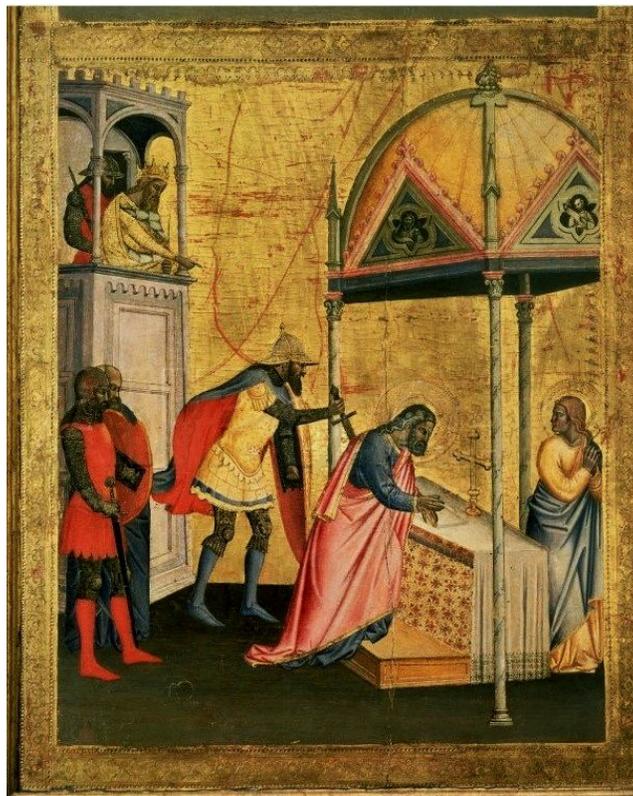
this when I was a little boy. (With silver you paint blue underneath). One of the altarpieces in Milan had lost almost all of its gold so that a lot of the orange underpainting was exposed. I recognised that this was the orange behind the figures at the base of a crucifixion in the Bacon paintings from 1944. And that the red was the red behind the figures in the 1988 second version. The altarpiece that I looked at when I first had this thought was by Antonio Vivarini. Here is a photo of it stolen from the internet -



And here is the Bacon painting -



Here is a detail of an altarpiece painting by Andrea and Jacopo di Cione about the story of St Matthew where they have used red under the gold rather than orange-

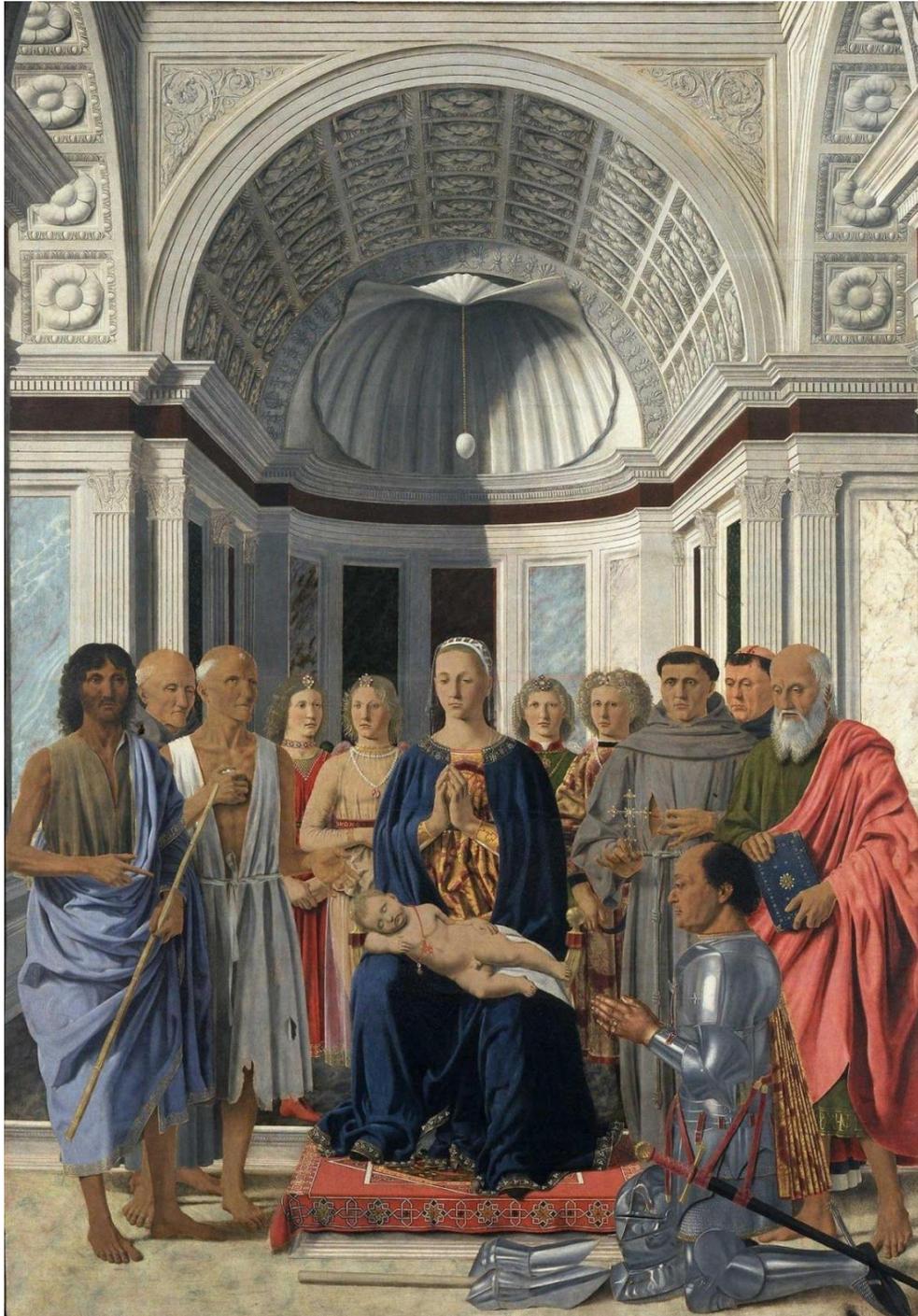


And here is Francis Bacons second version of the three pictures of the figures at the base of a crucifixion (the first is 1944 and this one is 1988) -



I thought that perhaps I could imagine that Bacon was interested in a “pre-formal” state of the iconic paintings he saw? That perhaps there was something he was interested in about the state before the gilding? I will come back to the idea.

The second thing I noticed, also in the Pinacoteca was the strange floating egg in the Piero della Francesca altarpiece -



This looked just like the light bulbs that are always dangling into the Francis Bacon paintings, like this one of George Dyer -



The lightbulb isn't an egg, of course, it is a different object. We could think about the symbolism of the egg and then of the lightbulb and then about time and all that. The forties, after the war, lights as sources of life, the sun and the egg... all that sort of thing.

As interesting I thought was the shape of the room, the curve of the wall is very similar, and it is repeated a lot of times in Bacon paintings, those sorts of curves.

A lot of times the curves are intersected by frames, like in this picture which is an homage to Edward Muybridge's photographs of bodies in motion, this one of a woman emptying a pail of water and a paralytic child walking on all fours from 1956 -



And here is one with the frame but not the curve -



These seemed to me to have something to do with the frame in the Fra Angelico Annunciation in the San Marco Museum, where along the top of the pillars the perspectival effect is enunciated by the black rope or ribbon or framework -



There are also lots of frames and pre-formal, pre-finished looking things in the unfinished Leonardo drawings in the Uffizi like this one -



There is also this, The Adoration of the Magi, this picture has been cropped off at the top -



In this unfinished Leonardo da Vinci there are a lot of half painted faces, not finished paintings of faces. This painting was only recently restored, before the restoration it looked like this -



So before it was finished it was abandoned, and after this it aged. Now it has been restored. In the pre-restoration state details of the face, bodies and animals look as though they have musculature, material but are lacking recognisable form. Perhaps these look like Bacons creatures at the base of the crucifixion?

## Pre Form.

A lot of the things I have read about Francis Bacon paintings have talked about the free form of the shapes of the creatures. I wonder whether there is something that is not free but pre formal about them? I wonder if a way to understand Francis Bacon's strange religious paintings is to consider them, as he suggested, not as "modern" or "post-modern" - the implication often being with these terms as beyond or outside of history - but as precisely reflexive of their lineage? Perhaps Francis Bacon is such a great painter because he paints only what was there before but before it was painted before. I wonder how much sense that makes? Not a lot, probably.

But if he shows us

- the colour before the gold,
- and the frames that structure the scientific seductiveness of realistic representation,
- the symbolic objects dangling from the heavens
- and the strange shapes of nightmarish beasts

-doesn't he by showing us these things also merely give us a kind of access to an original sense of only-begottenness? (The root of this word in Latin and Greek may help to place it - unigenitus in Latin and monogenes in greek - of one source, une première re-naissance, perhaps?)

- Perhaps the colour before the gold is the colour after the gold has worn away, after the death of god? Perhaps the Orange was there, and then the gold was there, and now the gold is gone and now we are back to the ghastly, violent, vulgar orange. Perhaps the stage is being cleared of the pretences of faith and perhaps what is left is something dirty and fleshy happening under a sodium streetlight?
- Perhaps the frames that structure our understanding of normative or scientific vision are not forgotten here but rather shown in the shape which more accurately represents their usefulness, after two wars of machines perhaps the atomic truth of the science is no longer feasibly illustrated as the orderly structuring system it may once have appeared to be, and, we could add, it is certainly not in accordance with any human being, with any genuinely human becoming?
- Perhaps the symbolic object hanging from the top of the frame is not from heaven but from a low ceiling in a cheap room, and perhaps the symbolic function of the object is subsumed under its practical application, it literally brings or gives light, and that is all that it brings and it offers no further objective depth, perhaps its (then scientific) usefulness is the extent of its

beauty, its meaning is its purpose after which it is disposable, replaceable and forgettable. They are not the colossal sun, they are not sons, they are not fertile and yet they will never rot, they will outlive their own usefulness as materials and outlive our own material bodies, too. They are as and they are not as the sun or the egg were before them.

- And the strange shapes of the nightmarish beasts are not entirely inhuman, they seem to have bodies which we might assume to contain organs, they seem to have, at times, limbs (the others perhaps removed by the war) but they mostly have mouths, one even has an ear although it does not seem to be attached or alive (in the right hand panel the beast is grey, unlike the grimacing sexual red mouth in the second panel or the hair covered left panel which may or may not have a nose capable of smelling anything given that it has no nostrils). These mouths are sometimes related to the asthma which kept Bacon from the war, a great thought, but I wonder whether the mouths other use, one of the mouth's other uses rather, might be important too. Two of these beasts seem to have been capable of speech at some point, now maybe they only spit or howl or scream or remain in rigor mortis in the figure of a scream (Unlike Munch's screaming foetus who seems to be alive before her time Bacon's monsters are rather *dopo la vita*, after life, here rendered still). None of them was ever capable of seeing, it would seem. None of them of touching. One of them may have been able to listen. So they all have that organ by which we assert our supremacy over the animals, the mouth which allows us speech and, therefore, reflexive and discursive and dialogic thought - but if we have no method by which to see what we might talk about, no method to touch the objects of our affection or anxiety or desire, no method by which we might do anything, in fact, then what might we do other than consume and scream. We are after the state of animal being but are so far beyond it we have abandoned, lost, had removed by torture or neglect, those organs which might have made our supremacy (if it may be called this) valuable. Our speech holes are rendered beyond pathetic and revolting, rendered rather as indifferent and utterly meaningless, in fact. Holes at one end of a tube.

In Bacon's paintings we are given a visualisation of Ivan Karamazov's nightmare scenario, if God is dead and everything is, then, permitted... we are fucked. We remain fucked, which is why these paintings still resonate so strongly now after such a long/little time.

