

# A painter and his hell

## Love is the Devil--study for a portrait of Francis Bacon: a film by John Maybury

Elaine Gorton  
17 October 1998

*Love is the Devil* is the first feature-length film directed and written by John Maybury, who is known for his short films, adverts and music videos. It is based on the book, *The Gilded Gutter Life of Francis Bacon*. The film was well received at the Cannes Film Festival and went on general release from September 18.

The story is a familiar one. Lovers meet from very different social backgrounds; everything that attracts them ultimately repels them and it all ends in tears. The difference is that the tragic lovers are a world-renowned artist Francis Bacon (Derek Jacobi), and George Dyer (Daniel Craig), a petty criminal who rubs shoulders with the notorious London gangsters, the Kray twins.

Bacon is a crucial artistic figure. Widely held to be one of Britain's most significant painters of the twentieth century, he was born in Ireland but spent his formative years in Germany between the First and Second World Wars. His outlook was significantly shaped by the social and political struggles of the time, from which he drew profoundly negative conclusions. Fascism's triumph convinced Bacon that the left-wing idealism of his Berlin contemporaries ran contrary to human nature. He celebrated what he considered to be the dark soul of humanity. Man was a beast and civilisation a thin veneer. The Second World War confirmed him in these views. Sex and death were life's only constants. Together with the persecution suffered by homosexuals, these experiences spurred on the inner demons that haunted Bacon and lent his paintings their ugly fascination and power. 'I am optimistic about nothing,' Bacon says again and again in the film.

We meet Bacon at the height of his success. He is feted by both the Soho avant-garde and the establishment. His paintings fetch large sums. Yet it is

not difficult to understand how Bacon finds the figure of Dyer fascinating. They meet as the result of a botched burglary on Bacon's home. But instead of turning Dyer over to the police, he offers him whatever he wants in return for sex. Bacon has found his muse. Here is someone who epitomises Bacon's sexual and emotional ideals; a big, seemingly brutal and certainly brutalised man who has the 'qualities of innocence and amorality', a contradiction that Bacon would find easy to reconcile. As for Dyer, he is an opportunist who thinks he has struck gold. He asks Bacon, 'You actually make money out of painting?'

The two fall in love against the odds and despite the social divide that separates them. But Bacon tries to change Dyer. He wants him to be strong and domineering, an idealised male figure--his 'Lucifer', his 'fallen angel'. He encourages Dyer to beat him during their lovemaking and tries to integrate him into his circle of friends. Dyer feels very uncomfortable in this milieu. Paradoxically Bacon is unhappy with the changes Dyer does undergo. When Dyer falls in love and reveals his emotional vulnerability, Bacon feels somehow let down. He cannot cope with the increasing mental problems with which Dyer suffers. The relationship degenerates, becomes increasingly violent. Dyer is desperate, tries to cling onto Bacon, who resents his dependence. In the end he commits suicide.

The link between Bacon's relationship with Dyer and his art is a complex subject to deal with. It was made more difficult still by the refusal of Bacon's estate to allow the use of any of his paintings. An understanding of the nature of Bacon's work, his depiction of man as animal, as flesh, often grotesquely distorted and butchered, would have served to illustrate and confirm

the film's themes. In seeking to overcome these difficulties, Maybury has two major assets working in his favour: a fine cast (particularly in Jacobi) and a visual flair combined with sophisticated film and audio technique.

So much of the film hangs on its ability to create a visual style that reproduces Bacon's vision. Indeed this is its most successful aspect. The film opens with Bacon grieving the death of George. The scene is set in a spartan bedroom. Bacon sits on the edge of the bed, his head buried in George's pillow, weeping. The camera sweeps up to view the character from above. There are many such shots. The world created for Bacon by Maybury is a claustrophobic, subterranean hell that George has the misfortune to fall into. We see the figure of Dyer tumbling in blackness and landing in a room daubed with red and black and covered with black and white photographs of the dead and dying, resembling the den of a serial killer rather than a painter's studio.

The scene is lit from above, as is most of the film. There is a large round mirror in the background that distorts the reflected image. The use of reflection is one of the main devices used by Maybury to allude to Francis Bacon's paintings. Mirrors are used to repeat and layer images, resembling Bacon's use of the triptych. Water and shots through glasses and bottles distort faces and forms.

The strong directional light serves two main purposes. The intense shadows exaggerate the physical form and create the sense of being underground. The film is largely set in a series of interiors. These contrast group scenes involving Bacon, his acolytes and peers (usually characterised by venomous gossip) with more intimate moments between Bacon and Dyer. Colour is used imaginatively. The predominant greys and greens of the opening scenes become more and more red until the film reaches its climax in Dyer's death in a vivid scarlet hotel room.

Other aspects of *Love is the Devil* are less successful. Style to some extent substitutes for substance. Maybury fails to sustain the story. It seems overlong and unduly disjointed, held together only by Jacobi's first person narration. Certain references are clumsy and laboured--images of falling, the spiral staircase motif appropriated from Alfred Hitchcock. There is little attempt made to place Bacon's relationship to Dyer in a

broader social context. Its makers boast that this was their intention. 'We were more interested in a film which reflected the mood and atmosphere of the paintings than a film which reflected the period,' said producer Chiara Menage. Despite its flaws, however, this remains an interesting cinematic work.



To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**