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LEO BERSANI AND THE UNIVERSE

Brian Glavey

Is the Rectum a Grave? and Other Essays by Leo Bersani. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009. Pp. 224. $75.00 cloth, $25.00 paper.

Over the past twenty-five years, while formulating a series of influential theses about sex, Leo Bersani has also been methodically working through a philosophy of art. This, of course, is no big secret; the subtitle of *The Freudian Body* (1986), after all, is *Psychoanalysis and Art,* and much of Bersani's career has been dedicated to investigating the relation between these two terms. From *The Forms of Violence* (1985) to *Forms of Being* (2004), Bersani has always been a formalist, though one for whom the question of form is intimately associated with questions of ethics and ontology. In large part it is this commitment to the aesthetic, rather than more explicitly political concerns, that motivates the rigorous refusal of redemption that has been so influential in queer studies. Bersani opposes, for instance, the seemingly benign tendency to view art as imparting value on experience not only because this compensatory view soothes the sting of injustice, but also because it demotes art to an unseemly subservience to a culture's need for consolation. Art, for Bersani, has its own value independently of these consolations—a value worth defending.

But what is the nature of this value? Given the masochistic aesthetic formulated in Bersani's earlier works, we might expect a number of answers to this question. We might anticipate, for in-

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stance, the hypothesis that art, like sex, has the potential to overwhelm the self and trigger experiences of *jouissance* that disrupt the violent hegemony of the ego. And indeed, according to Bersani, art does offer these sorts of experiences. Whereas at one point in his career art came to seem a lot like sex, however, his later writings suggest that it is, on the contrary, sex that begins to resemble art. "The aesthetic is not confined to works of art," he argues, "sex can also be one of the modalities of the aesthetic" (70). This seeming reversal of emphasis suggests an attempt to rethink the understanding of self-shattering for which Bersani is most famous. The result has been a criticism that does not so much use psychoanalysis to read art, or even art to read psychoanalysis (two projects that he has executed brilliantly throughout his career), but rather that gestures toward evasions of the model of subjectivity associated with psychoanalysis in the first place. For some time now, Bersani has been exploring the possibility that the aesthetic might rewrite our understanding of subjectivity in a way that precedes the sundry dramas of aggression that Freud has taught us to recognize.

What is striking about the development of Bersani's thought is not its commitment to the aesthetic, but rather the specific vision of the aesthetic to which it is committed. The attempt to imagine forms of relationality that sidestep the violence inherent in the appetitive structure of selfhood has led our most eloquent critic of the culture of redemption to a view of art that appears surprisingly pastoral, a view dedicated to discovering our "at-homeness in the world" (55, 119). For Bersani, art might lead us "to see our prior presence in the world, to see, as bizarre as this may sound, that, ontologically, the world cares for us" (152–53). This aesthetic is a mode of interacting with the world that doesn't strive to master or obliterate otherness, but rather that accepts "the pleasure of finding ourselves harbored within it" (153). We are both in the world and of the world, and it is one of the constitutive tragedies of human existence, Bersani argues, that we find ourselves compelled to blot out this reality.

These ontological tendencies are not a new development, but they are underlined with particular elegance and force in Bersani's recent collection *Is the Rectum a Grave? and Other Essays*. Or, rather, they are underlined in the *Other Essays* of the collection's title. "Is the Rectum a Grave?" (1987), it would seem, is among the least aesthetic of Bersani's writings, a landmark work of cultural criticism dissecting both the affirmative shibboleths that would link sex and progressive politics, on the one hand, and the murderous misogyny and homophobia shaping the cultural representation of the AIDS crisis, on the other. The choice to

jump-start Bersani's recent collection with this famous essay—more than a decade older than anything else included—is one of the book's most interesting features. Besides giving a new home to an immensely important journal article (the piece actually began as a book review), opening the new book with "Is the Rectum a Grave?" seems an attempt to recontextualize his insights about the antirelational solipsism of sex.

In the midst of one of two interesting interviews that close out the volume, Kaja Silverman suggests that it might be a mistake to read Bersani's later ideas about aesthetic subjectivity as though they were variations on his earlier work, since the later work is chiefly interested in form. Bersani demurs, however, responding: "What for you is a reactive gesture is for me a point of departure. . . . If there weren't pleasure in giving up what our civilization insists we retain—our ego boundaries—the communication of forms would never occur. So masochism is the precondition of this passage" (175). In other words, masochism is a precondition, a first step toward aesthetic communion. As such, the "Rectum" essay is already a story about form. Art and sex are important not only because they disrupt the illusion of identity upon which authority stakes its claims, but also because they initiate a new mode of perception once the ego's cynosure is shaken. This point is made again and again throughout the new collection such that it seems impossible, after reading through its essays and interviews in succession, to think of Bersani as a prophet of negativity. Indeed, on a certain level, it seems as though Bersani takes the affirmative vision of sex he has criticized so powerfully and relocates it to a level of greater abstraction, offering an ontological redemption rather than a merely psychological one. "If our psychic center can finally seem less seductive," he argues, "it would seem not only imperative but natural to treat the outside as we would a home" (70). Ultimately then, homoness winds up a surprising form of cosmic hominess.

Despite the brilliance and coherence of the project revealed in the new collection, the transposition of the "Rectum" essay into the context of Bersani's vision of the aesthetic might generate a certain cognitive dissonance, transposing the essay from the context of the urgency of the AIDS crisis to what can seem like a diffuse mysticism. In a sense, this shift might be seen as paralleling the trajectory of queer criticism more generally since the 1990s as drug treatments worked to stanch, though not to stop, the epidemic and the particular political exigencies shaping gay, lesbian, and queer debate shifted. Though Bersani's continued antiredemptive commitments might make this consonance seem unlikely, in fact his vision of being harbored within

the world's care might be said to resemble the reparative aesthetic Eve Sedgwick identifies in the work of Marcel Proust. "That the universe along with the things in it are alive and therefore good; here I think, is the crux of Proust's mysticism," she proposes, before offering a qualification: "The formulation does not record a certainty or a belief but an orientation, the structure of a need, and a mode of perception. It is possible for the universe to be dead and worthless; but if it does not live, neither do the things in it, including one's self and one's contents. So put it comparatively: the universe itself is *as* alive as anything it holds."[1] Despite their differences, the career of both thinkers follows a similar trajectory from a hermeneutics of suspicion toward an exploration of modes of perception that resituate the self in relation to the world. Both reveal a discontent with the theoretical project of demystifying power, as though this were all that criticism could do, and a desire to push theory toward experiences that are hard to theorize, that appear themselves rather mystified.

For Sedgwick, of course, Proust's vision of systems nested within systems helps create more capacious and habitable forms of interiority. We long, she suggests, to be contained within a vital universe so that we can value the things that we contain ourselves. The upshot is a prescription for how the self might find forms of sustenance for itself and its contents. What is potentially radical about Bersani's line of thought, on the other hand, remains the possibility of love without identity, a possibility that itself hinges for Bersani on a particular notion of form. Although he does continue to write about Proust and Henry James, the novelists most important to Sedgwick's criticism, it is significant that his imagination has come to gravitate increasingly toward the visual arts. One result of the transition is to shift attention away from an art of intricate interiors to a spatialized aesthetic of repeating forms. Bersani's space tends inevitably to extend and flatten; his preferred spatial metaphors are figures of contiguity and extension. Thus he works to trace "the communication of forms in art as the affirmation of a certain solidarity in the universe, a solidarity we must perhaps first of all see not as one of identities but rather of positionings and configurations in space" (43–44, 100).

The solidarity Bersani discovers within similarity resonates with other projects such as Walter Benjamin's writings on the mimetic faculty and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's on the flesh of the world. But perhaps his aesthetic impersonality most resembles the forces that drive mimicry in nature according to Roger Caillois, who, in an essay that influenced Jacques Lacan's formulation of the mirror stage, diagnosed a certain "deper-

sonalization through assimilation into space," through which things become "similar, not similar to anything in particular, but simply similar."[2] For Caillois, this tendency, through which an individual organism is driven to recede into its environment, represents a thirst to return to the inanimate akin to the death drive. Bersani likewise argues that the aesthetic opens onto a mode of similitude that differentiates neither between the human and the nonhuman nor even between the animate and inanimate. In Bersani's account, however, making contact with this sort of pervasive, impersonal similarity is connected with life rather than death.

Self-shattering, in other words, is rewritten as a form of expansiveness: "lessness," we learn, "is the condition of allness" (70). If such allness escapes the label of redemption, it is because redemption is a concept predicated on loss: something must be taken or traded away in order to be redeemed. It is just this fixation on lack that Bersani is working to avoid and that propels his consideration of the limits of psychoanalysis. Freud offers us powerful tools for tracing the way the subject transforms the world into its own reflection, for the profound difficulty—if not the impossibility—of relating to the world at all. Art, on the other hand, has the potential to demonstrate a truth that remains strangely inadmissible: that relationality, rather than a problem, is simply an ontological fact. The chief stumbling block of psychoanalytic thought, Bersani argues, "is the difficulty it has imagining that we can find ourselves already in the world—there not as a result of our projections but as a sign of the natural extensibility of all being. This is the presence to which art—not psychoanalysis—alerts us" (100).

Art, it seems, is better equipped than theory to think about presence, to imagine subjectivity in terms not of competition but of composition. Bersani's exploration of this sort of aesthetic has no doubt been nurtured by the methodology of his investigations as much as by his objects of study. For the most part, his exploration of these questions has been produced in collaboration with Ulysses Dutoit, such that the books and essays themselves render indistinguishable the boundary between two different voices, suggesting a sublunary version of the nonidentitarian communities they describe. At the same time, however, even the fully collaborative works are read in relation to what we might think of Bersani's author function, as testifying to the coherence of his thought. Bersani admits, "[N]othing, it would seem, is more difficult than to conceive, to elaborate, to put into practice 'new relational modes'" (102). The ambivalent presence of the collaborative voice within *Is the Rectum a Grave?* points both toward the possibility

of these modes and toward the difficulty of their achievement. Rather than listing Dutoit as a co-author of the entire volume, specific pages, generally those pages containing meditations on films, are singled out in footnotes. In a sense, this has the effect of turning each argument into a choreographed exchange between the theorist, eager to secure distinctions, master difference, and correct mistakes, and an aesthetic subject for whom boundaries fade and are replaced by meditations on likeness and presence rooted in readings of specific works of art.

One is struck by the regularity with which this choreography unfolds. The collection seems to circle back on itself, covering what appears to be the same territory again and again. Bersani wants to loosen the hold of a way of thinking in thrall to difference by instituting a thought organized around non-identical sameness. In the process, he produces his own thesaurus of similarity, trying out a string of nearly synonymous terms in order to gesture toward the way of relating he catches glimpses of in the works he studies: homoness, inaccurate replication, communication of forms, similitude, infinite extensibility, alikeness, and so on. Though each term has its nuances, and their resemblance is of course Bersani's point, it's difficult nonetheless not to find them weighted down by a certain redundancy. Indeed, the whole collection testifies, in ways that are at once fascinating and infuriating, to the sorts of mimetic echoes he teaches us to find everywhere. What is frustrating is that the aesthetic subjectivity he outlines threatens to render the universe into a sort of conceptual gray goo of sameness. Whether the artwork that spurs Bersani's brilliant interpretation is a film by Jean-Luc Godard or Pedro Almodóvar or a novel by Pierre Michon, the result is, if not identical, profoundly *similar*. Indeed, entire sequences of sentences are recycled verbatim in multiple essays. Of course, such repetitions have pragmatic explanations linked to the assembly of occasional writings into a collection such as this, but it's hard not to see them as both miming Bersani's thesis and as symptomatic of it as well. Psychoanalysis is, as Bersani has demonstrated better than anyone, a profoundly articulate discourse capable of endless nuance. One can't help but feel a little disappointed at finding, when Bersani turns from the sexual to the aesthetic subject, that art, rather than offering a more varied and nuanced vision, offers a more reductive one. That, even with these reservations, one can still find Bersani's readings so brilliant and pleasurable is a testament to his own artistry.

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queer aesthetics entitled "The Sissy Arts," portions of which have appeared in PMLA and American Literature.

NOTES

1. Eve Sedgwick, "The Weather in Proust," unpublished talk, quoted in Jonathan Goldberg, "On the Eve of the Future," *PMLA* 125, no. 2 (March 2010): 376–77.
2. Roger Caillois, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia," in *The Edge of Surrealism: A Roger Caillois Reader,* ed. Claudine Frank (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 200), 89–106, quotation on 100.