theories and methodologies

Looking with Leo

KAJA SILVERMAN

I CHOSE THE TITLE OF THIS ESSAY IN PART BECAUSE I WILL BE DISCUSSING LEO BERSANI'S WORK ON PAINTING AND CINEMA, AND DOing so as a friend rather than a rival or adversary. But the three words in my title also describe how Bersani himself approaches the visible world: when he sees something, he looks *with* it, not *at* it. He is drawn to artists who look in the same way—artists who challenge the notion that seeing is a one-way action, which a seer performs on a visual object. Terrence Malick is a particularly good example of this type of artist, since he not only looks with the world but also makes this action the center of his films. As Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit put it in their discussion of *The Thin Red Line*, Malick shows us both "the world his characters are registering" and "the imprint of the act of looking on the subject of the looking" (*Forms* 146).

Everything that Bersani has written about a painting or a film has also begun with, and been enabled by, another visual collaboration; he sees what he sees because he approaches it through another pair of eyes—those provided by Dutoit. Bersani and Dutoit have looked together with an astonishingly wide range of visual works: Assyrian palace reliefs; paintings by Morandi, Rembrandt, and Caravaggio; Alain Resnais's *Muriel*, *Mon oncle d'Amerique*, and *Nuit et brouillard*; Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens*; Jean-Luc Godard's *Le mépris* and *Hélas pour moi*; Malick's *The Thin Red Line*; Pedro Almodóvar's *Todo sobre mi madre*; Derek Jarman's *Caravaggio*; and—most recently—the films of Eric Rohmer.

Bersani's look dramatizes one of the key principles of his thought: the notion that there is no such thing as an individual. Everyone relates to everyone and everything else through formal correspondences. Resemblance forges unbreakable bonds, so there are no "gaps" or "empty spaces" in the universe (*Caravaggio's Secrets* 72). Unfortunately, though, most of us do not welcome similarity or the relations it establishes. We spend our lives either repudiating others, psychically, morally, or epistemologically, or trying to possess them. Bersani has been seeking a way out of this bind for a long time, through a series of partially over-

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lapping concepts: inaccurate self-replication, impersonal narcissism, the communication of forms, and infinite extensibility.

I would love to hear Bersani talk about the relations among these concepts—where they overlap, where they diverge, when and why he mobilizes one rather than another. But I have no interest in reducing this series to one. What Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote about the painter could also be said about Bersani; he, too, is

> a person at work who each morning finds in the shape of things the same questioning and the same call he never stops responding to. . . . [H]is work is never completed, it is always in progress. . . . It is always a question of advancing the line of the already opened furrow and of recapturing an accent which has already appeared in the corner of a previous painting or in some instant of his experience, without the painter himself being able to say (since the distinction has no meaning) what comes from him and what comes from things. (95)

The call to which Bersani awakens every day comes from the phenomenal world. The question that impels him to write book after book is a prolongation of this call. It goes something like this: what are the perceptual circumstances that would make it possible for us to correspond with other beings not only formally but also psychically? Each of the concepts through which he attempts to answer this question advances the line of this "already opened furrow."

I say "perceptual circumstances" because perception occupies a privileged place in Bersani's thought. In one famous passage in *The Ego and the Id*, Freud writes that the ego is a "precipitate" of "abandoned object-cathexes" (24). In another he maintains that the ego is "first and foremost a bodily ego" (20). Bersani and Dutoit weave these two definitions of the ego together in an important passage in *Caravaggio's Secrets* and use the resulting formulation both to explain and to dismantle the opposition between the psyche and the world. "All behavior could be described in terms of connectedness, and the first connectedness we know is physical," they write. "Modes of relationality in human life are 'deduced from' our perceptions of physical space" (63). So is the ego, Bersani and Dutoit go on to argue. The self is created through the interiorization of the relational field that is defined for the infant through its sensory interactions with its environment.

Unfortunately, the environment out of which the ego emerges is "narrow." The ego is also a defensive structure, which seeks to internalize the relational field that was mapped for it through its early perceptual experiences and to prevent new perceptions from occurring: "The infantile ego must defend itself against the external stimuli by which it is bombarded; hatred is at first a self-preservative reflex. . . . [And] this repudiation of the world—of all the difference that threatens the ego's stability (indeed in its very constitution as a distinct identity)—is by no means limited to infancy" (*Arts* 147).

The political stakes of this project become pressingly evident in Bersani and Dutoit's 1993 book *Arts of Impoverishment*. This book contains three chapters—one on Samuel Beckett, one on Mark Rothko, and one on Resnais. In the third chapter, the authors discuss two of Resnais's most historically inflected films: *Nuit et brouillard*, a documentary about the German death and concentration camps, and *Muriel*, a fictional work that revolves around the French torture of Algerians during the French-Algerian War. Early in their analysis of *Nuit et brouillard*, Bersani and Dutoit pose the question that is often asked in discussions of this film—"What is Nazism or, more relevantly, how can what we call Nazism be represented?" However, instead of talking about how Nazism should be represented and then using this prototype to determine whether or not *Nuit et brouillard* succeeds in its task, they suggest that wanting an adequate representation of what happened in the camps "may be a way of refusing to confront our implication in it" (185). We

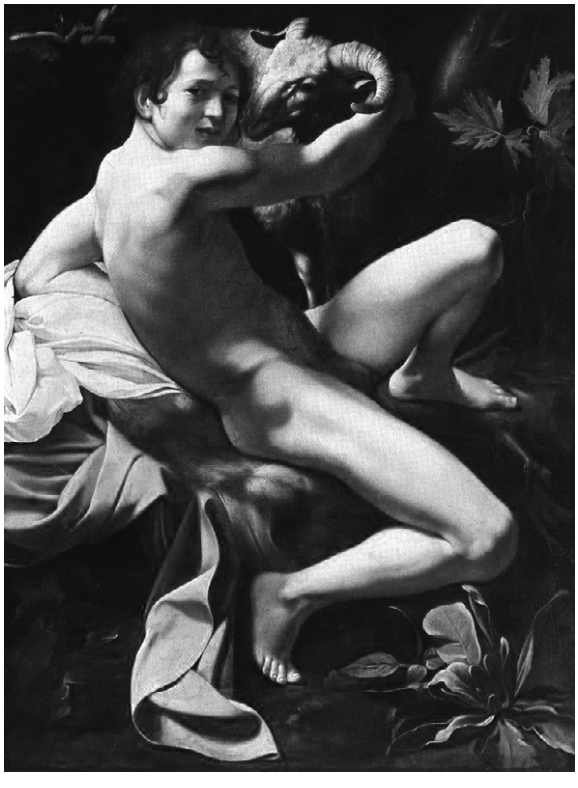
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need to stop worrying about whether a representation is true or false, or positive or negative, and start thinking about the divisions it puts in place. Although it would be ridiculous to compare a representation to a concentration camp, the two are not completely unrelated. A representation is a bounded image, outside of and in front of which we stand. It creates a series of binary oppositions, onto which others can easily be mapped: spectator/spectacle, visibility/invisibility, sight/touch.

Resnais refuses to let us cordon off Nazism by representing it. Instead of offering us a picture of something that happened years ago, in a place that has vanished from the earth, he blurs the distinction between the past and the present, dislocates the sound from the image, and diegeticizes the camera's tracking movements. Through these perceptual disturbances, Resnais dramatically expands our relational field:

> To watch [*Nuit et brouillard*] is to be turned away from its narrativizable content and towards its aestheticizing procedures. . . . We are no longer the viewing subject conscious of making an effort to see and to grasp . . . the filmic object. . . . Resnais has made the images of Nazism an active part of our contemporaneity. . . . The Nazi past is . . . repeated inside our sensory collaboration with the film. . . .
> (Bersani and Dutoit, *Arts* 187)

FIG. 1
Caravaggio, *Saint John the Baptist with a Ram*, 1602. Oil on canvas, 129 x 94 cm. Musei Capitolini, Rome.



As Bersani and Dutoit show, Resnais does something similar in *Muriel*; he implicates us perceptually in what we most seek to distance ourselves from morally: torture (196).

Although this is a powerful aesthetic, it is also a limited one. It forces us to feel our "inescapable complicity" in a violence that fills us with horror, but it does not help us end this violence (187). As Bersani and Dutoit indicate not only through the title of the book but also through the three chapter titles—"Inhibited Reading," "Blocked Vision," "Stalled Movement"—the artists discussed in *Arts of Impoverishment* proceed more by undoing than by doing. In his next two books, *Homos* and *The Culture of Redemption*, Bersani also promotes a negative ethics and aesthetics, but when he and Dutoit turn to Caravaggio and Malick, they think about art as a place where we can learn to look not just against ourselves but also with the world: "The models of relationality in an art like that of Caravaggio . . . trace a sensuality, the pleasurable and diversified extensibility of the body in space we may have *missed* in the urgent and exclusive soliciting of our attention—of our spatial imagination—by the narrow environment that first called us into the world" (*Caravaggio's Secrets* 64).

Bersani and Dutoit also discover that there is another perceptual opener—one that issues from within us but that propels us outward, toward other beings. This perceptual opener, which may be what permits us to correspond with other forms, is mortality:

> We think, we write, we paint under pressure, a pressure that is in part the knowledge the body has of its own death. This knowledge,

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FIG. 2
Jim Caviezel as Private Witt in Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* (1998).

> which we are perhaps born with, directs and inflects our implication in the real; it is a powerful formalizing element of the energy passing through the extended arm about to write, about to paint . . . about to welcome or repel the other's beckoning gesture. The particular artfulness with which each of us moves through space is the creation of our mortality, the expression or pressing outward, of death's inscription within our bodies. (35)

These two perceptual enablers—seduction and mortality—join forces in Bersani and Dutoit's readings of *Saint John the Baptist with a Ram*, the painting on the cover of *Caravaggio's Secrets* (fig. 1), and of Witt's face in *The Thin Red Line* (fig. 2). I would like to end by inviting you to look with Leo with these two things:

> The possibility of reading the youth's smile as a provocative sign of [an impenetrable] subjectivity is forestalled by the multiple fanlike structures in the painting, structures that open out into a purely external space. Several versions of this fanlike movement create an interior framing circle: the red drapery, the ram's horns, the boy's legs, and the leaves of the plant in the bottom right corner. The scene thus opens out, centrifugally, in various directions, countering the centripetal pull of the youth's gaze. Only his right arm traces a single direction, but its gesture is extended by the tree in the upper right corner, and ends somewhere outside the painting's frame. . . . Even the boy's spread legs have to be read here less as an erotic provocation than as merely one in a series of fanlike structures opening outward, away from the youth's body. . . . This, then, is the youth's secret, one not of interiority but rather of indefinite extensibility. . . . (81–82)

> [T]he astonishing unprotectedness of Witt's look designates a subject without claims on the world, who owns nothing. . . . Malick asks us both to be the world as Witt, looking at us, receives it and to imitate that receptivity . . . when we leave the film and turn again to the world outside it . . . *to let the world be*. (*Forms* 164)

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