

The Water's Caress

Becoming-Animal

Two projections. On one side, a birth scene: a monstrous animalcule – we glimpse its snout – finally appears in the reddish glow of the waters. What does this vision of the animal human signify? Is it a drift into a new contemporary eroticism? Is it the true face of flesh-and-blood humans? It has been said again and again in different ways, with exasperation in periods of barbarism,¹ or with the desire to distinguish oneself from technological civilization: man is an animal. This opposition has become particularly evident in art, in which there is an insistence on the animality of the body, an attempt to resexualize it,² even as experiments are conducted with media that may be called “mechanical” (digital video editing, computer graphics). It is as if the display of supple, warm, sensual flesh might compensate for the rigidity of the circuits and gears, as if the excess of blood might compensate for the lack of meaning. The animal thus represents a vegetative harmony of the self with the world that we have lost, at a time when we can conceive of our own lives only as a mechanism in a dichotomy between the body and culture. What has been less often said is that the perversion and sadism of attempts to return to animality form the monstrous character of most of our attempts to rediscover an organic freedom. The evocation of the pig in Christine Palmiéri's video thus appears to be well chosen, for ancient Egypt forbade its consumption, as did, later, the Jewish and Muslim religions. This is for a variety of reasons; the pig symbolized, among other things, the sedentary way of life of pig farmers. It represents life turned in on itself, stagnating on its edges, its debauchery and excrement. For Palmiéri, the pig evokes less the libidinous and the scatological than the insatiable need to manipulate and catalogue, to consume and control.

¹ 1. Wilhelm Reich, *Psychologie de masse du fascisme* (1933) (Paris: Payot, 1972), p. 285.

The Plays of the Pictorial Vision

Again, the double projection: on the other side, images of the Oriental bath succeed each other, with the body appearing and disappearing through a series of pictorial representations. The sounds of dripping are striking; we surprise ourselves by watching out for the repetition of motifs. Similarly, in the “dripping” of video images, the romantically inspired tableaux are superimposed on animated images of a filmed body that, for an instant, is merged with the painted body and then detaches itself, as the dragonfly detaches itself from the chitinous, transparent carapace that was its chrysalis. The filmed body – in its contemporary vision – is quickly concealed within another painted body, through the magic of a video edit that invites us to reread nineteenth-century romantic painting. Our contemporary experience of the body is thus partial and lateral, floating and metaphoric – although its appearance is intertwined with the frontal and fixed image of the nineteenth-century body, although it never ceases to turn back to this image as a condition of its visibility. With Palmiéri’s *Le Bain*, the animated body of the bather, which glides from tableau to tableau, is made of postures and changes of posture . . . this would have been Cézanne’s response, when interpretations of his *Baigneuses* were attempted: “I simply wanted to render certain postures.”

Bathing in Art

A poll conducted by Professor Michael Kelly and his staff in the philosophy department of Columbia University, under the supervision of sociologists Andras Szanto and Andrej Rus, concluded that “cosmeticians prefer paintings showing ordinary . . . faces (especially of women) in their free time, in groups, nude.”³ These could be Cézanne’s *Les*

² Herbert Marcuse, *Éros et Civilisation* (1954): “The body, which would no longer be used as a full-time instrument of work, would be resexualized. . . . The entire body would become an object of cathexis, a thing for play, an instrument of pleasure.” (Our translation.)

³ Andras Szanto and Andrej Rus (Department of Sociology, Columbia University), “Attitudes des esthéticiens d’Amérique du Nord envers les arts visuels: rapport sommaire” (1996), CIAC, fiche 34.

Baigneuses, Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*, and others. Oriental bath scenes may constitute the optimum situation for immersion of the viewer in the tableau. Palmiéri's *Le Bain* thus appears as a powerful metaphor in the pictorial perception; we are already viewers "in" the tableau, like the women in the bath. The projections on the walls and floor, the sound environment – it all takes us inside a highly colourful tableau, a sound-image incubator that invites us to let go. Art requires us to abandon ourselves to our senses, to life, which no longer corresponds to the bio-physical armour of the symbolic animal that we have become. This is why it brings forth a space of the imagination and a symbolic order that belong to former modes of civilization – those of matriarchy⁴ – and rituals of ablution and of fertility, purification, and death. We should recall that it was also through *Les Femmes d'Alger* that Cézanne was able to abandon himself to colour, with which he developed, as Jean-François Lyotard expressed it, "a passiveness capable of welcoming its other: light."

Ablution and Parturition

Thus, Palmiéri "bathes" herself in the history of painting and gives birth to her images. Becoming-animal signifies this: escaping the game of specular identifications and rediscovering a plasmatic mobility of bodies. Her odalisques, her bathers, are images that generate new images – the parthenogenesis of a representation that perpetuates itself, and within it bodies that have the fluidity of representation. How can this fluidity be attained? Not by abandoning ourselves to passive contemplation or grand mystical visions, but by gestures and postures that lead us to the reality of the sensible world. Thus the Oriental bath, with its everyday gestures, seems to be an age-old ritual for rediscovering oneself as a living and organized part of nature. For the misty shadows of the Moroccan sauna, the Omayyad or Ottoman baths, have always formed the Mediterranean dream of what Moravia called the "beauty arising from the depths of the ages, in harmony with the

⁴ Johann Jacob Bachofen, *Das Mutterrecht* (The right of the mother) (Stuttgart, 1861).

sparkling sea and luminous sky.”⁵ The water’s caress can provoke a resurgence of the Origin and its vital profusion.

The bathing woman prepares herself. Thus the look – even as little admiring and submerged as it is – is also a preliminary. To what?

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⁵ Alberto Moravia, *Le Mépris* (1954) (Paris: Gallimard, 19XX), p. 95.