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AESTHETIC QUALITIES OF FRANCIS BACON'S CANVASES AND THE ISSUE OF VALUE RESPONSE

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Autor rozważa problem odpowiedzi na wartość, używając metod teorii estetycznych preferujących „materialne" podejście do tego zagadnienia aksjologicznego oraz odwołując się do malarstwa Francisa Bacona. Odpowiedź ta jest emocjonalną reakcją powodowaną wieloma obszarami obrazu. Jednakże analiza dotyczyć będzie tych artystycznych czynników, których znaczenie jest często pomijane w ogólnych rozważaniach estetycznych: podobrazia, własności płótna, rodzaju farby, warstwy malarskiej, narzędzi malarskich, a nawet technicznych spraw: rodzaju i wielkości płótna. Analizy te pokazują jak wyłania się stopniowo kolorystyczny logos obrazu; logos, którego porządek wrażeniowego naporu i przemocy koloru współgra z dyscypliną formalną w tworzeniu szczególnej wartości – okropnego piękna.

Słowa kluczowe: malarstwo, płótno, wartość artystyczna, estetyka, ontologia, Bacon

Painting is a world of its own,
it's self-sufficient

Francis Bacon

Opening remarks

Francis Bacon's pictures initially fix one's eyes on the subjects depicted with the motif of a notorious scream[1] and open mouth[2]; the pope imprisoned in a cage or in a box, who is left to his own devices and whose

[1] 'Nightmarish horror is what is generally felt to be uppermost in his art. Certainly this is an interpretation justified by the primacy in his iconography of the human scream. This scream appears everywhere: on the faces of prelates and of businessmen or politicians; in representations of the Crucifixion; and on mouth detached from a face. The horror often persists where no such extreme situation is presented'. D. Sylvester, *About Modern Art. Critical Essays 1948-2000,* revised edition, Pimlico 2002, p. 55.

[2] 'Der Mund wurde zu Bacons Urbild, zu einer Metapher für Schmerz, Leid, Gier und Schrecken'. B. Steffen, *Der Schrei*, [in:] *Francis Bacon und die Bildtradition*, herausgegeben von Wilfried Seipel, Barbara Steffen, Chrisoph Vitali, Basel 2004, p. 147.

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scream is not only being seen but also 'heard' by the viewer. In addition, wounded and almost completely flexible bodies may horrify us by their deformity. Moreover, a number of the painter's statements, in which he admits that we are potential carcasses[3] and that we should wonder why we are not hanging from a butcher's cambrel, exposes a particular understanding of the human body and reveals what draws the painter's attention[4].

However, this kind of subject is not remote, either to the painting as such or to art in general, and artistic merit should not be sought in it. Its source is placed traditionally rather in an artistic form or in a way of exhibiting the negative phenomena of human existence. This form causes a positive axiological answer based on an aesthetic feeling, while the eye has been wandering among the painting's spaces for a long time.

This answer, as the effect of a painting's impact on the nervous system, is an emotional response to many dimensions of the painting. The analysis in this article, however, will concern only a little what appears visually at first – a figure, but most of all the support (or basis) of the painting, the canvas' properties, the type of paint, the color layer, the painting tools, and even the technical background – the type and size of the canvas. I think it is especially easy to see in Bacon's painting how the axiological area extends to the painter's workshop and concerns factors whose significance is often omitted in general aesthetic investigations. The analysis of these categories presents how the colorful logos of the painting gradually emerges; the logos whose order of sensuous influence and violence of color cooperate with formal discipline in creating the exceptional merit – a terrible beauty[5].

Considering the problem of value response, we use here the methods of the aesthetic theories which prefer the 'material' approach to this axiological issue. The conceptions of Roman Ingarden and Nicolai Hartmann are important to us and their preferred idea of the 'material aesthetics' is a useful tool for the analysis. However, it is necessary to point out that the use of such a tool is quite risky because it was applied by both philosophers to the analysis of time-honoured pieces of art (Leo-

[3] 'FB Well, of course, we are meat, we are potential carcasses. If I go into butcher's shop I always think it's surprising that I wasn't there instead of the animal'. D. Sylvester, *The Brutality of Fact. Interviews with Francis Bacon*, third enlarged edition with 146 illustrations, Thames and Hudson 1987, p. 46.

[4] 'Disgust made him productive, and nausea guided his brush'. W. Schmied, *Francis Bacon. Commitment and Conflict*, translated from the German by John Ormrod, Munich – Berlin – London – New York 2006, p. 8.

[5] See: *Francis Bacon: A Terrible Beauty*, curated by Barbara Dawson and Martin Harrison, Dublin City Gallery the Hugh Lane 2009.

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nardo da Vinci's The Last Supper[6], Saint Anne, self-portraits by Rembrandt[7], Ingres, Matejko, Van Gogh etc.) and one could doubt whether the aesthetic categories which were used to explain traditional painting can pass the postmodernist exam, assuming that this *Zeitgeist* is present in Bacon's painting.

A structure a painting and the issue of value response. An outline of Hartmann's and Ingarden's conception

Hartmann[8] and Ingarden[9] use a method of multi-layered analysis in researching the structure of a painting. According to the German philosopher, a painting consists of six layers of background and one layer of foreground. The plane of a painting with visible colours (colour combinations) builds the foreground which has a real mode of being, while the layers of the background are irreal. To the background belong: 1. a layer of objects (figures) presented in space and light; 2. a layer of movement (a phase of movement); 3. a 'biological' layer which reveals a dynamic of life; 4. a layer of psychological experiences; 5. a layer of an individual 'fate' which is presented, for instance, by facial features; 6. a layer of general ideas (metaphysical, religious ones). This structure creates a hierarchy of layers *per analogiam* to the hierachy of layers in the real world. It is a progressive sequence from the physical through the biological up to the region of spirit. A few ontological laws which apply to the real world also apply to the kingdom of a painting. From this point of view it can be accepted that the ontology of painting – a science that investigates a painting's structure and mode of being[10] has close connections with the ontology of the real world. In both the real world and a painting the lowest layer is a physical support of the other layers. The function of a support is transitive: a depicted phase of movement requires an object as its basis and is in itself a basis of emotions and so on. That is why a painting makes a cohesive whole: a source of its unity is the relationship between 'lifting and being lifted'.

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[6] See: R. Ingarden, *O budowie obrazu*, [in:] *Studia z estetyki,* t. II, wyd. 2, Warszawa 1966, p. 9.
[7] See: N. Hartmann, *Ästhetik*, zweite unveränderte Auflage, Berlin 1966, p. 166–168.
[8] See: N. Hartmann, *Ästhetik*, Kapitel 13 *Schichten in den bildenden Künsten*: b. *Die Außenschichten der Malerei,* p. 187– 190 ; c. *Die Innenschichten der Malerei*, p. 190–193.
[9] See: R. Ingarden, *O budowie…*, p. 7–115.
[10] The tasks of regional ontology (the ontology of a painting for example) partially coincide with tasks of general ontology, which are: 'Das erste Anliegen der Ontologie geht dahin, die Frage nach dem „Seienden als Seienden" in ihrer vollen Allgemienheit zu klären, sowie sich der Gegebenheit des Seienden grundsätzlich zu versicheren. Daneben tritt in zweiter Linie das Problem der Seinsweisen (Realität un Idealität) und ihres Verhältnisses zueinander'. N. Hartmann, *Der Aufbau der realen Welt. Grundriß der allgemeinen Kategorienlehre*, Berlin 1940, p. 1.

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Ingarden ascribes the same function of lifting to what he calls a pure physical canvas (*Gemälde*) or other painting materials, but these real things are not effective elements of a painting. According to his conception a painting as a whole is a pure intentional object which consists of three possible layers: 1. a historical or literary subject; 2. the schematical appearance of an object 3. the depicted objects.

The multi-layered structure of a painting, its analytical division, allows it to indicate the *topos* of aesthetic qualities. Each of the layers is not neutral but has its own group of qualities. That is why the controversy over 'the place' of a support in the structure of a painting is not only a theoretical one. Assuming that a support is a part of a painting, its axiological significance becomes stronger: physical attributes of a support are not axiologically indifferent and partially determine the aesthetic qualities of a painting. Their sensation might have an influence on value response. In this sense, painting without grounding on unprimed canvas imparts a kind of *roughness* to a painting plane and causes its special *sensationity*. Both qualities, which are properties of canvas, can be seen as aesthetic ones. They build up, together with the qualities of other layers, what Bacon calls 'violence of colour'.

A quite different solution is proposed by Ingarden: because a physical support doesn't belong to a painting, its axiological meaning must be weaker and aesthetic qualities are characteristic almost exclusively of intentional layers. But we can also find in his conception a kind of quality, called 'material'[11], whose role in creating the main value of a painting should be considered.

For the problem of values and value response under discussion it is also crucial what kind of qualities are distinctive for further layers. The specific shape of a figure, so particular to Bacon's popes, enables the appearance of 'negative', emotional states or 'dramatic' and even 'tragic' fate. An empty space around them might be felt as a kind of *ab-surdus*.

It's not so important to reveal existential meanings of pictoral signs which can be understood very differently. The most important thing is to answer the question as to whether the qualities felt all together create a well-organized whole. The given value (such as terrible beauty) of a painting is not simple but complex and is composed of many interrelated qualities which belong to different layers of a painting, thus the axiological unity of a painting may be recognized as the sequel of inner relations among them.

[11] See: R. Ingarden, *Zagadnienie systemu jakości estetycznie doniosłych*, [in:] *Studia z estetyki,* tom trzeci, Warszawa 1970, p. 291.

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This unity should be felt directly, and value response is neither a matter of reflection nor knowledge of artistic style or the sources of an artist's works or even his personality, but its subjective root is an emotional feeling. Hartmann directly admits that there is no other way to reveal the axiological moment of a work[12], while for Ingarden this feeling is a condtion of value response[13].

The great degree of significance of emotional feeling results from the fact that subtle qualities or valuable nuances can be sensed in such a feeling. There is an astonishing correspondence between the qualitative richness of a work and its feeling which 'passes over' reason with its principles and generality.

One can find that what Bacon meant by direct action of a painting on the nervous system comes down to an emotional feeling. In his commentaries on the process of creation, the painting's structures and the role of aesthetical perception, Bacon emphasized that his paintings should come across directly to the nervous system and provoke an emotional reaction[14]. These declarations as well as the motifs often selected by him: a scream and an open mouth with significantly outlined teeth, a swastika, a bleeding wound, and meat which is shown in its butcher's structure, highlight above all the importance of the subject to value response. But the first impetus comes from the lowest material layer of a painting – its unprimed canvas.

Unprimed canvas and its role in the creation of artistic violence and a terrible beauty

Bacon in his early phase of creation painted on Sundeala board which '…held pastel well'. *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* was painted on this board[15]. At that time he saw in a support a pure physical

[12] Hartmann writes in *Ästhetik*: '…dem lebendig reagierenden Wertgefühl seine besonderen qualitativen Färbungen (Nüancen) abzugewinnen und diese als unmittelbares Zeugnis von ebenso differenzierten Wertnüancen gelten zu lassen. Über die Berechtigung dieses Verfahrens gibt es grundsätzlich keinen Streit. Denn andere Quellen des Wissens um ästhetischen Wert und Unwert als das Wertgefühl haben wir nicht'. N. Hartmann, *Ästhetik*..., p. 324.

[13] 'The contemplative and emotion-laced intentional feeling of an already constituted, asthetic object occurs here. Asthetic feeling is a individual, original experience of something which is asethetically valuable (...). Aesthetic, intentional feeling leads to original, aesthetic response to valuable, aesthetic object, *resp.* to its value. A positive response to a value takes on the form of the emotional recognition that we bestow on an aesthetic object; a negative response is a rejection or condemation of a failed, worthless, aesthetic object'. R. Ingarden, *Przeżycie estetyczne i przedmiot estetyczny*, [w:] *Studia z estetyki*, Warszawa 1970, p. 101.

[14] See: D. Sylvester, *The Brutality of Fact*..., p. 18, 59, 82, 176.

[15] 'Since 1944 when *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* was painted. Bacon has worked exclusively on stretched canvas. The *Three Studies* themselves were painted on Sundeala

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basis of a painting. It was also treated as a condition of a painting's existence and did not play any aesthetic role.

However this, otherwise so important, attribute of support, which guaranteed solidity, seemed to be insufficient as it was detached from the pictorial effect after which Bacon strove. It was too indifferent to the intended colorful result and it didn't have impact on perception. It did not have anything that went beyond the function of a support and that would create individual quality, a certain roughness, hardness and even brutality. The wandering of a vast brush around the canvas seemed to be too easy and the pictorial effect that was achieved differed from the intended one. This support collaborated with color too smoothly, without any resistance.

The quest for different matter was only anticipated, hence it was found by chance. Not having enough money to purchase new canvases, Bacon began to paint on the reverse side of old ones. From then this side of the canvas was his standard painting surface. It cooperates well with the dynamism of an artistic idea, the movement of a brush and colorful qualities[16]. A canvas stops being treated as a pure physical basis and becomes a painting plane – a kind of intentional object which has its own space and texture with their specific qualities and tensions. The feature of a canvas discerned and affirmed by Bacon – ruggedness – can be seen as a real property of the surface and an artistic quality of the painting's plane at the same time. Using terminology developed by Ingarden, it can be described as a material quality which is aesthetically significant. Thanks to this ruggedness, a painting at its lowest level becomes sensational and manifests unique dynamics. Its affect on perception becomes disturbing and more intensive. Moreover, the *quasi* sense of touch which accompanies perception intensifies the feeling of that quality. Acting directly on the 'nervous system', it determines value response. Therefore

board, a light and absorbent wood-fibre board, then commonly used by artists; Roy de Maistre and Graham Sutherland, both close friends of Bacon, were using Sundeala as a support at that time, de Maistre as late as 1995. But this use was dictated by economic expediency rather than considered choice. Although Sundeala had its advantages (in Bacon's opinion 'it held pastel well'), he changed to using canvas as soon as he could afford to'. A. Durham, *Note on technique*, [in:] Dawn Ades, Adrew Forge*, Francis Bacon*, *with a note on technique by Andrew Durham and a select bibliography, 291 illustrations, 195 in colour, including 21 fold-outs*, Thames and Hudson, published in association with The Tate Gallery, London 1985, p. 232.

[16] 'Prior to this Bacon had been using commercially prepared canvases, which came ready-coated with a layer of white priming, giving a smooth, uniform surface on which to apply the paint. By reversing the canvas he could use the rougher texture of the unprimed side. The raw canvas provided a light brown base colour and offered more tooth, enabling dry paint or pastel to be dragged across the surface, giving broken strokes of colour according to how the texture picked up the paint'. J. Russel, *'The Mystery of the Paint': Francis Bacon's Materials*, [w:] *Francis Bacon. New Studies*, centenary essays edited by Martin Harrison, Steidl, Göttingen 2009, p. 234.

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this answer is not a consequence of thought[17] but its source lies in the feeling of sensuous qualities of the painting's basis[18].

The visual presence of canvases is often kept in Bacon's completed paintings. Their physical attributes have been involved in a piece of art and their real power has been used for building up a painting's plane which becomes more immediate and truthful. 'And there's another thing, that has to do with texture. I think the texture of a painting seems to be more immediate than the texture of a photograph, because the texture of a photograph seems to go through an illustrational process onto the nervous system, whereas the texture of a painting seems to come immediately onto the nervous system'[19]. Their determination is stronger and defines the principal painting sign – a colour. The usage of the reverse, unprimed side of a canvas intensifies it. In an interview with D. Sylvester, Bacon says: 'And also you have got to realize that a number of the backgrounds that I use on this unprimed canvas are pastel, because I find that with pastel you can get a much more intense colour and it holds very well on the unprimed canvas. It is like using very rough paper, like pastel paper'[20]. The relationship between a canvas and a colorful surface adopts the form of dependence, which can be defined in a philosophical discourse as a material one, because the materiality of the canvas determines brightness and colour saturation. Hartmann specially emphasises its force. In a case when the canvas is entirely covered with color and is therefore invisible, we can talk about internal determination, known only to the painter. But when the canvas visually breaks through the color or rather merges with it, this dependence is external (it is visible).

The grade of this 'breaking through', 'coverage', 'presence' and 'dependence' is different in each painting, hence only a more or less common rule may be established. It is also difficult to explain how a canvas by its presence on the surface loses its function of a 'pure' basis and how it intensifies a painting plane. The lack of clarity arises due to the fact

[17] 'The Bacon looks as though it might mean something equally momentous, but in the end there is no finite message to decode, and 'the most violent contradictions' fail to resolve into any kind of consoling or elevating harmony. The reactions of the nervous system take priority over rationalisations of the intellect'. M. Hammer, *Bacon and Sutherland*, published for The Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press New Haven and London, p. 141.

[18] 'Für Bacon produziert das Kunstwerk im Betrachter eher Gefühle als intellektuellen Anreiz. Der Künstler möchte in uns eine Reaktion hervorrufen, in der unsere Sinne buchstäblich überfallen werden. So gesehen ist das Leben nie sehr weit vom Akt der Malerei entfernt: Die Gefühle, die da in der Malerei Ausdruck erhalten, sind jene des alltäglichen Lebens'. O. Berggruen, *Picasso und Bacon: Das andere Ich malen*, [in:] *Francis Bacon und die Bildtradition*…., p. 72.

[19] D. Sylvester, *The Brutality of Fact*…, p. 58.

[20] D. Sylvester, *The Brutality of Fact*…, p. 195.

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that each painting is an entirely individual object and thus its rules are individual as well.

Consequently, determination by the physical properties of unprimed canvas is multifaceted; it involves different levels of a painting and, as a result, many levels of perception: from purely sensual (perception of colorful tone), through *quasi*-tactual, up to emotional. However, there is correspondence between them owing to the axiological orderliness of a painting. Its qualities form a system with 'negative overtones and build up 'violence and brutality of colour'.

Underlying the pure artistic source of this coloristic effect, we should also take into consideration a source discovered by philosophical analysis. If we accept Hartmann's contention that a painting as a whole consists of two main layers which have different modes of being: real and irreal, then, because of the abovementioned difference, they will not be 'in accordance with one another' but fight and even displace each other, although never completely. In an interview, M. Archimbaud asked: 'Apart from Surrealism, what else don't you like in painting? Abstraction?' and Bacon answered: 'Yes, abstract art seems to me an easy solution. Painting materials are in themselves abstract, but painting isn't only the material, it's the result of a sort of conflict between the material and the subject. There's a kind of tension there, and I feel that abstract painters eliminate one of the two sides of this conflict right from the start: the material alone dictates its forms and its rules'[21]. From this point of view, a painting becomes an ontological field of tensions, whose forces intensify the sensation and allow the spectators to feel the artistic qualities and, finally, aesthetic values more directly. The scale of tension depends on how far a canvas encroaches on the artistic area and becomes an artistic sign. In the case of its visual presence (the phenomenon of 'breaking through') the relationship between a canvas and the layers of artistic markings (color, plane, space, figure, etc.) becomes so close that one can speak about a double nature of a canvas: real and irreal.

These remarks indicate that a canvas is already an objective source of value response. This physical thing and its attributes are involved in creating the axiological space which will be filled up in the course of a painter's work. In Bacon's painting it is the space of 'the violence of paint', deprived of pathos but texturally disturbing, strongly acting on perception, colorfully intensive and existentially ambigious.

[21] M. Archimbaud, *Francis Bacon in conversation with Michel Archimbaud*, Phaidon Press, London 1993, p. 145.

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The relationship between the canvas-thing-plane and value response concerns not only the properties of the reverse side of the canvas, but also other aspects: placing paints on the canvas, kinds of paint (oil and acrylic paints), size and format. Also these categories are not axiologically indifferent and they constitute factors which determine value response.

Paint-color-figure and their role in the creation of the violence of paint and a terrible beauty

Francis Bacon in his creation divided a picture's plane on the basis of a figure, which is a reference point for other elements of the picture. It determines the sort of paint used and the mode of its application. The figure has been painted with oil paints in the *impasto* technique, while the space and the background have been created with acrylic paint, pastels and spray paints[22]. Moreover, the space created in this way is rarely diversified and its advantage is the most visible in the late period of the artist's painting. It lets Bacon achieve relative unity of the space which contrasts with the much diversified and distorted figure. In addition, in the pictures that were created since the 1960s, it was the figure that was painted on the unprimed canvas first, and the background later.

As a result of this painting activity the figure takes place the central position on the plane. This can be understood not only in purely artistic categories: the figure is dominant and the other elements are subordinate to it, but also in aesthetic ones: the appearance of the figure by contrast with the background becomes restless, dynamic and tense. It isn't in itself cohesive or rational. This appearance is sometimes constructed in such a way as to emphasize the negative emotional reaction expressed by a scream.

The multidimensional contrast of the figure with the remaining elements of the picture causes the aesthetic experience to be focused above all on the former. The figure occupies the central position in the picture, as if it ruled over the whole artistic kingdom. Even its scream is the raison d'être of the space. However, this rule cannot be so strong that it would invalidate the meaning of other elements of a painting. Bacon was aware of the fact that the colorful, 'technical' and symbolic strength of

[22] 'Many tins of household vinyl emulsion paints were found in the studio, in a variety of different colours including white, pale blue, bright orange and deep purple. When Bacon described using arcylic paints in some backgrounds, it is likely that there are the paints he was referring to. Such paints could be quicky and conveniently applied to the large areas of background using a roller, many of which were also found into the studio. Tubes of acrylic paint would quickly run out and would need to be thinned before application to achieve the thin even layer seen in the background of painting from the 1960s onwards'. J. Russel, *'The Mystery of the Paint'*..., p. 239.

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the figure could impose too much pressure on the picture's plane. Moreover, an exaggerated contrast between the figure and the remaining parts seems to have been a box-office hit of little artistic value. On the one hand it leads to a formal monotony and flatness of a picture, while on the other to separation of the figure from the background and its 'sculptureness'. '…the canvas becomes completely clogged, and there's too much paint on it – just a technical thing, too much paint, and one just can't go on'[23]. From this point of view it is clear why Bacon inverted the procedure of creation and scraped off part of the paint[24]. In this way he shortened the distance between a textural figure and a plane. Physical shortening of the distance does not lead, however, to the deposition of the figure but only eliminates the possibility of the compositional 'clash'. After all, the figure always emerges from the plane, differing from it texturally[25]. Moreover, the use of a knife as a painting tool intensifies the sensuality of a picture and the violence of paint.

In the use of oil paints in the construction of a figure's image Bacon has been guided by their specific, often unexpected 'behavior'. 'And one of the things is, of course, that in one's conscious activity in painting – at any rate in oil painting, which is such a fluid and curious medium – often the tension will be completely changed by just the way a stroke of the brush goes on. It breeds another form that the form you're making can take'[26]. Thereby, the painter underlines the role of chance, unpredictable change or even an essential turnaround in the creation of a picture. The appearance of a figure thus evoked is not a result of a definitively deliberate plan but emerges only with the first move of a brush. The action of painting modifies the previous intention to such an extent that it shatters the subject and creates another, sometimes completely different, one. The idea understood as an invention does not precede the action of painting, but only together these aspects may objectify the idea in a pic-

[23] D. Sylvester, *The Brutality of Fact* ..., p . 18.

[24] 'If Bacon was in ever-greater control, things could still go wrong and there was a very narrow margin of error in which to recover a composition. Many were irretrievable and succumbed to the knife. [...] The success of his work hinged on precisely orchestrated contrasts between thick and thin paint, between different textures and colours, with relatively little opportunity for modification'. J. Shepard, *A Game of Chance: The Media and Techniques of Francis Bacon,* [in:] *Francis Bacon, A Terrible Beauty*, curated by Barbara Dawson and Martin Harrison, Dublin City Gallery the Hugh Lane 2009, p. 171.

[25] 'Der das Zentrum des Bildes (*Kopf II*, 1949) dominierende offene Mund ist mittels eines dicken weißen Malmittels betont, das sich vom schwarzen Untergrund stark abhebt. Der weiße Pfeil, der immer wieder in Bacons Bildern als Kennzeichen seiner visuellen Symbolik eingesetzt wird, sowie die weißen Zähne wurden so oft übermalt, daß diese Stellen als dicke Farbschichten aus der Bildfläche hervortreten und die Intensität von Bacons malerischer Hand klar erkennen lassen'. B. Steffen, *Der Schrei*, [in:] *Francis Bacon*..., p. 149.

[26] D. Sylvester, *The Brutality of Fact* ..., p .97.

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ture. It does not eliminate a critical attitude and correction but only engages them in the circle of acting and thinking.

This continual 'eluding' of reason causes a figure to lose its common rationality and it begins to appear disturbing and dramatic. Bacon, however, constantly emphasizes that these are purely artistic and aesthetic qualities, whose source can be found in a canvas and other elements of a picture. 'When talking about the violence of paint, it's nothing to do with the violence of war. It is to do with an attempt to remake the violence of reality itself. And the violence of reality is not the simple violence meant when you say that a rose or something is violent, but it's the violence also of the suggestions within the image itself which can only be conveyed through paint'[27]. Hence the terrible beauty of violence does not consist of reporting a fact or representing reality, but in the composing of pictorial signs.

Nevertheless, by accepting the central position of a figure, also in the axiological meaning[28], Bacon is caught 'between a real rock and an artistic hard place'. He was deeply convinced that painting is both autonomous and involved in real life. Undoubtedly, on the one hand a painting is a world on its own; it is self-sufficient and its aesthetic merit is superior to its moral or theoretical value. Therefore it is a whole, whose elements are pictorial signs. On the other hand, both a painter and his works are citizens of the real world; unique citizens who objectify its condensed sense. In Francis Bacon's painting this sense is clear and refers to 'real' power, force, violence, and even death. The meaning of these elements cannot be only aesthetical. After all, the image of a swastika refers us to a tragic history; the motif of crucifixion evokes pain and suffering.

The feeling of these negative states is by no means pure aesthetical, but rather 'real', especially for people who have bitter experiences of it. In this way the violence of color turns into 'real violence'. They complement one another.

This makes possible symbolic or even historical interpretations of a painting; however, they do not have to be so literal. One of them under-

[27] D. Sylvester, *The Brutality of Fact*..., p. 82.

[28] 'In the end, the maximum violence will be found in the seated or crouching Figures, which are subjected to neither torture nor brutality, to which nothing visible happens, and yet which manifest the power of the paint all the more. This is because violence has two different meanings: "When talking about the violence of paint, it's nothing to do with the violence of war". The violence of sensation is opposed to the violence of the represented (the sensational, the cliché). The former is inseparable from its direct action on the nervous system, the levels through which passes, the domains it traverses: being itself a Figure, it must have nothing of the nature of represented object'. G. Deluze, *Francis Bacon,* translated from the French by Daniel W. Smith, London–New York 2005, p. 28.

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lines an understanding of Bacon's paintings as a expression of a godless world[29] in which a human body loses its transcendental dimension and is reduced to a piece of meat. It is a tragic, worthless and painful world. In fact, Bacon's paintings are devoid of nobleness and pathos. A certain inevitability breaks through them. They reveal a truth about life which isn't at all joyful. A viewer finds himself/herself between negative poles and moves in the space of the scream.

But 'the truth of life' does not have to be in dispute with 'the truth of art' whereas a painting in its autonomy does not have to withdraw from the real world. They are rather interwoven and intensify one another. Bacon stresses that the swastika breaks the coloristic monotony of the depicted arm by its redness and expresses historical fact at the same time[30]. This is an explanation that assumes the possibility of 'a jump' from the field of real violence to the kingdom of art. The Hegelian category of *Aufhebung* might describe this transformation better because it contains the moment of negation (negation of reality) and the moment of remaining (*Erhaltung* – remaining of violence). The violence itself is deprived of real reference but doesn't lose its force and becomes an artistic one.

From these remarks about canvas, tools and the division of a painting's plane into the figurative parts, which are painted with oil paints, and parts painted with acrylic ones, and from more detailed comments about the priority of a figure, emerges 'the image of Bacon' as a painter, for whom the orderliness of a work and its composition are essential, and sometimes even much more important than the subject. His canvases are compositionally clear and the violence of paint exteriorizes directly into the nervous system causing the emotional value response. One can say that for Bacon a picture is an artistic problem which should be solved with the help of a brush. But this problem is sometimes involved in reality and has thematic aspects. In spite of that, the violence of paint re-

[29] 'In a Godless world the human is on a level with the beast, and the hierarchy separating the two is suspended. Indeed, faced with the prospect of a world without absolute meaning, the human resorts to the more animalistic impulses to make sense of meaninglessness'. R. Arya, *Francis Bacon: Painting in a Godless World*, Lund Humphries 2012, p. 54; 'The businessman is an anonymous figure that stands for the universal condition of alienation. He is Everyman, and his predicament is shared by everyone – by the Pope and the subhuman creature that crawls on all fours'. R. Arya, *Francis Bacon*..., p. 46.

[30] 'It was also, you may say, a stupid thing to put swastika there. But I wanted to put an armband to break the continuity of the arm and add the colour of this red round the arm. [...] I don't want to avoid telling a story, but I want very, very much to do the thing that Valéry said – to give the sensation without the boredom of its conveyance'. D. Sylvester, *The Brutality of Fact*..., p. 65.

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mains the principle and the power of this principle also determines the format.

Format and its role in the creating of artistic violence and a terrible beauty

Format, seen as the size of a canvas, may be understood as one of the physical properties of support. However, it is not axiologically neutral and together with other elements determines value response. This happens in two ways: firstly, it partially defines the relationship between a figure and a space; secondly, it outlines the boundary of a picture. The first sort of determination is strictly formal, as it is to be found in composition; the second one is ontological, since the boundary of a picture is the boundary of the irrational area of being.

The weight which Bacon attached to format and to the exhibitions of his paintings (especially triptychs), proves that from his point of view, the format was not only the physical size of a canvas, which can be adapted at any time. For him it was the essential compositional element that plays a significant role in intensifying the terrible beauty and the violence of paint. 'Bacon used commercially prepared supports of standard sizes, always turned so that the priming layer is on the back face. Through the 1950s a variety of support sizes are used, virtually always used in the portrait orientation, even for landscape compositions. Canvases 78 inches in height are used throughout Bacon's career, but the width of these gradually increases from 52 inches used for *Painting 1946*, to 54 (1950–57), 56 (1956–62) and finally 58 inches, used from 1963 onwards. From this time on, only two different sizes of canvas are principally used – a large 198 x 147.5 cm format (78 x 58 ins.) and a small 35.5 x 30.5 cm (14 x 12 ins.) for portrait heads. These sizes are used in both single works and triptych formats and, with rare exceptions, always in the portrait orientation'[31]. This kind of format and portrait-oriented pictures with a central position of a figure again makes it possible to create a space in which sounds the scream of a figure. Although the size of a figure was similar to the real height of a man, the proper format leaves enough room for space. The empty space causes the scream not to be heard by anyone. Dynamism and distortion of the figure contrasted with the almost flat space create an impression of the loneliness of the figure whose scream sounds in this space.

[31] J. Russel, *'The Mystery of the Paint'*..., p. 236.

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A triptych has a different meaning for artistic merit. In spite of the fact that Bacon did not attach a lot of importance to it[32], he had never given it up. But his triptych did not preserve a narrative continuity which should be correctly understood. The splitting of the triptych's narration is aimed at causing the viewer to break from the schema of 'common' perception and to bring him into a state of being aesthetically lost. In this way of thinking, a triptych is a painting drama in three acts, whose relationship remains very uncertain because each of the acts is irreducible to the others. The loss of identicalness and traditional logic corresponds with the idea of violence, which impacts on the certainty of everyday life and questions the principles of theoretical and practical reason.

The size of a picture, the form of a triptych and the scale of pictorially represented objects oblige the viewer to keep the right distance from a picture. The use of a glass pane not only protects the picture but also deepens this distance. In a manner of speaking, the picture seems to be retreating from the viewer. This phenomenon seems to be opposed to the idea of the violence of paint which comes across directly to the nervous system. In connection with the subject and relatively large format, it might even lead to the effect of dignity or splendor. Nevertheless, the violence of paint, even if blunt, remains in force.

Closing remarks

The analysis of several standard artistic categories which describe a pictorial piece of art: canvas and its attributes, types of paints, painting tools and format, together with the categories which may be assigned to Bacon's painting but which were taken from the ontology of painting: the appearance of a figure, the structure of a body, emotional feelings, fate and general ideas, reveals, I hope, a system of aesthetically 'negative' qualities which grows stronger from the lowest layer up. If we take into consideration the qualities which belong to the lowest layer of a painting:

[32] 'I've often been asked about the triptychs. To tell you the truth, I don't really know. Actually I don't know if one should talk about a triptych in my case. Of course, there are three canvases, and you can link that to a long-standing tradition. The primitives often used the triptych format, but as far as my work concerned, a triptych corresponds more to the idea of a succession of images on film. There are frequently three canvases, but there is no reason why I couldn't continue and add more. Why shouldn't there be more than three? What I do know is that I need these canvases to be separated from one another. That's why I was so annoyed with the way Guggenheim mounted the three panels of its *Crucifixion* all in one frame. It was absurd. I wanted them to be separate, and this is also the case for canvases of the other triptychs. **MA** In a way they are sequences? **FB.** Yes, in one sense they are. One image, another, then another with the frame adding a cetrain rhythm to the progression of images'. *Francis Bacon in conversation with Michel Archimbaud*, Phaidon Press London 1993, p. 165.

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roughness and being 'tooth', then they will be almost indifferent and only their relation with other qualities of the upper layers will impart on them a negative character. Similarly, the appearance of a figure, its incompleteness and particular being suspended in space, might have 'light' aesthetic meaning and only a connection with the qualities of a unprimed canvas makes them 'negative'.

But a painting regardless goes beyond its pure artistic sense and refers to the "truth of life and reality". This does not mean that a painting becomes a narrative or is a 'report' but only that it has deeper layers with their own aesthetic qualities which are directly felt and which intensify 'negativity'. Although all these qualities belong to the different layers of a painting, they harmonize with each other and make beauty. It does not matter what kind of beauty it is: horrible, terrible or other. It depends on the nature of particular qualities. But this ultimate merit must be retained if a painting is to be a world of its own, and self-sufficient in axiological meaning.

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Summary

In the article the author considers the problem of value response, using the methods of the aesthetic theories which prefer the 'material' approach to this axiological issue, as well as referring to Francis Bacon's painting. This answer is an emotional response to many dimensions of the painting. The analysis will concern, however, artistic factors whose significance is often omitted in general aesthetic investigations: the support (or basis) of the painting, the canvas' properties, the type of paint, the color layer, the painting tools, and even the technical background – the type and size of the canvas. The analysis of these categories presents how the colorful logos of the painting gradually emerges; the logos whose order of sensuous influence and violence of colour cooperate with formal discipline in creating the exceptional merit – a terrible beauty.

Keywords: painting, canvas, artistic value, beauty, aesthetics, ontology, Bacon.

Zusammenfassung

Der Verfasser des Artikels erwägt das Problem der Antwort auf den Wert, indem er Methoden der ästhetischen Theorien anwendet, die eine materielle Herangehensweise an diese axiologische Fragestellung bevorzugen. Dabei bezieht sich der Autor auf die Malerei von Francis Bacon. Als Antwort erscheint eine emotionale Reaktion, die von vielen Bereichen des Gemäldes verursacht wird. Die Analyse betrifft jedoch jene künstlerischen Faktoren, deren Bedeutung in allgemeinen ästhetischen Erwägungen häufig ausgelassen wird: die Leinwand, Eigenschaften des Maltuches, die Art der Farbe, Malschicht, Malmittel, sogar technische Angelegenheiten wie Art und Größe des Maltuches. Die Untersuchung dieser Kategorien zeigt, wie der koloristische Logos des Gemäldes schrittweise auftaucht: Logos, dessen Ordnung von Sturm der Eindrücke und Drang der Farbe mit der Formaldisziplin bei der Herausbildung eines besonderen Wertes übereinstimmt – der schrecklichen Schönheit.

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Schlüsselworte: Malerei, Leinwand, künstlerischer Wert, Ästhetik, Ontologie, Bacon.

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