

Queer Unhistoricism in a Trans-Disciplinary Frame: Luca Signorelli's Male Nudes

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An understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition; and it will assume that the appropriate place for that critical analysis to begin is from the relatively decentered perspective of modern gay and antihomophobic theory.

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Part I

Between 1482 and 1484/85, Luca Signorelli (c.1445–1523,) also called Luca of Cortona, paints a *Flagellation of Christ* that is arguably one of the most homoerotic representations of this subject in the history of Western painting.² Ever since first seeing this canvas, I have struggled to find a way to write about its highly aestheticized scene of cruelty and how (and why) it moves me. I fear I have failed.³ An extremely generous, engaged reader's response to a previous draft of this essay suggested that this painting seemed to serve primarily as a springboard for asking a series of questions about modern homosexuality, history, and identity, but that the essay lacked focus and coherence, sometimes came off as casual and off-handed, and needed a thesis. I do not dispute any of these conclusions, aside from the first; rather, this essay is very much an occasion to explore my own affective, bodily response to this specific painting (and others by Signorelli) and the way it haunts me, and to locate that response in a dynamic temporal context we might, for better or worse, call history.⁴

By contextualizing, in an admittedly broad sense, how I have been and am still being “moved” by Signorelli's oeuvre—only brief examples of which I discuss here—I also sought to consider some of the disciplinary tools at hand with which to explore my response.⁵ Hence this essay's engagement with queer unhistoricism.

¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 1.

² On the dating of the work, see Cecilia Martelli, “Lo stendardo di Brera nel percorso artistico di Signorelli giovane,” in *Omaggio Signorelli, Lo stendardo di Brera alla Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria*, ed. Tiziana Biganti (Perugia: Quattroemme, 2005), 11, and Tom Henry, *The Life and Art of Luca Signorelli* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), 49. Throughout this essay, I employ the term “Western” uneasily, aware that it homogenizes and consolidates one particular version of history, but it is in fact that version of history and historiography that is this essay's focus.

³ On failure as a trope in queer theory, see Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011). Of particular pertinence to my efforts is Halberstam's project of engaging “alternative renderings of the meaning of loss, masochism, and passivity” (ibid., 23). To this list, I would add “incoherence.”

⁴ On queer affect, see Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

⁵ For reasons of space, I do not discuss either Signorelli's representation of female bodies or his many canvases that move me in ways I would not call overtly erotic, such as his 1502 scene of the lamentation of the dead Christ, currently in Cortona.

Noting the implicit (and sometimes explicit) telos that structures some art historical accounts of representations of both the male body in general and scenes of the flagellation in particular; the ways in which Renaissance art historians have sought to locate the origin of certain painterly tropes; a famous anecdote describing how Signorelli was haunted by the memory of his beautiful dead son's naked body; and how it is that Michelangelo and not Signorelli has captured the general population's homoerotic imagination, I argue that the queer unhistoricism debates might fruitfully be brought to the study of Renaissance painting.⁶

Before discussing Signorelli's work and what use I hope to make of it, I explore some of the unfolding historical context in which these paintings and I meet.⁷ I do so as someone who works "with" history but is neither trained as a historian nor typically conducts the historian's obligatory disciplinary maneuver of perusing archives. Very early in my career, I engaged with some of the issues raised by the critique of empiricist historiography⁸ in order to explore the pleasures and dangers of queer history.⁹ Besides Nietzsche and Walter Benjamin, some of the relevant names at the time were Hayden White, Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Spivak, and Joan Wallach Scott;¹⁰ the discipline was called lesbian and gay history. Returning, then, to a series of issues that have haunted queer studies since those early years, I engage implicitly with a certain queer, out of joint time. Perhaps my words reflect my age and even my queer aging.¹¹

At a recent queer studies conference, one participant announced that, if I was not trans* or was not working on radical trans* issues, I needed to "shut the fuck up." This command was not a response to anything I had actually said; it was rather part of a process of determining whether I would be allowed to speak.¹² Apparently, my interlocuter had sized me up, looked at my clothes

⁶ The reason that I continue to employ the admittedly ideologically loaded term Renaissance—as well as the more currently in vogue early modern—is specifically that the former carries an erotic charge that the latter does not. In other words, my object of analysis here is more the image or myth of the past embedded in that term, Renaissance, than a however-contingently recovered past. Gary Ferguson nicely captures the tension in his own work between the two when he writes of drawing on "the work of historicists and non historicists" (Gary Ferguson, *Same-Sex Marriage in Renaissance Rome: Sexuality, Identity, and Community in Early Modern Europe* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016], 170 n. 21). This is not to imply that only historicists employ the term "early modern;" only that my primary concern here is genealogical.

⁷ See Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," in *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 57–124.

⁸ See John Champagne, *The Ethics of Marginality: A New Approach to Gay Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995). My conclusion in particular explores, via Nietzsche, the possibilities of a critical history of homosexuality.

⁹ Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, intro. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 253–64.

¹⁰ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in 19th-Century Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973); Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, eds., *Selected Subaltern Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Joan Wallach Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 397–415.

¹¹ On queer time, see, for example, J. Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), and Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

¹² On policing in the transgender community, see Lindsay Jordan Winters, "Trans Masculine Subjectivity: Identity Policing, Gendered Rituals, and Other Jeopardies" (PhD diss., San Diego State University, 2016); Sam Dylan Finch, "Why Aren't More Trans People Denouncing Truscum?," *Let's Queer Things UP!*, December 12, 2015 <https://letsqueerthingsup.com/2015/12/12/why-arent-more-trans-people-denouncing-truscum/>, accessed April 17, 2017; Patricia Gagne, Richard Tewksbury, and Deanna McGaughey, "Coming out and Crossing over: Identity Formation and Proclamation in a Transgender Community," *Gender and Society* 11, no. 4 (1997): 478–508, <http://www.jstor.org.ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/stable/190483>, accessed June 20, 2017. There is a long history of

and demeanor, and, “moved by image,” drawn certain conclusions about my gender identities.

The words were accompanied by a literal finger-pointing whose intention could only be described as shaming. After twenty-five years of sustained, fatiguing critique of an identity politics that risked replicating rather than deconstructing what Sedgwick termed modern homo/heterosexual definition, it was depressing to be asked to flash my identity credentials so as to attest to my own authenticity and hence guarantee the epistemological and moral authority of my speech.¹³ More than one of my feminist women friends to whom I have repeated this story has responded with a disheartened, “*Plus ça change.*” As I continue to draft this essay on a moving image, an image that moves “me” in a potentially embarrassing way, I return to this scene of identity credentialing and its various hauntings, all of them tinged with shame: shame for having spoken out of turn; shame for not measuring up to being a man (up until this moment of finger-pointing, never in my life had I been accused of being too butch); shame for dressing inappropriately (either too masculine or too feminine, take your pick); shame over a lifetime of pleasurable identifications with femininity; shame over occasional identifications with masculinity; “bottom” shame; “top” shame; shame for losing my temper and walking out of the conference; and the particular shame-haunting that characterizes obsessive-compulsive disorder, wherein such public scenes return in a continuous loop of self-recriminations and self-loathing.

Having now attempted to respond to my reader’s report by exploring more of the immediate personal, intellectual, and disciplinary context in which I currently see and respond to Signorelli’s work, I might in fact have made the situation worse—some readers are likely to argue that the essay now has even less focus. But to return to Signorelli’s painting, I cannot deny that gazing at this image produces in my body a certain quality of pleasure that I recognize as both sensual and sexual. Concerning the latter, I am not referring to a state of arousal. While it has something to do with this feeling, it is also different; *where* on the body one experiences this pleasure is less easy to locate, for example. It is more dispersed, more polymorphic, but unmistakably erotic all the same. This pleasure is also complicated and undercut by the specific scene depicted, the flagellation of Christ, and by my conscious response to such scenes of human cruelty and their representation in Western art.

I wish to produce a language in which to describe and account for this bodily response without making that response (and body) readily available to discipline. As a student of the history of Western sexuality, I assume that this response is not unique to me. We cannot argue, on the one hand, that sexuality is historically constructed and then, on the other, speak of individual, idiosyncratic bodily responses to erotic images. Arousal is always a highly-coded affair, a matter of connotation and not denotation, regardless of the way in which its potency leads us to mistake the former for the latter.¹⁴

contesting who or what counts as transgender. For some of this history, see Sally Hines and Tam Sanger, eds., *Transgender Identities: Towards a Social Analysis of Gender Diversity* (New York: Routledge, 2010). Important early interventions in these debates include K. L. Broad, “GLB+T? Gender/Sexuality Movements and Transgender Collective Identity (De)Constructions,” *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies* 7, no. 4 (2002): 241–64, and Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* (New York: Vintage, 1995).

¹³ Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 1. I realize that, in referencing Sedgwick, I might be accused of conflating gender and sexuality, for what was at issue in this conflict was not homo/heterosexual but gender definition. For a careful historical analysis of why post-nineteenth-century Euro-American discursive constructions of the two cannot be understood in isolation from one another, see Kevin Floyd, *The Reification of Desire: Towards a Queer Marxism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

¹⁴ For a fuller engagement with these issues, see Lynne Segal, “Sweet Sorrows, Painful Pleasures: Pornography, and the Perils of Heterosexual Desire,” in *Sex Exposed: Sexuality and the Pornography Debate*, ed. Lynne Segal and Mary McIntosh (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 65–91, and Elizabeth Cowie, “Pornography

When an aesthetic image from the past produces in us a bodily sensation, we are in the realm of what Nietzsche called the use of history for life, and in this instance, the appeal of history is unapologetically libidinal.¹⁵ My hope here is that, via an exploration of their eroticism, Signorelli's paintings become an occasion to pursue a form of antihomophobic inquiry that will critically analyze modern homo/heterosexual definition, not by locating the nascent signs of modern gay identity in the past, but by employing early modern painting as a tool for the undoing of identity claims. Writing this essay, I am employing Signorelli's painting in the service of a continuing, "life-affirming" critique of identitarianism. For Signorelli's world moves me to some degree because in it, desire has been freed from certain Oedipal obligations such as the either/or of homosexuality and heterosexuality and perhaps even male/female, and it does so more than Michelangelo's world, wherein women often appear to be men with breasts. Perhaps this has something to do with Signorelli's loving attention to that highly-desired—by a variety of genders and sexualities—region of the body: the buttocks, where the pleasures and dangers of the deconstruction of the me/not-me are so forcefully and fantastically enacted.

What I do not experience in front of these paintings is any sense of the human figures as "like me." In other words, at least consciously—and of course, one of the difficulties of writing about sex/gender fantasy is the way it partakes of both conscious and unconscious impulses—I do not recognize in Signorelli's figures a pre-modern version of myself. Rather, what renders the Renaissance queer is the way it can potentially speak to us of sex before sexuality, of eroticism before the homo/hetero divide, of a world where everyone, perhaps even everything, is potentially an object of desire, and of a time when there was no science of sexuality determined to expose the truth of its subject.¹⁶

Part II

Signorelli's Brera *Flagellation* (Fig. 1) is particularly significant in that it "introduces us to Signorelli as a specialist in painting the male nude and as an ambitious one at that."¹⁷ Called by one critic "the master of the buttocks," Signorelli lavishes attention on the contours and textures of the male body—in particular, its muscles, skin, and hair.¹⁸ The naked backsides of two of the torturers are visible beneath the colored loincloths that swath them, Signorelli having painted their bodies first and then added their clothing. Three of the tormentors wear brightly colored, striped scarves (also characteristic of Signorelli) that accentuate the narrowness of their waists, and hence the broadness of their shoulders. Although his flesh is a lighter shade than that of the torturers so as to distinguish it from theirs, Christ is similarly put on display. Light and shadow accentuate His muscles, and the distinctive way in which His loincloth is looped draws our gaze

and Fantasy," in *Sex Exposed*, 132–52.

¹⁵ On this libidinal appeal and its relationship to the construction of subaltern cultural memory, see Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

¹⁶ I am referring here to the strong libidinal pull exerted on some present-day audiences by Renaissance art and artifacts, a libidinal pull that necessarily spills over into present-day imaginings and fantasies of the period. The number of pop-culture texts, for example, that deal with the Renaissance is substantial, visual examples of which typically highlight its sensual pleasures via, for instance, a keen attention to fabrics and jewelry.

¹⁷ Gloria Kury, *The Early Work of Luca Signorelli: 1465–1490* (New York: Garland, 1978), 228.

¹⁸ Stephane Guegan, "Signorelli, le maître des géants," *Beaux arts magazine* (January 2002): 72–79. See also "Tights and NOT Pants—Luca Signorelli," *WTF Art History*, September 2012,

<http://wtfarthistory.com/post/9293925943/tights-are-not-pants-luca-signorelli>, accessed April 18, 2017.

to His genitals.



Fig. 1. Luca Signorelli, *Flagellation*, tempera on panel, c.1480–83, Pinacoteca di Brera, via Wikimedia Commons.

The garments of both Christ and the two torturers posed frontally sit so low on their waists that a faint trace of pubic hair is visible. Nearly all of the figures are posed in a manner typical of Signorelli's nudes, standing in contrapposto with the non-weight-bearing leg extended away from the body, the foot placed in what is called *demi-point* in ballet, the ball of the foot touching the floor and the heel lifted. The pose both accentuates their muscles and gives their bodies a high degree of expression; in the version adopted by Christ, the knee of the non-weight-bearing leg is turned in, rendering Him more vulnerable, while the torturers use the extended leg to place more weight on the opposite one and thus gather more force with which to beat Christ. The torturer tying Christ's arms behind His back adopts a particularly distinctive pose, one leg on *demi-point*, the other lifted and braced against the column. The pose of necessity brings the two men's pelvises, if not genitals, in proximity to one another. Much of this iconography is an attempt to wrestle with the problem of the humanation of Christ, his status as both God and

man.¹⁹

At the center of a crowd of men, both clothed and in various stages of undress, Jesus, circled by torturers in highly theatricalized poses, is a figure whose contemporary analogue is the “bottom” who has artfully staged for himself a gangbang. That images of the Passion are perceived as homoerotic can be demonstrated by something as banal as the first episode of the 2007 British television detective series *Inspector George Gently*,²⁰ in which a young poofster draws an image of the Crucifixion wherein the face of Jesus is that of the older man he loves, the leader of the biker gang to which the two belong. The episode is itself set in 1964, further suggesting its participation in an elaborate re-reading of the history of homosexuality. It stages a regression from our “enlightened” present to the 1960s (characterized in the episode by both the emergence of “tolerance” for homosexuality and a “residual” homophobia), to the figure of James Dean (images of whom we see on the walls of the young man’s bedroom), to the Renaissance. The reference to the Renaissance is itself doubled, figured not merely in the young man’s drawing of the Crucifixion image but also when the homophobic father refers to his son’s homosexuality by invoking the name of Michelangelo. Additionally, the homoeroticism of biker culture, burlesqued by avant-garde queer film-maker Kenneth Anger in his legendary 1947 film *Fireworks*,²¹ is also referenced by the episode in a variety of ways. The gang leader’s speech patterns and the way they mimic cultural clichés of beat lingo, for example, refer to the pansexuality of beat culture. Even more Anger-esque is a scene in which, in a deliberate parody of the Crucifixion, the homophobic (gangster) father chains the leather-jacket-and-chaps-clad biker gang leader’s arms in a tau shape in order to torture him.

Though the average amateur has probably never even heard of Signorelli, let alone Michelangelo’s debt to his work, the influence of Signorelli on Michelangelo is—in art historical circles—well-remarked, thanks in part (as we will see) to Vasari, who specifically mentions Michelangelo’s fresco of the *Last Judgment*.²² Numerous sources argue that the *ignudi* of Michelangelo’s *Tondo Doni* were inspired by the artist from Cortona, as well.²³ Signorelli’s addition of naked or nearly naked male bodies to sacred scenes dates from one of his earliest works, his c. 1482 fresco on the wall of the Sistine Chapel,²⁴ painted when Michelangelo was only seven years old.

After extolling the painter’s excellence and fame, greater than “quanto nessuno in alcun tempo sia stato” [“any other previous artist no matter the period”],²⁵ Vasari argues that Signorelli was particularly skilled at portraying the illusion of the nude body in motion: “nell’opere ch’egli fece nell’arte di pittura, mostrò il modo dell’usare le fatiche ne gli ignudi, e quegli con gran

¹⁹ The now (deservedly) canonical text on the artistic representation of Christ’s humanation is Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). See also John Champagne, *Italian Masculinity as Queer Melodrama: Caravaggio, Puccini, Contemporary Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

²⁰ *Inspector George Gently*, episode one, directed by Peter Flannery (2007). Accessed via Netflix.

²¹ *Fireworks*, directed by Kenneth Anger (1947). Accessed via coursework in film studies at New York University.

²² Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de’ più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architetti nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, ed. Rosanna Bettarini, with Paola Barocchi, 7 vols (Florence: Sansoni, 1966), 1568 edition, 3:637.

²³ Tiziana Biganti, “Nota biografica,” in *Omaggio Signorelli, Lo stendardo di Brera alla Galleria Nazionale dell’Umbria*, ed. Tiziana Biganti (Perugia: Quattroemme, 2005), 7; Chiara Franceschini, “The Nudes in Limbo: Michelangelo’s *Doni Tondo* Reconsidered,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 73 (2010): 163–66; Natacha Pernac, “Relire les nus de Luca Signorelli des années 1870 à nos jours,” *Artibus e Historiae* 30, no. 59 (2009): 181.

²⁴ Henry, *Life and Art*, 42.

²⁵ Vasari, *Le vite*, 1568 edition, 3:633.

difficoltà e bonissimo modo mostrò potersi far parer vivi” [“in his paintings, he showed the means of employing the movement of nude figures, and with great complexity and ability to portray them as if they seem living”].²⁶ Vasari later mentions the Bichi chapel of San’ Agostino in Siena, which brought Signorelli “molte ricchezze e molto onore” [“much wealth and much distinction”] in that city, as well as “ignudi” painted for Lorenzo de’ Medici that were highly praised.²⁷ The ignudi are mentioned again in Vasari’s praise for the chapel of San Brizio in Orvieto, through which Signorelli displays “la invenzione e la pratica grande” [“invention and great experience”] in both foreshortening and the portrayal of physical beauty.²⁸ He then provides an oft-cited anecdote, beginning with the locution “dicesi che”: “essendogli stato occiso in Cortona un figliuolo che egli amava molto, bellissimo di volto e di persona” [“it is said that a much loved son of his, beautiful of aspect and person, was killed at Cortona”], Signorelli had him stripped nude and, “con grandissima constanza d’animo senza piangere lo ritrasse, ” [“with great constancy of spirit and without crying, painted his portrait”]. The 1568 edition adds “per vedere sempre che volesse, mediante l’opera delle sue mani, quello che la natura gli aveva dato e tolto la nimica fortuna” [“so that he might see whenever he wished, by means of holding the image in his hands, that which nature had given to him and by bad fortune taken”].²⁹ Henry argues that Vasari’s decision, in the second edition of the *Lives*, to place Signorelli at the end of the second part suggests “a teleological scheme” whereby Vasari casts Signorelli as “the culmination of fifteenth-century achievement.”³⁰

Signorelli’s image of the flagellation was originally one side of what is typically identified as a “gonfalone su tavola,” a processional standard on wood.³¹ The other side included a *Madonna and Child*—specifically, a “Madonna del latte,” the Virgin’s right breast exposed, the lower half of it framed by the Christ child’s thumb and forefinger, as if offering the breast to the viewer. Like scenes of the flagellation, it is also a trope signifying the humanation of Christ. Now in Milan’s Brera Museum, the standard was created for the Confraternity of the Raccomandati, who practiced *autofustigazione* [self-flagellation].³²

Precedents for Signorelli’s flagellation include his teacher Piero della Francesca’s version of this subject; antecedents of Piero’s composition have been analyzed by Millard Meiss, Marilyn Lavin, and Kury.³³ In their analyses of the images of the flagellation, all three critics first establish a relationship to previous examples and then set out to demonstrate the uniqueness of the one under discussion. The standard reading of Signorelli’s image is that it reveals the influence of both his teacher Piero and contemporaneous Florentine painting and sculpture.³⁴ Given that Piero was Signorelli’s teacher and that, via his work on the Sistine Chapel wall frescos, Signorelli came in contact with Florentine artists, this is not necessarily a spurious

²⁶ Ibid., 1550 edition, 3:633; in the later edition, he simplifies the praise. My translation.

²⁷ Ibid., 1550 edition, 3:636.

²⁸ Ibid., 3:638.

²⁹ Ibid., 1568 edition, 3:637.

³⁰ Henry, *Life and Art*, 2.

³¹ Kury, however, disputes this (*Early Works*, 229).

³² Martelli, “Lo stendardo,” 11.

³³ Millard Meiss, “A New Early Duccio,” *Art Bulletin* 33, no. 2 (1951): 95–103; Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, “Piero della Francesca’s Flagellation: The Triumph of the Christian Glory,” *Art Bulletin* 50, no. 4 (1968): 321–42; Kury, *Early Works*. Painted in 1455–60 and now in Urbino, the Piero painting is known for its enigmatic quality and virtuoso treatment of space, the scene of the flagellation, however, set in a much deeper space (further from the eye of the spectator) than in his student’s version. Signorelli borrows a number of compositional elements from his teacher.

³⁴ See, for example, Kury, *Early Works*, 226; Henry, *Life and Art*, 5–6.

conclusion.³⁵ It reminds us, however, that who gets credited with what and when, how different is different enough to be considered “innovative,” and even who is allowed to be considered innovative, is a historiographical problem Renaissance art critics cannot avoid.

Often portrayed as one episode in a cycle of scenes of the Passion, painterly representations of the flagellation are not uncommon. One noteworthy early portrayal is Duccio’s, now in the Frick museum. The Frick’s website, however, attributes the painting to Cimabue, a position Meiss explicitly rejects.³⁶ Linked to Giotto, Duccio is sometimes called “proto-Renaissance,” which would make Cimabue “proto-proto-Renaissance.” Meiss’s essay is fascinating in terms of its careful elaboration of what constitutes evidence when one is hoping to establish the provenance, author, and value of a depiction of a flagellation. That is, it provides a kind of crash course in what, at the time Meiss wrote his essay—admittedly, decades ago—, were some of the rules whereby the discipline of art history produced true statements about its objects of study, at least in terms of what is known as connoisseurship.³⁷ The same is true of later efforts by first Lavin, then Kury, and then Martelli.³⁸

The specific significance of date and attribution of the flagellation discussed by Meiss is that it allows the critic to construe the Frick flagellation as superior to its historical precedents. That superiority suggests a *telos*, the history of Western art as a progression toward a more nuanced portrayal of Christ’s humanation, *from* Byzantine painting *to* the Renaissance. For example, it is argued that Duccio’s flagellation possesses “a complexity unknown in earlier medieval [*sic*] art.”³⁹ Such teleological thinking was arguably characteristic of the discipline of art history in Meiss’s time, a symptomatic repetition of Vasari’s conceit.

Signorelli’s composition is unique, as there are to my knowledge no surviving images that portray so many torturers wearing so little clothing and possessing such highly defined muscles posed so beautifully. At least one middle-brow critic has labeled Signorelli’s flagellations (of which he painted several) a 400-year precursor to Proust’s descriptions of “l’amour ‘maudit’” [“‘cursed’ love”] practiced by Baron de Charlus.⁴⁰ Other critics have also noted the alleged “sadistic dimension” of Signorelli’s work, this interpretation arguably a kind of unconscious nod to the image’s homoeroticism:⁴¹ the distinction between Signorelli’s depiction and the apparently

³⁵ On the collaboration involved in the painting of the Sistine Chapel wall frescoes, see Henry, *Life and Art*, 40. A flagellation scene contemporaneous with Piero’s is the fresco by Andrea del Castagno, destroyed in the seventeenth century, known to us only via Vasari’s description and an anonymous engraving that may or may not have been influenced by Castagno (Lavin, “Piero della Francesca’s Flagellation,” 21; Kury, *Early Works*, 227).

³⁶ Meiss, “A New Early Duccio,” 96.

³⁷ Connoisseurship was one of “the two major approaches of method in art history” (the second being iconography) made popular following the Second World War (Elizabeth Pilliod, *Pontormo, Bronzino, Allori: A Genealogy of Florentine Art* [New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001], 7).

³⁸ In search of Renaissance precedents of the depictions of the flagellation, one would also typically cite bronze reliefs of the scene, perhaps the most famous being Lorenzo Ghiberti’s 1403–24 version for the doors of Florence’s baptistery (Lavin, “Piero della Francesca’s Flagellation,” 321), which, despite the anatomical detail and elegant movements of the torturers, is a far simpler composition than Signorelli’s. The bronze relief after which Signorelli’s Brera image seems modeled is Giorgio Martini’s c. 1480 composition. (Martini is the same artist who sculpted the wood figure of St. Christopher that, along with Signorelli’s frescoes, decorated the Bichi chapel.) Kury, who has offered one of the most thorough treatments in English of the Brera standard, cites also Verrocchio’s *Beheading of John the Baptist* from the 1477–80 silver *San Giovanni Battista* altar currently in Florence’s Museo dell’Opera del Duomo (*Early Works*, 234).

³⁹ Meiss, “A New Early Duccio,” 98.

⁴⁰ Dominique Fernandez, *L’Amour qui ose dire son nom: Art et homosexualité* (Paris: Stock, 2001), 134–35.

⁴¹ Kury, *Early Works*, cited in Henry, *Life and Art*, 7; Henry also mentions James Jackson Jarvis and J. A. Symonds as fascinated by this sadism.

“non-sadistic” portrayals of the flagellation with which it is implicitly contrasted suggests a casual connection of homoeroticism with sadism, and this connection provides one of the conditions of possibility for what Andrew Hewitt has termed the myth of homofascism, the insidious and homophobic idea that the German and Italian Fascists were “actually” repressed homosexuals.⁴²

Martelli has suggested that we see in the Brera standard the influence on Signorelli of his teacher Piero but also of Bartolomeo della Gatta,⁴³ and of Florentine artists including the sculptor Verrocchio (whose workshop is regarded by most Renaissance scholars as the greatest of the 1400s)⁴⁴ and the Pollaiuolo brothers.⁴⁵ Martelli specifically credits Antonio Pollaiuolo with providing the inspiration for Signorelli’s depictions of the male bodies (in particular, via Antonio’s *Labors of Hercules*), and Piero for the striped sashes worn by Christ’s tormentors. Antonio Pollaiuolo’s most famous engraving of male figures, the *Battle of Ten Nude Men* (Fig. 2), has been assigned a range of dates, some of them subsequent to Signorelli’s Brera *Flagellation*. (The recent Pollaiuolo show at Milan’s Museo Poldi Pezzoli dates it 1485, for example, while Olszewski dates it c. 1489).⁴⁶



Fig. 2. Antonio Pollaiuolo, *Battle of the Nude Men*, engraving, 1465–1489. Wikimedia Commons.

⁴² Andrew Hewitt, *Political Inversions: Homosexuality, Fascism, and the Modernist Imaginary* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 1-37. Hewitt’s desire “to show how the historical conflation of homosexuality and fascism serves as a rearguard action against the demise of a subject-centered, ‘heterosexual’ history” demonstrates his commitment to a queer unhistoricism *avant la lettre*, as it were. *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴³ Martelli, “Lo stendardo,” 12.

⁴⁴ Biganti, “Nota biographica,” 7.

⁴⁵ Martelli, “Lo stendardo,” 13.

⁴⁶ Edward J. Olszewski, “Bring on the Clones: Pollaiuolo’s *Battle of Ten Nude Men*,” *Artibus et Historiae* 30, no. 60 (2009): 10.

Nonetheless, Barbara Deimling argues that, prior to composing his *Flagellation*, Signorelli “studied the works of Pollaiuolo, in particular his muscle-flaunting *Battle of the Nude Men*.”⁴⁷ Henry, too, argues that “over the second half of the 1480s, the artist demonstrates his knowledge of Pollaiuolo’s engraving.”⁴⁸ Given the claim that “it is scarcely possible to exaggerate the importance of Pollaiuolo’s *Battle of Naked Men* in the history of European engraving,” the idea that Signorelli might not have been influenced by Pollaiuolo is apparently for some critics unthinkable.⁴⁹ Noting the amount of scholarly attention the engraving has been given, Joseph Manca summarizes one strain of scholarly consensus: “some stress that the engraving could have served, like a pattern book, as a model for artists who sought ideas for representing the fine points of human anatomy, movement, and emotional expression.”⁵⁰ However, even to the untrained eye, the differences between Pollaiuolo’s and Signorelli’s nudes are obvious, as the muscles of Pollaiuolo’s figures are excessively defined, looking more like flayed cadavers (or anatomical drawings composed from them) than living human beings.⁵¹ The poses of Pollaiuolo’s figures are also much stiffer than those of the flagellators in Signorelli’s standard. To the modern eye, Signorelli’s male nudes are simply a lot sexier than Pollaiuolo’s.

In the case of much Renaissance art history, however, originality must be traced back to the Florentines. Henry’s argument concerning the influence of Verrocchio on Signorelli is interesting in this regard. After admitting that “although there is no documentary evidence to prove it,” Henry claims that “Signorelli’s later paintings suggest that he visited Florence.”⁵² Why? It does not seem possible for it to be otherwise. As Henry asks, “Why, for instance, is he one of the few artists who understood the male nude without being a sculptor as well as a painter? Where could he have learnt to draw figures in action?”⁵³

As for how to account for all of this artistic interest in the male nude, Kenneth Clark takes a

⁴⁷ Barbara Deimling, “Early Renaissance Art in Florence and Central Italy,” in *The Art of the Italian Renaissance*, ed. Rolf Toman (Potsdam: H.F. Ullman, 2007), 300; Deimling dates the engraving c. 1470–75 (*ibid.*, 275).

⁴⁸ Henry, *Life and Art*, 67.

⁴⁹ Louise S. Richards, “Antonio Pollaiuolo: *Battle of Naked Men*,” *Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 55, no. 3 (1968): 63.

⁵⁰ Joseph Manca, “Passion and Primitivism in Antonio Pollaiuolo’s *Battle of Naked Men*,” *Notes in the History of Art* 20, no. 3 (2001): 28.

⁵¹ Vasari specifically singles out Pollaiuolo for having conducted studies of human anatomy, including dissection (Vasari, *Le vite*, 3:506). The claim is made in both the 1550 and 1568 versions. According to the curators of the Signorelli exhibit in Umbria, other precedents for Signorelli’s flagellations include Pietro di Galeotto’s 1480 version. It is one of the painter’s only surviving compositions. Galeotto’s figures are more clothed than Signorelli’s but less dressed than Duccio’s, for example. One figure in particular is dressed in snug underwear. A striking difference between Galeotto’s and Signorelli’s depictions is that the faces of the torturers of the former are quite ugly. Also, the human anatomy is less detailed. Alongside one another, the paintings are strikingly different in this regard.

⁵² Henry, *Life and Art*, 34.

⁵³ *Ibid.* This is not in any way to understate the importance of Henry’s detailed, meticulously researched, and often convincing study. I am in no position to dispute anyone’s conclusions concerning who influenced whom. What is interesting to me in this instance is the discipline’s inability to “think” Signorelli minus Verrocchio and Pollaiuolo. I would tentatively add, however, that I do think Henry’s suggestion that Donatello’s *David* inspired some of Signorelli’s nude figures in the Bichi panels and *Pan* is unconvincing. Because, in Donatello’s statue, David’s right leg rests on Goliath’s head, the distribution of weight and orientation of the hips and legs is quite different from Signorelli’s images. Most obviously, David’s buttocks are nearly vertical, while in Signorelli’s figures, the buttocks tilt diagonally. This strikes me as precisely an instance where the discipline of art history has dictated that, in the case of the standing male nude, all roads must lead to Donatello. Interestingly, concerning Pollaiuolo, Henry instead concludes that “there does not seem to have been direct or prolonged contact” (*Life and Work*, 34; though he mentions the artist, Henry also does not suggest that della Gatta could have been a teacher of Signorelli’s. On della Gatta, see *ibid.*, 31–34).

decidedly no-nonsense view of images like Signorelli's: "in Florence, from about 1480 to 1505, the compulsive subject was a battle of naked men. It had no social or iconographic justification; it was simply art for art's sake."⁵⁴ I would hesitate, however, to describe Signorelli's *Flagellation* as a "battle of naked men," given the way the subject matter of the painting dictates that there be a single man who is the object of violence. Clark's "common sense" response also does nothing to help us to understand why a battle of naked men in particular would, in the Renaissance, become the de facto means of exploring art for art's sake; such a response evidences a kind of willed refusal to look too closely.

Referring to Signorelli's famous San Brizio fresco *The Damned Cast into Hell*, one of the standard undergraduate textbooks tells us, "What most strikes us is not Signorelli's use of the nude body as an expressive instrument—even though he far surpasses his predecessors in this respect—but the deep sense of tragedy that pervades the scene."⁵⁵ Janson's not so subtle attempt to interpellate his readers as subjects via the use of "us" is interesting in that it reinforces the idea that Michelangelo, and not Signorelli, is the artist most deserving of accolades for the use of "the nude body as expressive instrument." That the San Brizio chapel was created prior to the Sistine Chapel ceiling also implicitly suggests a teleology from Signorelli to Michelangelo, as does Janson's comment that Signorelli "far surpasses his predecessors."

Perhaps the fact that Michelangelo is for some readers recognizably "homosexual" contributes to his having received credit for perfecting the image of the male nude. Traveling through Italian museums, one can overhear guides offer a variety of theories as to why Michelangelo's nude women look like linebackers, from the "fact" that he was a homosexual to his failure to use female models. Given the lack of evidence concerning his carnal desires, Signorelli's nudes present a "problem" for contemporary viewers under the sway of Romanticism in particular, a problem that Michelangelo does not.

Part III

Pernac provides a useful homo-history of appropriations, citations, and homages to Signorelli's nudes, their references to the classical past typically shielding them from charges of obscenity.⁵⁶ During the fascist years, a number of homosexual painters, including Filippo de Pisis, Corrado Cagli, and Guglielmo Janni, pursued a similar strategy of mining history for its homoerotic ruins so as to explore the male nude minus fear of persecution for what was then typically called in Italian *pederastia*. All three artists painted nude male figures that masked their homoeroticism by referencing the Greco-Roman world—their efforts mimicking the fascist appropriation of that same world. Janni also reworked Renaissance images of saints and religious figures (including images of St. Sebastian, but also David and St. Francis) that themselves borrowed from classical, pastoral antecedents.⁵⁷ This masking was apparently so successful that even late-twentieth-century critics were hesitant to discuss the erotic appeal of Cagli's male bodies in particular.⁵⁸

In her essay on Signorelli, Pernac chides art historians for not being sufficiently attentive to

⁵⁴ Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1956), 200.

⁵⁵ H. W. Janson, *History of Art. A Survey of the Major Visual Arts from the Dawn of History to the Present Day* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1969), 347.

⁵⁶ Pernac, "Relire les nus," 189.

⁵⁷ On de Pisis and Janni, see John Champagne, *Aesthetic Modernism and Masculinity in Fascist Italy* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

⁵⁸ See, for example, Fabio Benzi, "Cagli, o il genio sfuggente," in *Corrado Cagli, gli anni della Scuola Romana 1932–1938*, ed. Fabio Benzi (Rome: Archivio Arco Farnese, 1999), 7–15.

work in the history of homosexuality.⁵⁹ Clearly, some quarters of the discipline of art history seem ill-prepared to think about what it means to have an embodied homoerotic response to a work of art from the past. Queer theory has recently produced a rich body of Anglophone scholarship under the rubric of queer unhistoricism, which takes as its object of study Renaissance Italy, France, and Britain.⁶⁰ Anti-positivist and anti-teleological, queer unhistoricism is rigorously polemical. It refuses, for strategic reasons, what Sedgwick terms modern homo/heterosexual definition, not out of nostalgia for some nonexistent, bucolic gay past but as a way to deconstruct the gender/sex binaries imposed in the modern West by biopower.⁶¹

Specifically, queer unhistoricism is an autocritique of historicist tendencies within both Renaissance Studies and what was once called LGBTQ Studies as each of these subdisciplines intersect with the discipline of History. Or, to put it another way, in an attempt to exploit productively tensions between Literary Studies and History as they grapple with antihomophobic inquiry, queer unhistoricism brings the insights of deconstruction to bear on historiography. For example, a key figure in these developments, Jonathan Goldberg, argues against a historicism that naively believes in history as “a real that had not passed through language or one that could leave language behind.”⁶² Another scholar, Carla Freccero, describes her work with Aranye L.O. Fradenburg in *Premodern Sexualities*, as follows: “We argued for a queer historiography that would devote itself to a critical revalorization of the places and possibilities of pleasure within the serious and ‘ascetic’ work of history.”⁶³ Such a position begins with the assumption that there is no historiography free from the “taint” of libidinal investment. From feminism and critical race studies, queer unhistoricism also borrows the premise that claims of disinterestedness on the part of the historian mask a series of ideological assumptions. Inflected as they are by inequities of class, race, gender, sexuality, and ability, these assumptions shape the assignation of artistic value to some works and not others, while at the same time insisting that they themselves are value-neutral.

Mario Digangi summarizes the unhistoricist position as an intervention in what queer unhistoricists regard as “the ossified and overly schematic critical orthodoxy that has come to dominate the history of sexuality: the spurious distinction between premodern sexual *acts* and modern sexual *identities* derived from a certain reading of Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality*.”⁶⁴ The queer unhistoricists’ implicit critique of Foucault’s misreading by sociologists

⁵⁹ Pernac, “Relire les nus,” 189.

⁶⁰ See, for example, Martin G. Eisner and Marc D. Schachter, “*Libido Sciendi*: Apuleius, Boccaccio, and the Study of the History of Sexuality,” *PMLA* 124, no. 3 (2009): 817–37; Carla Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006); Ferguson, *Same Sex Marriages*; id., *Queer (Re)Readings in the French Renaissance: Homosexuality, Gender, Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008); Jonathan Goldberg, *Sodometries: Renaissance Texts, Modern Sexualities* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992); Vin Nardizzi, Stephen Guy-Bray, and Will Stockton, eds., *Queer Renaissance Historiography, Backward Gaze* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009); Melissa E. Sanchez, “‘Use me but as your spaniel’: Feminism, Queer Theory, and Early Modern Sexualities,” *PMLA* 127, no. 3 (2012): 493–511; Valerie Traub, “The Sonnets: Sequence, Sexuality, and Shakespeare’s Two Loves,” in *A Companion to Shakespeare’s Works. Vol. 4: The Poems, Problem Comedies, Late Plays*, ed. Richard Dutton and Jean E. Howard (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 275–301.

⁶¹ Floyd, *The Reification of Desire*, 63–65.

⁶² Goldberg, *Sodometries*, 30.

⁶³ Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern*, 79.

⁶⁴ Mario Digangi, “Queer Theory, Historicism, and Early Modern Sexualities,” *Criticism* 48, no. 1 (2006): 130, <<http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism/vol48/iss1/5>>, accessed January 11, 2015 (original italics). My own initial minor interventions in these debates have returned to this reading of Foucault, highlighting, for example, that in the much-cited passage where Foucault allegedly makes this claim, the word “identity” does not appear; Foucault is rather referring to a subject—which is not the same as a person (John Champagne, “Foucault and Queer

and historicists is noteworthy.⁶⁵ And many historians might in fact be as committed to an unreflective historicism as the queer unhistoricists suggest—or at least they were in 1992, when Goldberg suggested that most historians proceed as if “Foucault had never written,” and most Renaissance literary critics were oblivious to Foucault’s examinations of sexuality.⁶⁶ One thing at stake in this debate is precisely how to read Foucault, not simply in terms of the perpetual return to that infamous passage where he is alleged to have posited the emergence of modern gay identity but also, and more productively, in terms of precisely what to call Foucault’s efforts: philosophy? history? genealogy? fiction?

Queer unhistoricism rightly insists that the Renaissance is always already queer. The term Renaissance was invented and employed quite self-consciously by a whole host of nineteenth-century German and British art historians who attempted to seize on a fictive “classical” past and claim it as Europe’s progenitor. Some of the relevant names include Johann Joachim Winkelmann and later, by the time the word “Renaissance” had entered the English language (1836),⁶⁷ Walter Pater, Robert Vischer, J. A. Symonds, and John Ruskin. Not coincidentally, some of these same men participated in the fabricating of what Sedgwick catachrestically terms modern homo/heterosexual definition.⁶⁸ (Pernac’s work on the afterlife of Signorelli’s nudes reminds us that these figures were living through that shift named by Foucault as the “emergence” of that different-enough disciplinary subject, the homosexual.)⁶⁹ Any attempt to employ the term Renaissance is irreducibly haunted by this genealogy.

The trope of haunting has been most fully developed by Freccero, who defines it as “the way history registers as affect in the social and psychic lives of beings.”⁷⁰ That is, “Thinking historicity through haunting thus combines both the seeming objectivity of events and the subjectivity of their affective afterlife.”⁷¹ The concept of haunting is crucial for any attempt to understand Renaissance painting via anti-homophobic inquiry, as there is still so much we simply cannot know and yet continue, sometimes desperately, to seek. Documentation generally does not exist, and when it does, we are not always sure how to read it. Inventories, for example, were lists of possessions, and the person conducting the inventory was often free to refer to the objects in as expeditious a manner as possible. As a result, even the subject matter of some of Western art’s most famous paintings—Titian’s *Venus of Urbino*, for example, and Caravaggio’s *Capitoline Saint John the Baptist*—are disputed.

(Un)historicism,” *PMLA* 128, no. 4 [2013]: 1005–06, and Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité: La volonté de savoir* [Paris: Gallimard, 1976], 59).

⁶⁵ On this sociological misreading of Foucault, see Champagne, *Ethics*, 63–65 in particular.

⁶⁶ Goldberg, *Sodometries*, 21.

⁶⁷ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “Renaissance,” accessed February 6, 2015, <<http://www.oed.com.ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/view/Entry/162352?redirectedFrom=Renaissance#eid>>.

⁶⁸ Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 1.

⁶⁹ Admittedly, Foucault sometimes place fast and loose with his dating, at some moments locating the emergence of the disciplinary subject, at least in the guise of the homosexual, in the nineteenth century and, at others, the Enlightenment. This, however, might itself be read as Foucault’s attempt to keep in play a similarity within a difference. It suggests both the necessity and hazards of reading *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995) and the *History of Sexuality, Volume One* as a continuous text. Given the way the latter text elaborates the model of power Foucault announces in the former, and the way this model underwrites Foucault’s critique of both disciplinary society and the psychoanalytic subject, reading the two texts together seems worth the (teleological) risk.

⁷⁰ Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern*, 78.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 76. On haunting, see also the important work of Wendy O. Brown, *Politics out of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

To contemporary amateurs, perhaps one of the most startling characteristics of Signorelli's paintings is the way they themselves are haunted by antiquity, for, as I have already suggested, as early as the Sistine chapel frescoes, Signorelli's paintings began to be populated by specters: classically inspired male nude figures, *ignudi*, set in natural landscapes. Such figures, often described in English as Arcadian owing to their resemblance to shepherds, occur in both religious and secular paintings.⁷² More than once, these figures refer directly to a particular genre of classical sculpture, called *Lo Spinario*, which consists of a seated boy or young man, one leg crossed over the other at the knee. When in Rome, Signorelli could presumably have seen the bronze version of this work now in the Capitoline Museum. While, as its name might suggest, in the classical version, the boy is pulling a thorn from his foot, Signorelli typically adjusts this detail. Versions of this figure occur in Signorelli's *Testament and Death of Moses* fresco on the wall of the Sistine Chapel, one of the surviving panels from the Bichi chapel now in the Toledo (Ohio) Museum of Art, and his *Madonna and Child* tondo currently in Munich's Alte Pinakotech; Perugino's Sistine chapel fresco of the *Baptism of Christ* also includes such a figure. While there is no critical agreement concerning the significance of Signorelli's Arcadian images, critics assume that they are of a piece with Florentine Neoplatonic attempts to reconcile paganism with Christianity. Characteristic of Renaissance Neoplatonism, the effort to harmonize Christianity with classical culture is a feature of some of Italian art's most noted works.⁷³ Signorelli's most noted effort is the c. 1490 Uffizi tondo, with its depiction of the Madonna and Child in the foreground and four largely naked male Arcadian figures in the background (Fig. 3). The canvas is a kind of staging of the efforts to syncretize paganism and Christianity, the former literally a backdrop to the latter.

One of Signorelli's quintessential secular Arcadian images, *The Triumph [or Court, or School] of Pan*, no longer exists, except in photographs, and so it haunts our imaginations. According to some scholars, the painting was commissioned by Lorenzo de' Medici; it is presumed to have been destroyed in 1945 during the bombing of Berlin, the circumstances of its "martyrdom" increasing its fantasmatic value as a life-affirming demonstration of erotic possibilities wiped from existence by male violence. It is universally lauded as one of Signorelli's masterpieces. James Saslow has (anachronistically) interpreted the painting as a "catalogue of [sexual] orientations," including "a rare lesbian episode."⁷⁴ Another critic has called it "the finest" of Signorelli's works prior to San Brizio.⁷⁵ As the absent *Pan* suggests, the idea of haunting is particularly pertinent to attempts to discern something like a history of gender and sexuality in the West, and the traces it may have left on the artwork of the past.⁷⁶

Did Florentine Renaissance Neoplatonism, however tacitly, condone homosex? The textual evidence is itself contradictory. For example, there is no consensus concerning whether Neoplatonist Marsilio Ficino's (1443–99) concept of Platonic love embraced homoerotic carnal

⁷² Franceschini, "Nudes in Limbo," 165.

⁷³ In addition to the *ignudi*, Michelangelo's other characteristic trope harmonizing paganism and Christianity is the figures of the Sibyls.

⁷⁴ James M. Saslow, *Pictures and Passions: A History of Homosexuality in the Visual Arts* (New York: Viking, 1999), 88.

⁷⁵ Anthony Gash, "Shakespeare's Comedies of Shadow and Substance: Word and Image in *Henry IV* and *Twelfth Night*," *Word & Image* 4, no. 3/4 (1988): 657.

⁷⁶ Henry adds that large-scale secular mythological paintings like the *Pan* originated in the Florence of Lorenzo, the most famous example of which is probably Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*, and that Signorelli was "at the forefront of their development" (*Life and Work*, 80).

relations.⁷⁷ In Signorelli's aforementioned Uffizi tondo (Fig. 3), the two male figures on the right are particularly suggestive.



Fig. 3. Luca Signorelli. *Madonna and Christ Child* (detail), oil on wood, c. 1490, Galleria degli Uffizi. Wikimedia Commons.

⁷⁷ On the controversy surrounding how to read the Arcadian figures, see Franceschini, "The Nudes in Limbo."

One stands with his muscular back to us, his buttocks covered with a translucent red loincloth. Leaning his weight on a staff, his body forms an arc that extends over the second man. Half reclining, resting his weight on his right arm, his body inclined towards us, this second figure is playing a flute that forms a diagonal line leading straight from his mouth to his companion's groin. Gazing up, he is holding the end of the instrument so that his hand almost touches the other man's thigh. Similar versions of both of these figures occur in the lost (secular) *Pan*. How are we to make sense of these clues?

There is no archival evidence that Signorelli had homosexual or that he was sexually attracted (if we can risk such a phrase) to males—other than the surviving images and their visual treatment of the body. Given that his biography cannot solve the problem of the homoerotic potency of his images, he resists appropriation by an identitarian historiography that would cast him as proto-gay and is thus a fitting figure for discussion by queer unhistoricism. And it is difficult to deny the homoerotic way in which his paintings compel us to see, particularly given his fondness for portraying figures who literally have their backs to us—a trope that, in the late medieval period, could signify sodomy.⁷⁸ Two of the nude male figures in the Bichi chapel panels are turned away from us, and both men's buttocks are, as in the Brera standard, emphasized so as to draw our eyes to them—one via a translucent veil, the other via a red sash draped across the lower half.⁷⁹ In both cases, the material clings to their bodies. The same is true of the garment worn by the woman in one of the Toledo panels, which in her case emphasizes her breasts and belly.

At least since Freud, seeing has gotten a bad name: scopophilia, narcissism, the sadistic gaze, objectification.⁸⁰ One strand of psychoanalytic feminism, however, has insisted that fantasies of the controlling gaze are precisely that—fantasies; they have an autonomous existence as fantasy, and their relationship to the real is complex and contradictory.⁸¹ And technologies like perspective can be resisted and are more dialectical than our own ideological critiques sometimes propose. As Christopher Braider has provocatively suggested, in order to make sense of any visual image, one must (also) be seized by the painting.⁸² The painting does not simply assign to me a controlling gaze—making me the subject of vision—but equally requires that I subject myself to its logic, that I find myself placed at the center of vision.

Braider's intervention complements Gilles Deleuze's response to theories of narrative as sadistic.⁸³ Deleuze counters with the suggestion that our relationship to aesthetic pleasure might

⁷⁸ Gary Cestaro, "Pederastic Insemination, or Dante in the Grammar Classroom," in *The Poetics of Masculinity in Early Modern Italy and Spain*, ed. Gerry Milligan and Jane Tylus (Toronto: Center for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2010), 41–73. Thanks to Dr. Cestaro for sharing his work with me.

⁷⁹ Arcadian male figures with their backs to us also occur in the *Pan* painting; men in tights with their backs to us are featured in the Sistine wall fresco, Signorelli's *Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian*, and his *Preaching of the Anti-Christ* of the San Brizio frescoes. Some critics cite Piero Pollaiuolo's version of the Saint Sebastian as the inspiration for Signorelli's. The comparison is interesting in that, while Pollaiuolo's version also has a figure with his back to us, he is bent at the waist, and his buttocks are not revealed to the degree they are in Signorelli.

⁸⁰ Many of these ideas are introduced in Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

⁸¹ Cowie, "Pornography and Fantasy," 132–52.

⁸² Christopher Braider, "The Fountain of Narcissus: The Invention of Subjectivity and the Pauline Ontology of Art in Caravaggio and Rembrandt," *Comparative Literature* 50, no. 4 (1998): 304.

⁸³ Gilles Deleuze, *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty* (New York: Zone Books: 1991). Gaylyn Studlar extends Deleuze's analysis to film, responding to the argument laid out by Laura Mulvey, who understands the cinematic gaze as sadistic and controlling (Gaylyn Studlar, *In the Realm of Pleasure: Von Sternberg, Dietrich, and the Masochistic Aesthetic* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1988], and Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other*

in some cases more accurately be described as masochistic, the two perversions not, however, mirror opposites (as Freud describes them) but rather two different modes of a relation of the self to itself and its other—each perversion having its own aesthetic. Sadism is the refusal of the being-subject-to. It is the fantasy of the subject who ratifies its own autonomy via a subjection of the will and body of an other. This is clear in Sade’s work in particular. Masochism rather is the soliciting of the both/and, the willingness (conscious, unconscious, the space between the two,) to be subject of and subject to. It is characterized precisely by reversibility, reciprocity, and versatility. Perhaps it is even queer in a way that sadism is not. Scenes of the flagellation seem to call out for a Deleuzian analytical framework, given their melodramatic theatricality as well as that, in order to fulfill the ancient prophecies, Christ had to submit willingly to the Passion and to seduce Judas into betraying him.⁸⁴ For, in Deleuze’s model, the masochist’s tormentor is not a sadist who seeks a willing “victim”; rather, s/he has been seduced by the bottom into playing the role of the dominator/dominatrix.

In response to Sedgwick’s call for an attentiveness to “unrationalized coexistence of different models” of sexuality in the present,⁸⁵ Marzio Barbagli and Asher Colombo have posited four historical “tipi di relazioni omoerotiche” [“types of homoerotic relationships”], not all of which are based on gender transitivity.⁸⁶ Their suggestion that “modern” homosexual relations are “si basano sul principio di eguaglianza” [“based on the principle of equality”] and are those in which “le tradizionali caratteristiche di genere perdono di importanza” [“the traditional characteristics of gender lose their importance”], however, is problematic.⁸⁷ For even a casual perusal of non-professional, xtube, men-who-“like”-men-videos (xtube’s locution) reveals the degree to which an imaginary femininity plays a vital, sustaining role in some male homoerotic fantasy. There is something compellingly perverse, however, in the authors’ suggestion that, in modern homosexual configurations, “entrambi si scambiano le posizioni e sono contemporaneamente insertivi e ricettivi” [“both partners change positions and are simultaneously inserters and receivers”].⁸⁸

Inevitably, attempts to read paintings like Signorelli’s as homoerotic, let alone queer, will produce among positivist art historians the critique that one is at best projecting back into history current, psychoanalytically inflected understandings of desire, the meaning of nudity, and so forth. At worst, one will be accused of being perverse in the specific sense of revealing one’s own highly interested, non-hetero-erotic idiosyncrasies. Such accusations must repress the fact that all interpretation occurs within a context.⁸⁹ One never sees in the abstract, but from a subject position. To return to the queer unhistoricist debates, when reading the history of sexualities, do we stress continuity over difference? How different is different? Do we make this decision based on strategy (rather than naively historicist attempts to suggest what really is the real difference)?

Pleasures, 2nd ed. [Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2009]).

⁸⁴ This argument is developed in John Champagne, *Italian Masculinity as Queer Melodrama: Caravaggio, Puccini, Contemporary Cinema* (New York: Palgrave, 2015).

⁸⁵ Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 47.

⁸⁶ Marzio Barbagli and Asher Colombo, *Omosessuali moderni, gay e lesbiche in Italia* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2001), 225–27.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 227.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*; note the authors’ deliberate refusal to employ instead “passivo” and “attivo.”

⁸⁹ One of the most engaging explorations of this theme is Kobena Mercer’s reading of Mapplethorpe, which demonstrates that Mapplethorpe’s photographs can be read as both racist and about racism, as an attempt to fetishize the black male body and to comment on that fetishization. Kobena Mercer, “Just Looking for Trouble: Robert Mapplethorpe and Fantasies of Race,” in *Sex Exposed, Sexuality and the Pornography Debate*, ed. Lynne Segal and Mary McIntosh (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 92–110.

Pushed to its limits, queer unhistoricism nags at us to remember that whether or not pre-modern subjects “understood” certain images as homoerotic is *on some level* irrelevant (if understanding is in fact what happens when the subject experiences an image as sexy). Only a positivist historian would assume that we *could* bracket our own embeddedness in history. Furthermore, in terms of queer theory’s own history, exactly when and where a “great paradigm shift” occurred (roughly, *from* sodomy as a wildly heterogeneous category of acts that might potentially be practiced by any sinful being *to* homosexuality as a condition specific to a psychoanalytic subject) is irrelevant, except in as much as it produces contemporary opportunities for the elaboration of thought and politics.

Given the amount of ink that has been spilled on the *from* sodomy *to* homosexuality question, I will spell out my own working understanding of this shift: unlike the sodomite, the homosexual is the subject of the science of sexuality. While this shift is irreducible, new discursive formations do not erase the traces of historically prior ones but are, to some extent, constituted from their ruins. This shift is not teleological. It is a rupture only if one construes it as different enough to warrant this nomination. For Foucault, that difference is marked by the “invention” of a *dispositif* of sexuality that reduced the importance of the previous dispensation, a *dispositif d’alliance* [*dispositif* of alliance].⁹⁰ The former did not replace the latter but did constitute something new enough to warrant a distinction.⁹¹ To illustrate the difference between the former and the latter, one might note that the numerous claimants to the Spanish throne that fought (at the beginning of the eighteenth century) what are called the Wars of Spanish Succession were all related to Henry IV and Maria de’ Medici, and that such a method of collating bodies is today virtually unthinkable. The homosexual subject is a function of this new *dispositif*. Prior to psychoanalysis, the homosexual in all its historical specificity is unimaginable. In an always inadequate shorthand: a case study is not a sinner. Nor is it an “identity” or a “personality.”⁹² To quote Foucault: “In the confessional the sinner says what he knows, whereas in analysis the neurotic is supposed to say more than that. And it has never been claimed that confession has developed the power to eliminate the direct symptoms of illness.”⁹³

In her work on the history of sodomy in Baroque Rome, Marina Baldassari provides this Foucauldian formulation: “Il termine di omosessualità, infatti, si diffuse nel linguaggio comune soltanto nell’Ottocento, momento in cui accanto al giudizio morale relative alla sodomia, proveniente da teologi e giuristi, iniziò ad affiancarsi quello scientifico dei medici.” [“The term homosexuality, in fact, became common in everyday language only in the 1800s, the moment in which alongside the moral judgement relative to sodomy, deriving from the theologians and legal experts, it began to sustain itself via the scientific judgment of doctors”].⁹⁴ Both church and state had legal jurisdiction over the crime of sodomy.⁹⁵ In France, homosexual relations were, in the spirit of the Enlightenment, decriminalized in 1791, making the homosexual increasingly the responsibility of the science of sexuality and its practitioners. Thanks to the widespread influence of Napoleonic law, other European countries followed suit.

⁹⁰ Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, 140.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁹² For an Italian instance of this misreading of Foucault, see Barbagli and Colombo, *Omosessuali moderni*, 232–33 in particular.

⁹³ Sigmund Freud, “The Question of Lay Analysis,” in *Wild Analysis*, trans. Alan Bance (London: Penguin, 2002), 101.

⁹⁴ Marina Baldassari, *Bande giovanili e “vizio nefando”. Violenza e sessualità nella Roma barocca* (Rome: Viella, 2005), 11.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

The problem of when and where to locate this shift from the subject of sodomy to the subject of sexuality is admittedly an extremely complicated one, even for a historicist. First, because it was a transnational affair. Few of us have the knowledge of languages required to read across the archive of sexological literature, which itself makes references to both scientific (or pseudo-scientific) and literary discourse. We have archival evidence of the cosmopolitanism of nineteenth century European culture, certain authors—Andre Gide, for example—being read far and wide. Also to be considered is the role eugenics played in the fabricating of citizen-subjects, a protracted process in a Europe torn between competing models of sovereignty at least until the end of World War I, if not beyond. At a minimum, one would need a knowledge of English, German, French, and Italian, and these are only the obvious. Related to this need to be fluent in several languages is the fact that many early case studies have not yet been translated, and so it is premature to discount Foucault’s argument. Third, disciplinary techniques are mobile and were “imported” from the hospital to the army to the school to the state apparatus to the work place to literature and back again in an endless recursive loop. Because the archive includes everything, one would need to resist the logic of academic disciplines and their circumscription of what should and should not be included. A *dispositif* cannot be reconstructed on the basis of a single discourse, whether it be literary or juridical or discourses of the self. Fourth, as the previous problematics suggest, any thorough consideration of the sexological archive would need to resist the logic of nationalism. Not enough attention has been paid to the debt modern academic disciplines owe to nationalism, and the way the discursive remains of this debt continue to shape accounts of the history of homosexuality in unexpected ways.⁹⁶ The tendency to equate sexual with national cultures has resulted in, on the one hand, an overemphasis, even outside of the US, on New York’s Stonewall riots as a founding moment in “modern” queer history and, on the other, a resistance in Italian Studies to queer theory that dismisses it as “Anglo-Saxon” and assumes that it automatically reflects US imperial pretensions.⁹⁷ Both of these positions contribute to a continuing neglect of the rich homoerotic cultures of inter-war Berlin, Paris, London, and New York. These cultures were not bound by nation or even class, as the bodies that traveled through them were not simply the wealthy bourgeois but also artists, immigrants, and sailors.⁹⁸ This is not to mention the sheer volume of material this archive comprises, a thorough exploration of which requires the kind of collaborative work that arguably continues to be discouraged in the humanities in particular. In short, nearly everything in our training obstructs us from engaging in a genealogy of the modern homosexual of the West.

While the debates in queer historiography return repeatedly to the now-infamous passage in the *History of Sexuality* where Foucault cites the emergence of the invert, far less overt attention is paid to his “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” an essay that his English language editor argues is crucial to any understanding of Foucault’s larger project.⁹⁹ Yet it is not difficult to locate in a

⁹⁶ On the role of the nineteenth-century discipline of history in pursuing the interests of the nation-state, see Immanuel Wallerstein, *World Systems Analysis: An Introduction* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 5–6 in particular.

⁹⁷ See, for example, Lorenzo Benadusi, review of “John Champagne, *Aesthetic Modernism and Masculinity in Fascist Italy* (2013),” *Mestiere di Storico* 1 (2013): 167; Lucienne Kroha, *The Drama of the Assimilated Jew: Giorgio Bassani’s Romanzo di Ferrara* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 251; Giovanni Dall’Orto, “Control la ‘queer theory.’ Una critica politica. (2012),” <https://www.academia.edu/2248802/DallOrto_Giovanni_-_Contro_la_Queue_theory_-_Una_critica_politica_2012_>, accessed January 26, 2015.

⁹⁸ For an early portrait of interwar homoerotic Europe, see Willy, *The Third Sex*, trans. and intro. Lawrence Schehr (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

⁹⁹ Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F.

great deal of the exciting recent work in the queer Renaissance a Foucauldian haunting. To revisit Foucault's own words, then, genealogy "opposes itself to the search for 'origins.'"¹⁰⁰ It overtly rejects "an original identity" and seeks instead to reconstruct the way homosexuality "was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms."¹⁰¹ Despite her hesitations concerning some of the overly polemical claims of queer unhistoricism,¹⁰² Valerie Traub's efforts to "render adequately the complexity and alterity of early modern sexuality" are of a piece with her unhistoricist colleagues in that both reject history as *telos*.¹⁰³ In its insistence on the alterity of history to itself, genealogy refuses to treat the sodomite as a modern homosexual waiting to be born. To posit, as Melissa Sanchez does, an "early modern analogue" is precisely not to posit an origin.¹⁰⁴ For what the term analogue signifies is sameness in difference (and difference in sameness). As the zoological definition proposes, an analogue is "an animal group having general similarities in appearance or mode of life to another group of a distinct and unrelated kind," as in the following marvelously queer example: "Humming birds, like the butterflies, whose analogues they are, suck the nectar of the flowers."¹⁰⁵ In the infamous and oft-cited passage, Foucault is decidedly not writing of the emergence of a modern homosexual identity but rather the eruption of the homosexual as a species.¹⁰⁶

Perhaps above all, genealogy seeks not identities but apparitions.¹⁰⁷ What is the relationship between genealogy and history? According to Foucault, "the historian's history finds its support outside of time and pretends to base its judgments on an apocalyptic objectivity."¹⁰⁸ History becomes an instrument of genealogy only "if it refuses the certainty of absolutes."¹⁰⁹ In his response in *PMLA* to Sanchez's work on the queer Renaissance, Michael McKeon, then, deeply misconstrues the project of queer unhistoricism. This is clear from the very beginning of his letter, when he admits that he read Sanchez's work "anticipating an account of what we know about early modern sexualities."¹¹⁰ McKeon's polemic is actually not with Sanchez, but with those who posit a before and after of homosexual identity. For, according to the author, "from 1675 to 1725 there occurred a revolution in the conception and practice of sexuality that in its concrete historicity achieved the transformation that we normally attribute to the period from 1875 to 1925."¹¹¹ In fairness to McKeon, that his position is historicist is obvious to the (implied) author himself, as he begins by addressing his comments to those readers "hungry for more knowledge about early modern sexualities."¹¹² In light of my earlier comments about the ways in which we conflate sexual with national cultures, it is noteworthy that, in making a case elsewhere for the seventeenth and eighteenth century as the time period in which "male same-sex identity coalesced," McKeon employs only English-language sources and makes no mention of

Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 139.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 140.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 142.

¹⁰² Valerie Traub, "The New Unhistoricism in Queer Studies," *PMLA* 128, no. 1 (2013): 21–39.

¹⁰³ Traub, "Sonnets," 285.

¹⁰⁴ Sanchez, "Use me," 502.

¹⁰⁵ Kirby, cited in *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "Analogue," accessed February 6, 2015, <<http://www.oed.com.ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/view/Entry/7029?redirectedFrom=analogue#eid>>

¹⁰⁶ Foucault, *History*, 59; on emergence and species, see Foucault, "Nietzsche," 149.

¹⁰⁷ Foucault, "Nietzsche," 148.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 152.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 153.

¹¹⁰ Michael McKeon, "Early Modern Sexualities: Two Views," *PMLA* 128, no. 2 (2013): 474.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 475.

¹¹² Ibid.

France, Italy, or Germany.¹¹³ Such a move risks suggesting that “a historical transformation that was a major component of the transition to modernity” was primarily an English affair.¹¹⁴

Sanchez, rather, begins her article explaining that what she will be exploring is “the way we read representations of early modern female sexuality.”¹¹⁵ Throughout her essay, she highlights some of the advantages of using history for life—specifically, in an effort to “bring to view sexual possibilities that get lost when we base definitions of queerness solely on the gender of object choice.”¹¹⁶ Her work is genealogical in a number of different ways, from its insistent use of the literary archive as a way to “give us access to some of the early modern cultural fantasies that cannot be documented by the period’s moral, legal, or medical discourses”¹¹⁷ to its reading of early modern literature with the determination that “we recognize these representations’ potential to generate new understandings of sexual variation.”¹¹⁸ As a positivist historian, McKeon cannot make heads or tails of a way of reading the past that refuses to “fix” history, to render it transparent and definitively knowable.

Sanchez’s analysis reminds us of why the concept of performativity is so crucial; the performative brings its object into being. Sanchez proposes “a mode of reading” the past that seeks not the recovery of history but rather its use in the present.¹¹⁹ Her project is “to make visible early modern images of pleasures and intimacies that challenge heteronormative ideals of companionate marriage and ‘homonormative’ ideals of egalitarian friendship.”¹²⁰

Jonathan Goldberg provides, in his *Sodometries*, an invaluable and exemplary instance of a queer unhistoricism that enacts that different-enough difference between genealogy and history, between a counter-reading of Foucault and one that turns Foucault into a sociologist or historian, between thinking historically and thinking as a historicist. The very subtitle of Goldberg’s book, “Renaissance Texts, Modern Sexualities,” is emblematic of the complexity of his project. Is the relation of the two phrases to one another opposite or apposite? Why does a book about Renaissance literature begin with an analysis of a T-shirt that sodomizes Saddam Hussein?¹²¹

Part IV

Nietzsche’s version of historical sense is explicit in its perspective and acknowledges its system of injustice. Its perception is slanted, being a deliberate appraisal, affirmation, or negation; it reaches the lingering and poisonous traces in order to prescribe the best antidote. It is not given to a discrete effacement before the objects it observes and does not submit itself to their processes; nor does it seek laws, since it gives equal weight to its own sight and to its objects.

Michel Foucault¹²²

Pernac’s complaints about the tendency of art historians to be less attentive to queer theory than

¹¹³ Michael McKeon, “The Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Sexuality Hypothesis,” in “Sex: A Thematic Issue,” special issue, *Signs* 37, no. 4 (2012): 791.

¹¹⁴ McKeon, “Early Modern Sexualities,” 475.

¹¹⁵ Sanchez, “Use me,” 493.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 506.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 494; here, she is paraphrasing Bruce Smith.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 494–95; for a brief gloss of her unhistoricist approach, see also *ibid.*, 507 n. 10.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 493.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 494.

¹²¹ Goldberg, “Sodometries,” 2.

¹²² Foucault, “Nietzsche,” 157.

they could be, however, cuts both ways. Given a number of historical factors, queer theory has been dominated by literary studies, sociology, and political science. This is not to neglect the important work of figures like James Saslow, Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, Christopher Reed, and Jonathan David Katz and David C. Ward.¹²³ But Katz, Ward, and Reed are modernists, Saslow's work is arguably better located in Gay and Lesbian Studies than queer theory, and Bersani and Dutoit have not written a great deal about the Renaissance (but rather, Caravaggio and the Baroque).

So why bring the queer unhistoricism debates to bear on the study of early modern painting? Renaissance art historian Hubert Damisch has noted the way in which the idea of the "origin" and its repetition is one "from which one can never escape in Renaissance studies."¹²⁴ He is also well aware of the dangers of a historicism whose practitioners' "pretensions to objectivity go hand in hand with a refusal to acknowledge the implications of the historical moment in which they themselves live, and with a failure to discern the strands that continue to connect the past with the present."¹²⁵ Clearly, Damisch and queer unhistoricists share some of the same concerns. His locution "can never escape" must be read literally, as a disciplinary move that cannot be avoided. With its emphasis on repetition and difference, however, deconstruction suggests an alternative to the historicism Damisch describes.

A discussion of whether or not Signorelli's images are homoerotic seems invariably to lead back to Renaissance Florence and a series of unresolved questions around the degree to which homosexual behavior was tolerated, when, by whom, and under what conditions; around the relationship—or lack thereof—between discourses, both censorious and celebratory, and actual practices.¹²⁶ Unfortunately, such questions can be read as proposing empirical answers. What begins as genealogy transmogrifies into history. This is not bad faith; it can be attributed to a variety of factors, from required disciplinary moves to the lure of the presumption to know.

What is homosexuality? Is it sameness? Difference? Sameness in difference? Difference in sameness? Is it gender inversion? Gender hypertrophy? Bad object choices? Perverse aims? Sublimation? Narcissism? Anti-humanism? Sadistic? Masochistic? These are the very questions that queer unhistoricism asks, incessantly. It is also the question posed perhaps most forcibly by Signorelli's scenes of the flagellation.

For, contrary to Kury, Signorelli does not (at least in the Brera standard) choose to emphasize the "physical and moral ugliness" of the Flagellation.¹²⁷ The tormentors are in fact quite beautiful, startlingly beautiful, and, owing to the problem of the humanation of Christ, the difference between his body and theirs is a matter of degree. What is disturbing about the flagellation scene portrayed in the Brera standard is its allure. Like all forms of sexuality, masochism is coded; Signorelli's scene has all the marks of an S/M scenario, from the highly theatricalized poses of the torturers to the fetish-wear of the loincloths on both Christ and his torturers to the fully-dressed figures watching the scene unfold to the proscenium arch that frames the action as theater. We are presented the male bodies via a gaze loving in its

¹²³ Saslow, *Pictures and Passions*; Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Caravaggio's Secrets* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998); Christopher Reed, *Art and Homosexuality: A History of Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Jonathan David Katz and David C. Ward, *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Books, 2010).

¹²⁴ Hubert Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, trans. John Goodman (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 212.

¹²⁵ Damisch, *Origin*, 185.

¹²⁶ The most comprehensive, if historicist, treatment of these issues is Michael Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships: Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

¹²⁷ Kury, *Early Work*, 228.

attentiveness. Light caresses the figures' skin. Like the lost *Pan*, the Brera flagellation seems an invitation to polymorphous perversity, offering us not the fetishizing gaze of the Œdipal trauma, but the baroque gaze of the bacchanalia. Seated above the scene, his eyes cast demurely downward, Pilate in fact seems to be the single figure not enjoying the show.

Signorelli's images of the flagellation strike me as consonant with one of the unique contributions of queer theory, what is sometimes called (to my mind, misleadingly) the "antirelational" thesis, perhaps most famously articulated by Leo Bersani's "Is the Rectum a Grave?"¹²⁸ As summarized by Sanchez, "Rather than disavow the appeal of the erotic humiliation and loss of boundaries associated with women and gay men, Bersani argued, we might provisionally accept that sexuality may itself be 'a tautology for masochism' in order to conceive of intimacies that do not aspire to self-affirmation or mutual recognition."¹²⁹ Like Sanchez, Candace Vogler has also argued against a certain "redemptive reinvention of sex"¹³⁰ associated with anti-porn feminism and its attempt to conceive of forms of sexual intimacy from which all traces of power have been banished.¹³¹ Such forms of sexual intimacy are predicated upon a mutual recognition of the other's ego. Like Sanchez and Bersani, Vogler, too, suggests the value of what she terms a "depersonalizing intimacy," an intimacy that arises not from a sharing of selves or mutual recognition of personhood, but from a loss of self-awareness.¹³² When sex becomes a means of seeking this "depersonalizing intimacy" that celebrates the potential destruction of the ego, that loss of self-awareness is sometimes called masochism.¹³³

Régis Michel describes what he himself terms "l'homosexualité de Signorelli" ["Signorelli's homosexuality"] (referring not to the artist but to his images) as "un fétichisme phallique dont se souviendra Michel-Ange dans le délire surviril de ses musculatures" ["a phallic fetishism that Michelangelo will remember in the overly hyperviril delirium of his muscles"].¹³⁴ Given that, in the Freud scenario, the fetish is a substitute for the "missing" penis of the woman, a phallic fetishism is a double negation, a disavowal of disavowal. It is a refusal—rather than a simple disavowal—of the lack that desire seeks to fulfill. The danger such a refusal courts is precisely a

¹²⁸ Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?," *October* 43 (1987): 197–222. After Bersani, the antirelational is most associated with Lee Edelman's work, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004). The antirelational thesis argues that "erotic experience harbors the capacity to undo not only selfhood but also conventional social relations" (Tim Dean, "No Sex Please, We're American," *American Literary History* 27, no. 3 [2015]: 620). In Edelman's work, queer thus designates a refusal of all futurity. Lorenzo Bernini provides this precis: "al soggetto della politica moderna, perennemente catturato da un immaginario progettuale che impone di sacrificare il presente a un futuro di cui la famiglia riproduttiva è l'epitome, Edelman contrappone un soggetto queer risucchiato dal reale di una pulsione che lo costringe a una radicale adesione al presente; e ai movimenti di liberazione sessuale contrappone la staticità del rifiuto della socialità" ["to the modern political subject, perennially captive to a projected imaginary that demands a sacrifice of the present to a future of which the reproductive family is the epitome, Edelman opposes a queer subject pulled toward the real by a drive that constrains him/her to a radical adherence to the present; and to sexual liberation movements, he opposes the stasis of the refutation of sociality"] (Lorenzo Bernini, *Apocalissi queer, elementi di teoria antisociale* [Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2013], 18).

¹²⁹ Sanchez, "Use me," 496; citing Bersani, *Apocalissi queer*, 217.

¹³⁰ The phrase is Bersani's: Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?," 215.

¹³¹ Candace Vogler, "Sex and Talk," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 328–65. Vogler suggests that some women may find in conversation (the "talk" of the essay's title) precisely the "intimacies that do not aspire to self-affirmation" of which Sanchez writes (*ibid.*, 496).

¹³² *Ibid.*, 357.

¹³³ In the realm of fantasy, the violation of bodily boundaries that characterizes sex becomes a figure for "the ego dissolution of sexual bonding that threatens the boundaries of both persons" (Barbara Herman, cited in *ibid.*, 347).

¹³⁴ Régis Michel, *Posséder et détruire: Stratégies sexuelles dans l'art d'Occident* (Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 2000), 51.

misogynist erasure of sexual difference. Yet the redundancy of the phallic fetish threatens to objectify the penis, to turn it into a means at hand with which to pursue the destruction of the well-tempered self.

Work that resists the redemptive reinvention of sex has rightly emphasized the de-subjectivising potential of the sexual, something noted by Foucault in the latter part of his career in particular. To re-read Bersani via Foucault, I would suggest that sex *can become* a tautology for masochism. Yes, there is agency. What shall we make of sex? What pleasures might we discover? Given that we have found ourselves sexuality's object of knowledge, what is to be done?—given in particular the constant policing of gender and sexual norms as they assist late-capitalist disciplinary society in its production of docile, useful bodies. Can we free ourselves from sexuality without refuting the value of sex? We have no vocabulary with which to express the pleasure of de-subjectivisation, for pain and humiliation do not adequately name the pleasures of willful self-abnegation and alienation from one's proper self. So, we will make due with masochism.

Unfortunately, the most polemical position taken by the queer unhistoricists is that hegemonic queer historiography has emphasized difference over sameness, rupture over continuity, and its focus on the “before” and “after” of the homosexual is symptomatic of this emphasis. But such a position ends up answering the question queer historicism sets out to refuse. It is the refusal to answer what is the sameness and difference in homosexuality that is queer.

What is history for? “The purpose of history, guided by genealogy, is not to discover the roots of our identity but to commit itself to its dissipation.”¹³⁵ Even Tim Dean, a sharp critic of the antirelational thesis, insists, “One need not be a strict Freudian to grasp how sex is not primarily an expression of identity but its undoing.”¹³⁶ Notice that, in his account of the use of history for life, Foucault uses the term dissipation, not destruction. This is the different-enough difference that constitutes the “un” of queer unhistoricism. It is also a “different-enough difference”—from Michelangelo, from Pollaiuolo, from all of his Renaissance colleagues—that renders Signorelli's male nudes particularly queer.

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¹³⁵ Foucault, “Nietzsche,” 162.

¹³⁶ Dean, “No Sex Please,” 616.

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