

JENNIFER NELSON
Yale University

THE FLESH MIGHT LOOK FUNNY – IF YOU LOOK AT IT

Where can we see the flesh in pictures? If the bodied, creaturely congealment of popular sovereignty in modernity were to be represented in a painting, where would it be?

We must not believe that it appears only in paint itself.

Eric Santner's *The Royal Remains: The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty*, and specifically the chapter "Was Heisst Schauen?," have prompted me to meditate on modernist visuality. In particular, I have returned to a ten-year-old disagreement between two senior art historians, one of whom features prominently in Santner's writing.

In 2002, O. K. Werckmeister published a critique of T. J. Clark's 1999 essayistic, case-driven *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*.¹ Though Clark is the more widely respected authority on modernism, and though Werckmeister's idiosyncratic terms of debate compromise his argument,² Werckmeister has a point. Clark, Werckmeister claims, is ignoring one of two major tracks of modernist art practice. That is, Clark disregards popularly-oriented modernisms that rely on conventional image-making practices (read here: figurative illusionism) and instead considers upper-middle-class modernisms that strive to redefine image-making practices (read here: most modernisms that have ever been called "avant-garde"). The former category of modernism purports to be relevant for a broader viewership, whereas the latter category mistakenly prides itself on a new but unfortunately only "imaginary"

¹See O. K. Werckmeister, "A Critique of T. J. Clark's Farewell to an Idea," *Critical Inquiry*, 28, no. 4 (Summer 2002): 855-867. Clark, Timothy J. *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

²E.g., he begins by speaking of "traditional" as opposed to "modern" art without first defining what he means, which emerges gradually and which I outline in the following sentence.

system of practices, i.e., practices implying more utopian conditions than actually exist.³

This disagreement is not only a question of which modernism of Werckmeister's "two tracks" has the broader, more inclusive viewership. Werckmeister does not even raise and demolish the naïve possibility that a more avant-garde modernism's circumscribed, elite visuality might be just as universally parsable as whatever conventional visuality it has discarded.

Rather, the disagreement is ideological. Whereas Clark celebrates the tension between avant-gardist modernism and the difficult modernity with which it cannot tally, Werckmeister considers such celebration ultimately a surrender to a "doctrine of despondency."⁴ He insists instead on a more positive scholarly practice that acknowledges modernism within modernity, including the "track" of modernism that represents and engages actual human conditions of modernity head-on.⁵

For those who believe that Western art as a category and certain socioeconomic conditions are mutually constitutive, it may seem wiser to follow Clark rather than Werckmeister and privilege elite modernism's learned helplessness. That is, it may be more naïve, if one wishes to improve human conditions in modernity, to emphasize art that has been mobilized to play a role in that improvement. After all, one of art's constitutive functions has always been to provide monetary and meditative penance, assuaging the guilt of those who profit from socioeconomic harm—whether by reframing that harm figuratively in a culturally-cordoned-off forum or by imagining an alternative realm that, if actualized, would justify the harm.

The question here, for Santner and ourselves, is whether, when making claims about modernist visuality, to exclude modernisms that do not escape into the alternative realms posited by most avant-garde practices. By extension, because Werckmeister is largely right to identify two distinct tracks of modernism, such an exclusion would also implicitly apply to most figurative practices of modernism.

The answer to this question is the same as the one with which I began. No. Even after the *Death of Marat* and its split existence across the two tracks, discourse about modernity should not exclude art-making practices that engage modernity from within conventional figuration.⁶

³ See especially 856-857.

⁴ Werckmeister, 860.

⁵ Werckmeister does make a pained detour describing the avant-garde exception of early Constructivist art practices (856-857). These depart from painting as such. The question of why painting alone is the modernist medium under investigation is too large for the present essay, but presents another possibility for expanding Santner's inquiry.

⁶ For a less ideologically charged description of figuration's awkward place in art historical theory, see Robert Slifkin, "Philip Guston's Return to Figuration and the

The gist of “Was Heisst Schauen?” is that modernist art practice models the flesh as a substrate for the conflict between human experience and the structures of modernity. In this, Santner largely follows one of Clark’s central theses in *Farewell to an Idea*: modernism variably critiques and resists modernity, rather than remaining in lockstep with it (presumably in contrast to previous epochs, which were presumably enslaved by a totalizing Zeitgeist whose authority was underwritten by the structures of monarchical sovereignty). Santner’s most productive contribution to this narrative is indeed the interposition of the flesh as a way of understanding how the tension between lived experience and its functional codification plays out. This notion of the flesh visualized has great potential for art history. Not only does it provide a new framework for investigating modernism’s entanglement of materiality and medium with political and biopolitical concerns; through the flesh’s own fraught relationship to signification, a visualized flesh also complicates previous semiologically oriented accounts of various modernist episodes.⁷

How does art model the flesh? In Santner’s most optimistic formulation, he summarizes and seems to follow J. M. Bernstein’s belief that “human flourishing” means a “capacity for meaningful sensory experience within a vibrant form of life made to the measure of embodied subjects” (114).⁸ Bernstein, too, Santner implies, understands modernist art-making to attempt a practice that is commensurate with embodied life over and against the totalizing, mismatched structures of modernity. In “the abstract materiality of modernist art,” we can hope to bury (alive) the haunting but defunct “authority of living nature,” whose “plenipotentiary” is abstract materiality’s “sensuous particular” (118).⁹ In other words, abstract materiality retains sensuous detail that stands in for a nature whose authority is lost. The flesh that would replace totalized, sovereign nature as ramifier of our existence remains fraught and zombified in this model. But Santner’s tone is not despondent. He seems fascinated by the living death of our own authority, and by its display in abstract painting. He even acknowledges modern visuality’s strange humor, “the idiotic persistence of [human beings’] ‘highness’” (107-110), though it is difficult to connect this humor with any abstract painting in particular.¹⁰

‘1930s Renaissance’ of the 1960s,” *Art Bulletin*, 43, no. 2 (Jun. 2011): 220-242. Slifkin writes, “The exclusively morphological definition of figuration”—i.e., the understanding of figuration as merely “recognizable imagery”—“conventionally invoked in art historical discourse has subsequently . . . left art history unable to analyze . . . alternative models of figuration,” e.g., figuration’s referential and rhetorical capacities (226-227).

⁷ See especially the work of those figures associated with the journal *October*.

⁸ Santner engages specifically with J. M. Bernstein’s *Against Voluptuous Bodies: Late Modernism and the Meaning of Painting* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

⁹ These quotations are both Santner’s and Bernstein’s words; Santner cites Bernstein, 10.

¹⁰ Santner draws heavily on Alenka Zupancic, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

Just when a reader might worry that Santner has bought into a too-teleological art historical narrative that too-simply culminates in abstraction, he introduces Francis Bacon. But Santner does not emphasize Bacon's figurative practice *per se*. Rather, Bacon reminds us that a crucial attribute of the flesh is its paradoxical quality of being organic yet situated outside the body (125ff.).

Unfortunately, this engagement with Bacon reveals an essentializing over-reliance on written sources. For someone who so thoroughly, elsewhere in *The Royal Remains*, investigates psychoanalysis's crucial ability to apprehend the flesh, Santner stops disappointingly short of questioning artists' and contemporary discourses' self-myths. This is not to say that critics and scholars should have the last word, but to wonder why Santner does not do his own visual interpretation.

My disappointment is in earnest: Santner is an interpreter par excellence. There are many instances in which he agilely and profoundly enriches texts, most notably here in his discussion of Bataille's *informe* and Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois' activation of the term (105-6, 111-112).¹¹ I only wish this were a starting point for more direct visual analysis. For example, Santner qualifies Bacon's stated sense of continuity with Velázquez by remarking that if Bacon felt that "Velázquez recorded the court at that time," Bacon must then have recorded the remains of the court, the "mutated" form of "the royal personage," "the biopolitical pressure that now pulsates in—or better, *as*—the flesh of everyday life" (139).¹² This recasting of Bacon's notions in Santner's terms situates Bacon's stated practice in terms of Santner's biopolitical discourse, to be sure. But I was hoping Santner would also enrich one of Bacon's paintings after Velázquez by describing *how* it would register its transmuted inheritance.

The chapter's premise of visualized flesh remains inchoate because of an unexpected reluctance to ground arguments in visual evidence. Bacon's statements often correspond brilliantly to Santner's points about the displaced and disfigured real that is the flesh. But do Bacon's paintings actually correspond to "returning fact onto the nervous system in a more violent way" (126-127) or to a distinction between "illustrational" and "non-illustrational form" (127-128)?¹³ How? Does he really break with conventions in the same way that Santner/Clark has described with respect to the *Death of Marat*? What if the disruptiveness of Bacon's paintings does not tally, as I would argue, with the disruptiveness of materially-focused abstraction? Perhaps the two are linked, but Santner links them only through his often adept navigation of secondary discourse. Beautiful and connotatively rich as his writing can be, it should do more than restage

¹¹ See also, for example, Santner's critique of Deleuze's move from Lacan's "logic of the signifier" to a virtualized "logic of the sensation," in which Santner shows great sensitivity to Deleuze's nuances but ultimately rejects Deleuze's belief in a level of undifferentiated, bare existence (132-136, citing Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, tr. Daniel Smith [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003]).

¹² Santner cites David Sylvester, *The Brutality of Fact: Interviews with Francis Bacon* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2008), 28.

¹³ Sylvester, 12 and 57.

modernism's usual platitudes about itself—and it would, I suspect, through direct visual analysis.

For we do get one paragraph of such analysis at the end of the chapter, describing the “theater” in which Bacon himself stages his central figures. The boxes and other pseudoperspectival lines impinging upon these figures, Santner convincingly argues, record the flesh and its pressure upon the modern subject. The paintings thus depict bodies hemmed in by “various political and biopolitical spaces of modernity” (140). I wish this discussion had come earlier, and at greater length—for Santner, here, is an even better visual analyst than his predecessor, Ernst Kantorowicz. Where Kantorowicz merely registers horror over and over again (albeit entertainingly) at the worm-compromised *transis* of medieval and early modern European tombs, Santner performs rather eloquent ekphrasis, noting that “the forces moving through the figure’s body seem to push their way out by way of a scream” (140).¹⁴

However, without further discussion, this brief, concluding ekphrasis (not overtly connected to any painting[s] in particular) followed by a cursory return to the *Death of Marat* cannot achieve its full impact. A bare, minimal juxtaposition of Bacon’s staging with David’s painting of empty space made me long for the analysis that was missing. Interpretation of specific images could have prevented this anticlimax, and challenged or improved standard modernist narratives. I suspect that more direct visual analysis would have shifted Santner’s inherited bias toward avant-gardist, materially focused modernisms and produced a more complete theory of visualization of the flesh. After reckoning with illusionistic representation of the conventionally coded kind, from, say, Jean-François Millet or Diego Rivera or even Thomas Hart Benton—or any other figurative painter of the conditions of modernity—would Santner have argued that their participation in conventions made their paintings less engaging of sensory experience than their relatively abstracted contemporaries? Might that argument not have historicized itself as one of taste, quickly returnable to a (lingering, even haunting) series of twentieth-century moments when some elites in Europe and the United States turned away from illusionistic realism? Would Santner have needed an intervening theorist, as with Bacon, to explain how these painters’ figuration was really about disrupting figuration and thus at least superficially akin to Santner’s theory of material, fleshly, abstracted modernism?

Still, suppose we take at face value Santner’s assumption that traditional codifications of representation are intrinsically rooted in a problematic, monarchical structure of authorized reference. We cannot consequently assume that *any* marshaling of traditional codes obstructs meaningful sensory experience. If, in modernity, the body has become a site for “calculation, discipline, and functional optimization” (117), if *all* traditional modes of engaging the senses are inherently culpable in the turn toward the body as a

¹⁴ For Kantorowicz’s discussion of these tombs, see *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* [1957] (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 431–436. Kantorowicz’s best line concerns the tomb of Francis I de La Sarraz, “the horrors of which would spoil the appetite even of an inveterate ghoul” (*Ibid.*, 433).

utilitarian calculus, what then when “abstract expressionism,” as Werckmeister writes, becomes “vulgar,” itself popularly codified?¹⁵

No art practice escapes near-immediate codification of its own terms. But the problem is larger. The power of Santner’s book is that, while he cedes codification as the realm of totalization and personhood-quashing tyranny, he does not cede interpretation and communication of and about texts. This chapter belies that power. I am fascinated by his reluctance to interpret images directly: given Santner’s sophistication and range, and since the turn to media studies as a thriving subfield of literary studies, such reluctance cannot be interpreted as merely a literary scholar’s reliance on specialists’ accounts. This missed opportunity suggests that there is something particularly uncomfortable about visual simulacra of the flesh.

What might we find if we looked for the flesh in Millet’s *Winnower* (1848) in the Musée d’Orsay? This question leads to many others. How might tropes of heroization problematically correspond to our surplus sovereignty? Which tropes get used how? How might such direct signification in a historical context of willful looking-away have inflected or infected the flesh? Why might the representation of wheat rather than empty space be the most abstract or painterly area of the painting? We could go on to more sophisticated inquiries.

Such questions lead also toward Santner’s penultimate subject in the book, Walter Benjamin’s correspondence with Gershom Scholem about the theology of Kafka’s work (248-250).¹⁶ Scholem thinks that the difference between lost Scripture (potential godlessness) and unreadable Scripture (a “zero point” of revelation “in which it has *validity* but *no significance*”) is crucial, and chooses the latter in his reading of Kafka, whose oeuvre, for Scholem, preserves “transcendence.” Benjamin sees the difference as irrelevant: the importance of Scripture in modernity is its transmutation into life, specifically into the “absurdity” of everyday “[l]ife as it is lived in the village.” We have here a theological formulation of Santner’s “surplus of immanence.” If one adduces a continuous thread to a letter written by Benjamin five years later, absurdity would be Kafka’s “essential feature”: “humor” in the metamorphosis of “life into Scripture.”

When it comes to visual cultures of modernism, Santner should turn away from despondent, postlapsarian discourses (Clark, Deleuze, and now Bernstein) and follow his more complex Benjaminian instincts.¹⁷ Rather than focusing only on an abstract tradition of modernism that retains validity while relinquishing conventional significance, perhaps he might also include more-everyday visual

¹⁵ Werckmeister, 866.

¹⁶ The letters cited are taken from *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, 1932-1940*, tr. Gary Smith and Andre Levere (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992): August 11, 1934, 135; September 20, 1934, 142; and February 4, 1939, 243.

¹⁷ To paraphrase Benjamin: Santner – unlike Scholem – is precisely “man enough to be that man,” that is, the scholar of modernist humor.

models of the flesh. Yes, it is funny to think that Western art, the great penitential interface of capitalist modernity, might attempt the laughable metamorphosis of everyday human conditions—especially the ones that most report capitalism's sins—into vessels of transcendence. Perhaps what makes the realist track of modernism so unpopular for postlapsarian theorists is that, in modernity, the metamorphosis of everyday life into art, often dependent on the continued efficacy of conventional figuration, is ever more uncomfortably comical. The necessary complement of a post-avant-gardist "doctrine of despondency" is a study of figurative tragicomedy.

©Jennifer Nelson.

Nelson, Jennifer. "The Flesh Might Look Funny—if You Look at It," in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 12 no. 1 (Spring 2012): 37-43.