

Beheading: The Lesson of Caravaggio.

Caravaggio spent the first and final periods of his flight from justice in Naples. Thus, Naples was the city where a new phase of his career would start and where he would spend the last part of his life. Among the many cities in which Caravaggio lived and painted, Naples was also the place where he had the most enduring influence. It should therefore come as no surprise that his insistence on the representation of beheading would give rise to a proliferation of copies throughout seventeenth-century Neapolitan painting, as well as among contemporary artists.¹ In this article, I examine Caravaggio's Neapolitan *oeuvre*, and specifically analyze his two versions of *Salome with the Head of St. John the Baptist* as a model of artistic subjectivity and identitarian empowerment that will resonate in the work of many female and feminist artists. By underscoring Caravaggio's use of decapitation as a way of symbolic self-defence, I also hope to challenge the frequent scholarly dismissal of psychoanalytical interpretations of Caravaggio's work.² Indeed, not only do biographical elements shore up a reading of Caravaggio's representation of beheading that departs from the iconological tradition, but they also show Caravaggio's proximity to seventeenth-century theorists who underpinned and anticipated psychoanalytical theories on the castration complex and fetishism. Such a reading will allow for a larger discussion on artworks as discursive objects strained between the unfathomable intentions of their artists and their successive cultural appropriations. In the conclusion, it will become clear that Caravaggio's use of the decapitated head as a strategy of artistic subjectivity would set a precedent for female artists, starting from Caravaggio's self-selected disciple, Artemisia Gentileschi, to contemporary superstar-artists such as Cindy Sherman and Adriana Varejão.

1. The Head and the Two Women of Salome with the Head of St. John the Baptist

Caravaggio painted Salome and John the Baptist on three occasions: the two versions of *Salome with the Head of St. John the Baptist* (c. 1607; c. 1609), and the Maltese *Beheading of St. John the Baptist* (c. 1608). Scholars have long been divided on the authenticity, place and date of execution of the two versions of *Salome with the Head of St. John the Baptist*,³ but nowadays they generally agree on Naples as the site of execution, though they variously assign the two paintings either to Caravaggio's first sojourn in Naples (1606-1607), or to his second one (1609-1610). The two versions of *Salome with the Head of St. John the*

Baptist are at first glance extremely similar. However, the London *Salome with the Head of St. John the Baptist* crams all the characters towards the foreground, whereas the Madrid version presents all characters receding towards the background, as if to attest to Caravaggio's increasing inwardness. Yet, in both versions, Salome turns her head away from the scene and her old servant clasps her hands in a gesture of horror and compassion. To fully grasp the fascination and possible meaning of the theme of beheading in Caravaggio it might be useful to start from these two recurring figures.

In an essay describing the figures of Salome and the old servant in Caravaggio's painting, Mina Gregori wrote, "The contrast between the attitudes of the two women whose heads seem to almost belong to the same body, and the opposition of youth and old age creates a moving and profoundly human 'contrapposto'" (335). In her use of the word "contrapposto," Gregori was referring to Maurizio Calvesi's study *Caravaggio e la ricerca della salvezza*, published in 1971 and then republished in his book, *La realtà del Caravaggio*.⁴ Calvesi generally interpreted the pairing of youth and old age as a recurrent Caravaggesque strategy, adopted to represent the opposition between the perfection of grace and the corruptibility of flesh. However, in the case of Salome and the old servant, Calvesi added that in this painting the pairing could actually manifest "un significato più complesso" 'a more complex meaning' (57), though he never really expanded on the nature of this complexity. This is because Calvesi could hardly associate the figure of Salome with the perfection of grace belonging to his original dichotomy.

In traditional iconology, the presence of an old servant next to a biblical woman assassin allowed viewers to differentiate between the figures of Judith and Salome. Prior to Caravaggio, painters tended to introduce the old servant in order to underscore Judith's purity and righteous indignation against the advances of the Assyrian Holofernes. In the case of the pagan Salome, they had generally considered such attention unnecessary. Panofsky, and after him Cinotti and Gregori reminds us that the first example of Salome with a servant in the Italian tradition goes back to Titian.⁵ In Titian, however, the servant appears to be young, and in both space and action completely disconnected from the figure of Salome, so that even the aforementioned critics have remained dubious on Titian as a possible source for Caravaggio's painting. Recent studies have further challenged this possible source (Joannides 163-70),⁶ and before that Cinotti had already rehashed Longhi's opinion that another source for Caravaggio's version of Salome could be traced in *The Virgin and Child with St Anne* by Leonardo now

at Louvre (or at least in the *Burlington House Cartoon*, also referred to as *The Virgin and Child with St Anne et St John* now in the National Gallery), but that in that case Caravaggio might have interpreted the theme in “chiave truce” ‘in a gory way.’ My opinion is that Longhi’s hypothesis, now neglected and forgotten by the majority of scholars, has to be reconsidered in light of two fundamental elements. The first element is that in Caravaggio’s painting, and not in Titian, the two bodies actually stem from the same body and articulate an alternation between youth and old age. The second is that many critics now recognize the influence of Leonardo and the Leonardesque school on other sections of the paintings; Mina Gregori, for instance, associates Caravaggio’s servant with a similar figure in a panel by Bernardino Luini at the Uffizi, or the outstretched arm of the executioner in the London version with a number of Leonardesque paintings, such as *The Beheading of St. John the Baptist* by Andrea Solario or a painting by Cesare da Sesto in Vienna (335). Other examples have been more recently remarked by Sybille Ebert-Schiffener who, for instance, points out to the Giampietrino’s *Salome with the Head of Saint John the Baptist*, c. 1510-30 (151). Interestingly enough, the theme of the two bodies stemming from the same torso was previously noticed by Freud in relation to Leonardo’s painting. More specifically, in his essay “Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood,” Freud claimed that Leonardo had depicted the Madonna and St. Anne of the *Burlington House Cartoon* and related paintings by unconsciously projecting memories pertaining to his stepmother and his biological mother (XI: 57-138). For Freud, such a representation would both re-enact and crystalize that moment in the psychic life of an individual when the good old mother is replaced by her sexual and alienating alter-ego; on the other hand, it was exactly such an awakening, that had prompted, according to Freud, Leonardo’s variant of the castration complex, as well as the defensive mechanisms of fetishism and sublimation that would produce such a significant impact on Leonardo’s life and work. Indeed, when we look at Caravaggio’s painting, we do not see the image of youth as perfection and old age as sin, that is the dichotomy presented by Calvesi in his aforementioned topology. Instead, we see a representation of two antithetic and morally ambiguous female figures whose heads stem from the same torso, thus following that Leonardesque pattern highlighted by Freud. Moreover, while a psychological interpretation of Caravaggio’s two-headed Salome cannot be completely disregarded, especially when considering his state of vulnerability at the time when beheading became a central theme of his production—after all, Caravaggio was fleeing a death penalty which

sanctioned his decapitation in exchange for a monetary reward—there might be other reasons explaining the peculiarity of his representation and the overlapping of an old woman with a young one.

When discussing Caravaggio's previous paintings, scholars have often argued that the artist privileged a literal rendition of the biblical text to the religious iconology established by previous painters. It is also known today that among the biblical sources accessible to Caravaggio, *The Vulgate* by St. Jerome represented a main reference (Graham-Dixon 300-02).⁷ This was due to the extreme popularity of both St. Jerome's masterpiece and his commentaries on the gospels at the time of Caravaggio, as well as to their full endorsement on the part of the Church of the Counter Reformation (Largent 146).⁸ It is in fact in *The Vulgate* that Caravaggio found the most limpid account of St. John the Baptist's execution, and most likely it is thanks to St. Jerome's commentary on St. Matthew that the artist must have understood its allegorical meaning. In particular, in explaining the episode of the Baptist, Jerome would write "caput legis, quod est Christus, de corpore absciditur proprio, id est, Judaico populo; datur gentili puellae, id est Romanae Ecclesiae" 'The head of law, which in Christ is severed from the body, that is the Jewish people; the head is then given to the noble girl, that is the Roman church' (629) In other words, by elaborating upon a medieval allegorical interpretation drawing back to Thomas Aquinas (II: 118), Jerome saw Salome as an allegorical vessel of the transition from the Judaic to the Christian religion, the carrier of "the head of law," that is of the signifying principle without which the Judaic written corpus would be as good as a dead body. As a result, Salome would be equated with the Church, the "gentili puellae," where the word "gentili" had to be read as both noble and "not Jew." And it is exactly as the "gentili puellae," a noble girl, that Salome is represented in Caravaggio's painting. More specifically, a reading of Caravaggio's paintings on Salome based on one of the most circulated writer of the counter-reformed church as opposed to the iconological tradition would allow to easily make sense of its uncanny peculiarity. Suddenly, it would become obvious that the contrast between the two women stemming from the same torso is indicative of the contrast between old and new testament, Judaic and Christian religion (with this approach being confirmed by other paintings, such as the *Madonna dei Palafrenieri*). Furthermore, the function of Christ "as the head of the law" is symbolized by the head of his most notorious prophet and precursor. Indeed, if one agrees with Barbara Baert when she states that the kingship between the Baptist and Christ was at once physical and symbolic (Santing, Baert, and Traninger

125-30), their similarly vivifying and ennobling presence would become apparent in Caravaggio's painting thanks to the movement from the wrinkly and gargoyle-like old women to the aristocratic and young Salome. More interestingly for the following artists, this transition would be paralleled by a psycho-sexual undertone that sees the movement from one woman to the other as the moment of passage from the good old mother to her sexual and alienating counterpart, one which is reinforced by the reminder of castration and loss of physical unity that the head symbolizes, and to which Caravaggio must have been very sensitive at the time. It would therefore be on this second meaning that contemporary viewers would pick up, especially as the late nineteenth-century conflation of Salome with the the image of the *femme fatale* would become more and more common.⁹ Finally, it is by interpreting the two women of Caravaggio's painting as symbols of castration, on the one hand, and disavowal and foreclosure, on the other, that it becomes possible to understand not only Caravaggio's use of beheading as a defensive mechanism against that splitting of the ego, but also the effect of his work on contemporary artists.¹⁰

A psychoanalytical interpretation of Caravaggio's beheading (Bersani and Dutoit) has often been criticized by traditional art-historians because of its apparent failure to grasp the "true" meaning and historical contribution of Caravaggio's painting. On the other hand, the art-historians' aspiration for primal meaning and pure historicity might seem somehow ingenuous in the aftermath of movements such as post-structuralism or deconstructivism. Following Mieke Bal's bi-univocal historical perspective,¹¹ a painting like Caravaggio's *Salome with the Head of St. John the Baptist* could instead be examined in relation to the cultural context of its production as well as to the contemporary re-semiotization of psychoanalysis. One might ask: can we find historical precedents to the psychoanalytic interpretation of fetishism? Is it possible to find an equivalent of psychoanalysis's problematic elision of gaze and sexuality in Caravaggio's times? And what about the relation between fetishism and dismemberment the painting inaugurates? Is it new or is it historically founded?

Our rediscovery of the centrality of Giambattista della Porta to Caravaggio's Neapolitan circle is part of this ongoing endeavor. More specifically, Giambattista della Porta has recently emerged as a pivotal figure in Caravaggio's cultural network in Naples and a direct influence between his work and Caravaggio can be proven in the case of his commission for the Pio Monte della Misericordia (Gazzara 215-227). Moreover, della Porta and his works were well known by the founding

members of the Pio Monte della Misericordia, since he was on friendly terms with many of them and he had been the most significant preceptor of the young Giovanni Battista Manso, today considered as the mover for the commission of the Pio Monte (Pacelli *Le Sette Opere*, 102; Graham-Dixon 340). It is therefore virtually impossible that in a Naples deeply afflicted by the plague, his theories on the contagious action of fascination—theories that were common knowledge at the time, independently of the encyclopedic summary of della Porta—would have been ignored by either Caravaggio or his commissioners.

In *Della fascinazione, e dei rimedi contro la fascinazione*, chapter XV, book VIII of his *Della magia naturale*,¹² Giambattista della Porta explores the symptomatology and epidemiology of the so-called disease of “fascination” by summarizing pseudo-scientific theories and common beliefs that were widely circulating in early seventeenth-century Italy. In *Della fascinazione*, della Porta describes fascination as the faculty to produce disease or death simply by looking at someone. As such, fascination is both the disease and the agent of disease and it is connected to the Mediterranean theories of the “evil eye” that would also be incorporated by psychoanalysis, and notably by Jacques Lacan in his notorious critique of vision.¹³ For della Porta, only a seductive eye can simultaneously be the source of sexual desire and disease “because there are some spirits coming out of the eyes which reach the heart of the charmed victim and infect him” (297-298). In other words, a seductress like Salome could act as an agent of both infatuation and death.

In proffering a theory of fascination, della Porta was obviously not inventing anything new, since medical, scientific, and psychological theories developed and discussed over the centuries had informed his writings. His theory of fascination is indeed an offshoot of a number of other theories reaching back to medieval times, and intertwining the notion of melancholia with a belief in the infatuating powers of the gaze, as Giorgio Agamben extensively illustrates in his seminal book, *Stanzas*. However, della Porta allows us to read Caravaggio’s representation of Salome in ways that scholars have not previously recognized. Firstly, della Porta’s blending of visuality and desire elaborates on medieval theories on melancholia, while anticipating contemporary theories of fetishism. Secondly, his theories reveal that many aspects of contemporary psychoanalytical theories were in fact present in seventeenth-century discourse, and certainly within Caravaggio’s Neapolitan milieu. Indeed, if we approach della Porta’s description of fascination as the encyclopedic synthesis that he wanted it to be, it is possible to interpret Salome’s gaze as either the result of her

“melancholic nature” or the “normal reaction to the infectious eye of a dead body” (297-98). Finally, della Porta’s theory provides important contextual coordinates for our understanding of Caravaggio’s Salome. In particular, if according to della Porta and his contemporaries, “fascination” carried an annihilating power, contemporary viewers see the figure of Salome as an agent of defiance towards masculinity and phallogocentrism, but also intuitively understand the role played by the gaze in such a complex dynamic, thus reconnecting with a seventeenth-century understanding of the painting. In other words, by turning her eyes away from the possible contagion brought by the Other, Salome presents us with evidence of an ancient medical notion that has undergone a process of re-semiotization and de-medicalization in contemporary thought. Jean-Paul Sartre, for instance, defined a similar shift of the gaze as a way to subtract oneself from the risk of moving from the transcendence of the subject to the passivity of the object.¹⁴ Freud and Lacan interpreted the averted gaze as a defensive mechanism in traumatic experiences.¹⁵

When looking at Caravaggio’s paintings on Salome today, it is difficult to separate the discourse on vision as an instrument of identitarian affirmation, from the use of apotropaic beheadings, as a representation of passivity. In other words, it is possible that a seed of our contemporary understanding of the painting was already present in the beliefs that informed it from the very beginning. In particular, the affirmation of the artist’s subjectivity is linked to a double bind (or positioning within the painting), especially when considering Caravaggio’s desire to gain control over the position of vulnerability determined by his death penalty, by apotropaically embracing his own decapitation. Furthermore, not only had Caravaggio started to project himself onto the decapitated heads of his paintings before his self-portrait in *David and Goliath* (Panzera 101-03), but the two Neapolitan versions of *Salome with the Head of St. John the Baptist* were most likely created after the *David and Goliath* and conceived as gifts for those whom the artist had wronged and on whom his destiny depended,¹⁶ hence conveying the artist’s prostration, his *mea culpa* and complete self-offering. This because, as Caravaggio’s capital penalty was formulated in terms that put a bounty on his head, the artist probably tried to save himself by creating a painting that could work in lieu of his physical decapitation. Portrayals of beheadings thus allowed Caravaggio to represent biblical themes that were particularly attuned to his sensibility, but they also served to advance his own agenda: to construct an artistic subjectivity in an attempt to save his life. Though often misleading in

their speculations, critics who have insisted on the biographical aspects of Caravaggio's work have certainly captured an element of his original intentions and subsequent fortune. In fact, together with chiaroscuro, dramatic lighting, foreground scene, and trademark naturalism, the essential relation of an artist's works to the construction of his artistic persona has become one of Caravaggio's fundamental lessons for subsequent artists.

In the years following Caravaggio's death, scenes of decapitation would multiply and propagate among his Neapolitan and foreign imitators, often moving past the artist's own intentions. In particular, the presence in Naples of copies of Caravaggio's *Salome* in the years immediately following its completion (Cinotti e Dell'Acqua 453),¹⁷ as well as seventeenth century accounts suggesting Neapolitan artists' fascination in Caravaggio's art (De Dominicis 227), largely demonstrate the impact of Caravaggio's unique representation of *Salome* on the local school of painting. It was only over time, then, that painters' emphasis progressively shifted from the head of the Baptist to the figure of *Salome*, and *Salome* herself went from being the submissive victim of her mother's schemes to the ultimate embodiment of a diabolic femininity. This is because, as Regina Janes phrased it, "Fifteenth and sixteenth-century interest in female worthies, female education, female artists and patrons of the arts did not proceed without generating opposition as vehement as the nineteenth-century's" (111-12).

New ideas on female subjectivity and accompanying misogynist critiques also framed the work of Artemisia Gentileschi, the only established female artist participating in the explosion of Caravaggism taking place in the aftermath of the artist's death. However, unlike other Caravaggesque artists, Artemisia did not pedantically imitate the art of her self-proclaimed master. On the contrary, by focusing on the theme of *Judith Slaying Holofernes* as a less controversial instance of beheading, Gentileschi elaborated on Caravaggio's use of beheading as a way to construct and represent her own artistic subjectivity. This eventually would make of her a controversial icon for a number of feminist artists and art-historians, in a typical instance in which artistic reception ends up going well beyond an artist's own intentions. It is nonetheless on the path set by Caravaggio and developed by Gentileschi and her viewers that one finds the premises of an artistic tendency to use the theme of beheading as an instrument of identitarian and political empowerment, especially in those cases where, by a postmodern use of iconological sources, the artist chooses to incorporate baroque material. Cindy Sherman and Adriana Varejão, the two women artists that I will

discuss at the end of this article, represent two recent and interesting occurrences of this trend.

2. In the Footsteps of Caravaggio: Beheading and subjectivity in Female Artists

Approaching Artemisia Gentileschi's paintings on the theme of decapitation as projective surfaces for the artist's unconscious drives or desires has become common practice for art critics. The most prominent American scholar on Artemisia Gentileschi, Mary D. Garrard, has been a fierce advocate of this trend and she has repeatedly returned to the topic,¹⁸ despite the criticism of other feminist scholars such as Griselda Pollock, Mieke Bal, and Nanette Salomon.¹⁹ Arguing for the feminist momentum of a female mythology, in *Artemisia Gentileschi around 1622*, Garrard states:

Artemisia Gentileschi, who was manifestly influenced by the art of both Michelangelo and Caravaggio, also practiced self-projection in her art. In her four independent conceptions of the theme of *Judith and Holofernes*, from about 1612 to 1625, she depicted the biblical Judith as the heroic agent of retributive justice who killed the Assyrian tyrant In Artemisia's fantasized inversion of the gender stereotype, Judith is a socially liberated woman who punishes masculine wrongdoing. Although none of Artemisia's Judith is literally a self-portrait, the artist seems to have embedded coded self-references in each of her versions of the theme. (20)

Garrard deems it impossible to separate completely the work of Gentileschi from her life, especially when, as in the case of Gentileschi, that life informed both her relation to painting and her viewers' understanding of her work. While in principle countering Garrard's claims, later critics such as Griselda Pollock have often rehashed her argument from a different angle. For instance, in "Feminist Dilemmas with The Art/Life Problem," Pollock elaborates on the critical habit of reading the art of women in fixed binary terms, and, in order to do so, she takes as an example Agnès Merlet's biographical film on Artemisia Gentileschi. Her objective is to look at "several interrelated arguments about the troubled relations between an artist's life and work, between biography and art, fact and fiction, history and truth, document and text" (169-70). However, Pollock also relies on the psycho-biographical instruments that she seems to disavow. For Pollock, the image of the

femme fatale bent on sexual revenge is so intrinsically related to paintings such as *Judith Slaying Holofernes* that Artemisia often becomes identified with the protagonists of her paintings, and she accuses Merlet of undoing this “by redefining her Artemisia/Judith as a seduced and desiring woman, without any thought of revenge” (193). In other words, Pollock fully grasps the contradiction between a philological analysis and the discursive history of a painting. She knows and states that “Artemisia Gentileschi’s painting had nothing to do with rape or her life experience, [since] it was a popular and much-commissioned subject in baroque Italy” (203). Yet, she is also aware of the limits of such a reductive approach, since as she puts it, more than the original intention of those “baroque” artists, this mythology had the largest impact on imitators throughout history. And it is for this reason that the work of Cindy Sherman and Adriana Varejão as participants in this very long chain of followers may shed some light on the legacy of visual beheading as an instrument of identitarian construction.

By resurrecting and subtly parodying the pictorial tradition of beheading/castration in her “history portraits series” of the 1980s, internationally renowned artist Cindy Sherman has quite clearly related the theme of castration to her more general artistic program aimed at debunking the Cartesian and predominantly male-oriented model of art history.²⁰ It is not a case that Sherman’s images of castration have been identified by Cecilia Sjöholm as explosive “mechanisms of feminist undoing” operating in a phallogocentric society where “the limits of visibility are therefore doubly determined: on the one hand by a veil covering that there is nothing to be seen, while on the other by the fantasy of a castrating violence beyond that veil” (99). Indeed, almost all critics who have examined Sherman’s work believe that in order to destabilize current dynamics of vision and art-appreciation, Sherman has defied the privileges associated with male vision, especially since that vision has so significantly shaped our ways of looking at the world and constructing artistic subjectivities.²¹ While this act of subversion is re-enacted by Sherman in a number of works, when undertaking “decapitation,” the artist returns to some of her favourite instruments, namely those of self-representation (as a strategy that the artists started using from the late 1970s in order to collapse the subject and object of representation), and masquerade. What is of the greatest interest in the context of this study, however, is that the artist’s new phase of postmodern masquerade and enhanced self-awareness is characterized by a coherence with the art of Caravaggio and his followers, one that critics have not failed to point out and juxtapose with other influences. For instance, in analyzing *Untitled*

228 (1990) as Sherman's take on the theme of "Judith with the head of Holofernes," Buskirk has spoken of "a subject made famous by both Caravaggio and Artemisia Gentileschi" (114), while also noticing how the artist mixed this baroque grotesque with the aesthetics of low-budget movies (as apparent in the Halloween fright-mask). Finally, in the history portraits, Sherman complements her critique of representation in photographic media with a larger reflection on the interweaving of subjectivity and gaze in art history. Yet, her most poignant interrogation of such a history centers on baroque examples, and more specifically, on those purported by Caravaggio and Artemisia Gentileschi, because it was with Caravaggio that the myth of the Renaissance artist's subjectivity simultaneously reached its zenith and began to collapse. In encompassing the opposing drives of self-magnification and self-debasement, the theme of beheading perfectly summarizes this double bind. More specifically, what one sees in Sherman's *Untitled 228* is nothing but the last representative of a long lineage of female assassins. However, while her protagonist shares with the kind of Salome and Judith her style of clothing, her posture, and murderous gesture, the phallocentrism she is fighting presents now a higher degree of complexity. Indeed, by holding in her head the fright-mask of an old man, she is simultaneously exposing and repressing a fear of aging that is connected to societal expectation, but also ambivalent feelings towards a domineering masculinity and the desire of an artificial corporeality—that is, all forces that exert a pressure on her own integrity and that she alternatively desires and disavows.

A defiance of the canon through corporeal fragmentation connects the work of Sherman to that of Adriana Varejão, and yet these two female artists' relations to femininity and tradition are somewhat different. In particular, while Varejão and Sherman both draw attention to the misogynist rhetoric hidden behind the magnification of women's interiority, inner feelings, and unfathomable sexuality, Sherman's investigation commences with a confrontation of the history of photographic media, so that her approach to the seventeenth century becomes a pop-cultural revival in flashy colors and 3D. Varejão, on the other hand, is more interested in the historical reduction of the female body to a stylized silhouette.

In *Figura de Convite III*, Varejão depicts an apparently harmonic Venus-like figure tattooed with suns, moons, and stars who is immediately offset by the decapitated head the figure is holding in her hand. Disharmony is also emphasized by the particular use of the Portuguese *azulejos* since, on the one hand, the fake tiles stir feelings of

coldness and anesthetic decorativeness and, on the other hand, bloody organs and bodily fluids slowly emerge through the cracks. And yet, *Figura de Convite III* can only be comprehended by this process of repeated “dismemberment.” In other words, one has to separate the painting’s parts, understand them as excerpts of previous narrations and relentlessly reimagine their meaning as a dialogue between their past and future uses. For instance, it is possible to appreciate a copy of the sixteenth-century engravings by Théodore de Bry as a fundamental source for *Figura de Convite III*, or to remember that these engravings originally aimed at representing the indigenous populations of the Americas as bestial and violent (as one can see in the foreground). Mixed in with them are decorative tiles, in the fashion of seventeenth-century tiles of zoological and botanical design, here transformed into an encyclopedia of the human body.²² Moreover, it is not difficult to see in the tribal goddess appearing in *Figura de Convite III* a way to conceal and orientalize a representation of femininity stemming from Eurocentric imagery. I would argue, in fact, that in her representations of castrating women as much as of cannibalism, Varejão is not just offering a postcolonial solution of compromise between the imagery of Portuguese colonizers and the visual forms of the colonized Brazil. Rather, she is shedding light on a process of cultural negotiation that exclusively unfolded on European shores between the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth century, one which had race and gender as its most pressing issues. De Bry, who never set foot in Brazil, had therefore “orientalized” the baroque visual tradition of the beheading woman—that is the tradition set by the line of painting established by Caravaggio and Artemisia Gentileschi; but he had also used it as a screen for the anxiety inspired by the colonial Other, hence reproducing on a social level Caravaggio’s narcissistic oscillation between self-disruption and the desire for assimilation.²³

The case of Artemisia and her many readers and heretic disciples help to shed light on the Neapolitan Caravaggio and his lesson. One can appreciate today as the henceforth condemned artist delineated a visual pattern and a thematic *topos* where the juxtaposition of beheading and fetishism underscored a tension towards the construction of artistic subjectivity. Within this psychoanalytic frame, Caravaggio’s insistence on beheading could no longer be separated from the castration complex in a broad sense, especially when placed in relation to the instability of his life and his expression of pederastic fantasies. In other words, the insistence on an imagery of decapitation resurfaced when his life was at risk and beheading was, on the one hand, embraced and tentatively

controlled, on the other, denied and rejected in the wake of Salome's averting gaze. Furthermore, while this psychoanalytic frame is not incompatible with the medical and psychological theories of Caravaggio's times, it certainly turns out to be extremely revelatory for an understanding of the art-historical and discursive appropriation of the theme of decapitation. This becomes even clearer in the case of Artemisia Gentileschi who emerges as the feminist heroine of phallic protest, and for whom the equation of beheading/castration has paradoxically served a feminist agenda. As the artworks of Cindy Sherman and Adriana Varejão helped to demonstrate, beheading continues to be an instrument of symbolic castration and self-empowerment. In fact, Varejão and Sherman have adopted beheading as a way to simultaneously celebrate and castrate the art-historical canon of their time; Sherman within her larger program of debunking a number of visual media, Varejão against the backdrop of a postcolonial critique.

Yet, castration is not the endgame, or at least there is a *coda*. Spanning from Caravaggio, through Gentileschi, and to Sherman and Varejão, beheading cannot simply be understood as a metaphor for castration. Instead, the meaning of these artists' work must be interpreted in relation to commercial interests and cultural appropriations. In the case of Caravaggio, recent scholarship has demonstrated that after his flight from Rome, in part owing to the lack of available models, the artist planned his paintings by repeatedly turning to the few cardboard sketches he had brought with him from Rome. It is therefore not a coincidence that the characters of Salome, the executioner, and the old woman can be found in the two versions of *Salome with the Head of St. John the Baptist* or later variations on the theme, and neither is it an accident that the viewer sees the same figures in several of his late paintings. Interestingly enough, what Caravaggio did for strictly utilitarian reasons retrospectively turned him into a forerunner of conceptual art. Indeed, by foreshadowing the operations of twentieth-century conceptual artists such as Sol LeWitt, Caravaggio not only repeatedly used fragments of his previous paintings with the aid of photographic procedure but he went as far as authorizing other artists to reproduce his paintings as long as the original scheme of the representation was maintained (Terzaghi).²⁴ Consequently, Caravaggio's dismembering and beheading did not only emblemize an ambivalent relation to his fear of death and his artistic aspirations, but they also became a practical necessity in his late pictorial activity. It is therefore from Caravaggio onwards that the fragmented and fetishized body falls within a spectrum stretching from the libidinal to the commercial, while

beheading, as the decapitated head as a ruin of the body,²⁵ inspires that process of continuous re-metaphorization of which both psychoanalysis and postmodernism have been the main advocates, if from opposite fronts.

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NOTES

¹ Among Caravaggio's immediate followers, the most prominent examples are the *Salome* by Giovanni Battista Caracciolo (c. 1620), *The Beheading of St. John the Baptist* by Massimo Stanzione (c. 1634), and *Salome with the Head of St. John the Baptist* by Guido Reni (c. 1637).

² Ferdinando Bologna has rejected any possible psychoanalytic and symbolic interpretation of Caravaggio. His academic authority has partly prevented further studies in that direction. Recently, Lorenzo Pericolo has reinstated the position of Bologna. See also Ferdinando Bologna, *L'incredulità del Caravaggio e l'esperienza delle "cose naturali"*; and Lorenzo Pericolo and David M. Stone, *Caravaggio: Reflections and Refractions*.

³ See Kitson 109; Marini 193; Pacelli, "Caracciolo Studies" 493; Pacelli, "Nuovi Documenti" 57. The opinions of scholars are divided on both the date and the place of execution of the two paintings. I tend to believe that the version now in London was finished in Naples during Caravaggio's first sojourn, while the Madrid version belongs to the second period and was originally conceived as a present for Wignacourt. Documentary evidence seems to support such a conclusion. The model for the executioner in the London *Salome* is the same used for the tormentor in the Neapolitan *Flagellation*, and probably for a figure in *The Crucifixion of St. Andrew* (Pacelli, "Caracciolo Studies" 493). Based on other similarities of this latter *Salome* with figure of the first Neapolitan period (as for instance the *Pero of the Seven Works of Mercy*), other scholars have opted for an earlier date (Kitson 109; Marini 193). Marini and Pacelli also believe that the London *Salome* might be the one recorded by some bibliographers as the *Judith and Holofernes* of 1607 sold in Naples together with the *Madonna of the Rosary* (Pacelli, "Nuovi documenti" 57-67). This theory would be explained by Caravaggio's innovative treatment of the subject (with the inclusion of the old servant normally paired with Judith) and corroborated by the following itinerary of the painting in northern Europe. The Madrid version would instead be the painting mentioned by Bellori as a present to Wignacourt and realized during Caravaggio's second period, that is after the deterioration of his relationship with the regent of Malta. After his assault at the Osteria del Cerriglio, however, Caravaggio would leave the painting in Naples, as Cinotti theorized in 1971. This would also explain the presence of the painting in Spain *ab antiquo*, since the painting was most likely brought there by the Viceroy of Naples, Don Juan Alonso Enriquez de Cabrera at his return in Spain in 1646. See Cinotti's tables on the two paintings in, Gian Alberto Dell'Acqua e Mia Cinotti, *Il Caravaggio e le sue grandi opere da San Luigi dei Francesi*, then in Mia Cinotti e Gian Alberto Dell'Acqua, *Michelangelo Merisi detto il Caravaggio: Tutte le opere*.

⁴ Already published in *Storia dell'Arte* vols. 9-10 (January-June 1971), Calvesi's study appears in his monographic work *La realtà del Caravaggio* (3-79).

⁵ Panofsky 42; Gregori 355; Cinotti and Dell'Acqua 457.

⁶ Paul Joannides has re-identified this painting as *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, mostly owing to the Cupid over the doorway. This reassessment of the painting corroborates our theory of a different source for Caravaggio's painting.

⁷ Graham-Dixon insists on the relevance of religious texts as opposed to traditional iconography throughout his whole book on Caravaggio. However, Graham-Dixon particularly focuses on the relation between Caravaggio and St. Jerome in the pages mentioned in this note in text.

⁸ Here it is also mentioned how in the seventeenth century, the learned Scripture scholar Richard Simon expressed the opinion that Jerome's commentaries were the most thorough and instructive of his work.

⁹ The multiple symbolic layers of the figure of Salome have been analyzed by Mireille Dottin-Orsini in a number of publications, such as *Cette femme qu'il disent fatale* (1993), or *Salomé* (1996). For Dottini-Orsini, Salome is at once a virgin and a courtesan, symbol of castration and *femme fatale*.

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud returned to the theme of fetishism on several occasions. While the earliest discussion on the topic can be found in *Three Essays* (1905), the most complete exploration of the theme can be found in "Fetishism," (XXI: 147-58). Here, with the disconcerting simplicity that characterizes most of his statements, Freud affirms that the fetish stands for the missing penis of the woman. Interestingly enough, this new explanation of the fetish had already been mentioned in his study on Leonardo (c. 1910). At the end of his career, Freud took up this question again and widened its scope, in "The Infantile Genital Organization" (1923), "The Economic Problem of Masochism" (1924), and "The Loss of Reality in Neurosis and Psychosis" (1924). In these late works, Freud pointed out that "splitting of the ego" is not peculiar to fetishism but can be found in many other situations in which the ego is faced with the necessity of constructing a defence. Although fetishism can normally be considered a form of disavowal, Freud believed that in the conflict between the weight of the unwelcome perception and the force of his counter-wish, a compromise could be reached. This compromise passes, in Freud's view, for a deviation of the gaze, a visual disavowal that, differently from Laforgue's scotomization, leaves a permanent trace on the psyche. Jacques Lacan would pick up this notion and elaborate on it in his notorious theory of foreclosure. See Jacques Lacan, "On a questions Preliminary to any possible treatment of Psychosis" (*Écrits* 445-88).

¹¹ See Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*.

¹² The book has been emended and published in Italian and Latin several times. Here I use the Italian version by Giambattista della Porta, *Della magia naturale* (Napoli: Antonio Bulifon Editore, 1677). This version is now part of the Hathitrust collection and can be read online at:

<http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=ucm.5322484901;view=1up;seq=19>
<http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=ucm.5322484901;view=1up;seq=19>

¹³ On the "evil eye," see mainly Frederick Thomas Elworthy, *The Evil Eye. The Origins and Practices of Superstition*; one can read also Edward S. Gifford, *The Evil Eye. Studies in the Folklore of Vision*; Clarence Maloney, ed. *The Evil Eye*; and Lawrence di Stasi,

Mal Occhio [The Evil Eye]: The Underside of Vision, where a particular emphasis is put on Southern Italy and Naples. The theory of the evil eye is expounded by Lacan in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*. In Lacan's interpretation, the "evil eye" has the power to separate, a power paradoxically derived from "invidia," that is the desire to unite. In ways that clearly resonate with della Porta and other medieval theories on fascination, Lacan maintains that the "evil eye" is like a *fascinum* "that which has the effect of arresting movement and, literally, killing life" (*The Four Fundamental Concepts* 118).

¹⁴ For the dynamic of powers ingrained in the perspective of vision, see Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*; a description of the relation between vision and desire as oppression can also be found in Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century Thought*. Such a theory gains further resonance if one accepts the hypothesis of a romantic involvement between Salome and John the Baptist, that would be notoriously foregrounded by Oscar Wilde.

¹⁵ See previous note on *fetishism* in Freud and *foreclosure* in Lacan.

¹⁶ Scholarly investigation of the addressees of these three paintings has helped to corroborate such a theory. For instance, scholars tend to agree that the *Salome* of Madrid was conceived as a peace offering for Alof de Wignacourt in Malta in the aftermath of Caravaggio's wrongdoings on the island, and *David with the Head of Goliath* was created for Scipione Borghese and was shipped to Rome to expedite the alleviation of the artist's penalty there. See also Ebert-Schiffner, *Caravaggio* 213.

¹⁷ In *Michelangelo Merisi detto il Caravaggio*, Cinotti reminds us of a copy of the London *Salome* located *ab antiquo* in the Abbey of Montevergine at Avellino, as well as of early influences on the local school, as for instance the detail of the head of the Baptist for the Christ in the *Crucifixion* by Caracciolo. Whether the Madrid *Salome* was brought to Spain by the Viceroy Juan Alonso Enrique de Cabrera in 1646 or by the Count of Lemos slightly later, scholars agree on the fact that the painting remained in Naples until that date and in a prime location which would ensure its visibility to local artists.

¹⁸ See in particular Mary D. Garrard, *The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art* (1989) and the more recent *Artemisia Gentileschi Around 1622: The Shaping and Reshaping of an Artistic Identity* (2001).

¹⁹ See Mieke Bal, "Seeing Sign: The Use of Semiotics for the Understanding of the Visual Arts" and following writings on Artemisia; Nanette Salomon, "The Art Historical Canon: Sins of Omission"; and Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories*.

²⁰ Notably, this is thesis expressed by Laura Mulvey in her seminal feminist text "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" for *Screen* vol. 16, no. 3. Mulvey has returned to the problem of vision with a more precise reference to Sherman in, "A Phantasmagoria of the Female-Body: The Work of Cindy Sherman." By expanding on Mulvey's theories, Amelia Jones's "Performing the Other as Self. Cindy Sherman and Laura Aguilar Pose the Subject?" considers it reductive to think of Sherman's contestation as mere optical disturbance and presents a model where the artist's construction/deconstruction of subjectivity is actually grounded in inter-corporeal and performative games.

²¹ In addition to the texts mentioned in this chapter, it is possible to read a synthetic overview of the scholarly debate on the Cindy Sherman in the volume by Amada Cruz, Elizabeth A.T Smith, and Amelia Jones, *Cindy Sherman: A Retrospective*; as well as in Johanna Burton, editor. *Cindy Sherman*.

²² The identification of Théodore de Bry's source can be found in the catalogue on the work of Adriana Varejão (Sollers and Herkenhoff, *Adriana Varejão: Chambres d'écho*).

²³ The connection of beheading to similar dynamics of ontogenic and philogenic narcissism is also explored by Julia Kristeva in her *The Severed Head: Capital Visions*.

²⁴ Terzaghi simply wrote about this uncommon procedure on the part of Caravaggio. It is my understanding and view that Sol LeWitt adopted a similar approach in his drawing in order to further challenge the necessity of artistic execution.

²⁵ On the body as ruin within baroque literature and iconography see, Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (217-35). For Benjamin the allegorization of the body can only be carried through in all its vigour with respect to the corpse and its parts. Since allegory is conceived from the outset as a ruin, only a fragmented body can lend itself to the permutation of meaning.

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