

Outscreaming the Laocoön: Sensation,  
Special Affects, and the Moving Image

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1. Davide Panagia, *The Political Life of Sensation* (Duke University Press: Durham, 2009), p. 2.
2. Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (Continuum: London, 2008), p. 25 explains a 'zone of indiscernability' as a place of possibility that always represented 'the opposite of the facile and the ready-made, the cliché [...] it has one face turned toward the subject[...] one face turned toward the object'.
3. Tom Conley, in Adrian Parr (ed.), *The Deleuze Dictionary* (Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 2005), p. 244.
4. Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, 'An Inventory of Shimmers', in Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg (eds), *The Affect Theory Reader* (Duke University Press: Durham, 2010), p. 1.
5. *Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca* (Le Lettere: Florence, 1987), p. 786: 'Senso. Potenza dell'anima, per la quale si conoscono le cose corporee presenti'.
6. Ignazio del Nente (1642) quoted in Armando Maggi, 'The Word's Self-Portrait in Blood: The Shroud of Turin as Ecstatic Mirror in Emanuele Tesauro's Baroque *Sacred Panegyrics*', *The Journal of Religion*, vol. 85, no. 4, 2005, p. 587, n. 11: 'affetto... consiste nell'innamoramento del cuore'.
7. Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. C. Grayson (Penguin: Middlesex, 1991), p. 73 [emphasis is mine]. In the original Latin text, the final line reads: 'Sed hi motus animi ex motibus corporis cognoscuntur'.

Sensation is a shock. It is that infra-thin moment between contact and cognition. It is a 'heterology of impulses that register on our bodies'; it is 'an experience of unrepresentability'.<sup>1</sup> It is an emergent 'zone of indiscernability' where everything is in flux and meaning is still to be determined.<sup>2</sup> Affect is the cumulative intensity that haunts the viewer after the encounter has occurred. It is 'the change, or variation, that occurs when bodies collide, or come into contact'.<sup>3</sup> It 'arises in the midst of *in-between-ness*: in the capacities to act and be acted upon' and to become something different, something other, something new.<sup>4</sup> Affect encompasses a variety of sensations, but sensation necessarily precedes affect; both demand that the subject reconfigure his/her habitual modes of thinking and being in new and extensive ways. These modern concepts share an affinity with their early modern cognates *senso* and *affetto* terms that underline the psychosomatic vulnerability of the early modern spectator at the very moment when Cartesian dualism was becoming re-articulated as a rationalist project. *Senso* is defined in the *Vocabolario della Crusca* as the power of the soul revealing itself through the body.<sup>5</sup> *Affetto*, to follow my favourite seventeenth-century definition, is like 'the heart falling in love' and speaks of the intense and violent conversion of the soul.<sup>6</sup>

The phrase 'moving image' can be interpreted in two ways if we focus on its grammatical syntax. First, the intransitive form of 'moving image' requires no object and most immediately invokes the flickering images of cinema. In this form, the phrase can suggest images that are animated (e.g. as in the *camera obscura* or magic lantern), but also images that seem to become animated in an uncanny manner. This brings us to the second or transitive form, which refers implicitly to images that move something, that act upon a subject, and that affect them. Why are true believers moved to tears when looking at the broken body of Christ in an image of the crucifixion and why do cinema-goers wince when they see victims being torn apart by Velociraptors, alien queens, or chainsaw-wielding murderers on screen all the while knowing that they are but mere representations? The moving image, in short, is the vehicle for that immersive, transformative experience. From a historical point of view, it approximates the concept of *istoria* as discussed by Leon Battista Alberti:

A 'historia' will move spectators when the men painted in the picture outwardly demonstrate their own feelings as clearly as possible. Nature provides—and there is nothing to be found more rapacious of her than she—that we mourn with the mourners, laugh with those who laugh, and grieve with the grief-stricken. *Yet these feelings are known from movements of the body.*<sup>7</sup>

We are all familiar with Alberti's explanation of narrative composition; the final line, however, when it is quoted, is generally interpreted in terms of style – i.e. in regard to the naturalistic depiction of human form – rather than understood as a statement about somaesthetic experience. If we shift the emphasis from the

bodies represented *inside* the images to the bodies that gaze upon them from the *outside*, then the passage can be understood in terms of the body synchrony and empathetic mirroring that occurs in spectatorship. While Alberti was ultimately interested in establishing firm rules for compositional design, I would like to push the line in terms of the more open, unscripted domain of reception. In other words, if the traditional injunction for artworks in classical theory was that an image or text must instruct (*docere*), please (*delectare*), and move (*movere*), the focus here will be placed on the final term, which is often underplayed at the expense of the other two.

The uneasy spectre of the ancient Roman sculptural group of *Laocoön and His Sons* in its immediate moment of ‘discovery’ in 1506 as well as its subsequent return in the art of Titian and Poussin will be the focus here. On the one hand, the discussion will be concerned with the visceral intensity that rips through the body of the spectator in the moment of confrontation; on the other hand, it will examine the eruptions that surface from this merging of ancient and modern identities. The former thinks about reception and the immediacy of aesthetic experience; the latter takes a more diachronic approach, wandering through a historical landscape of artistic actions and reactions.

When the *Laocoön and His Sons* was unearthed in Rome, the pathos and horror of this ensemble had yet to be etherised and contained by Johann Joachim Winckelmann’s idealising formula: ‘noble simplicity and quiet grandeur’. His *Laocoön* stood for a distinctively Apollonian model of classicism attained through repression, distillation, and containment.<sup>8</sup> If ‘aesthetic’ and ‘anesthetic’ share a common root in the Greek word *αἰσθάνομαι* (*aisthanomai*, which means perception by means of the senses), both seek to confine sensation and affect and to bring stillness where there is motion, to control durational intensity by means of language or narcotics. But sometimes images haunt, contaminate, linger, and otherwise transform their beholders in unexpected ways that resist containment. This was the case with the *Laocoön* in its early modern inception. In Giovanni Antonio da Brescia’s engraving (Fig. 1), for instance, the confusion and awkwardness of this particular found object is still palatable. This was one of the earliest reproductive prints in circulation, and here the ensemble is still represented as a lop-sided fragment waiting to be completed; even the sign that hangs next to the father’s head and which anchors the identity of the group is broken on one side. This early image of *Laocoön and His Sons* brings out what Leonard Barkan so eloquently pointed out as ‘its specially elliptical quality’ that moves the viewer to fill in the blanks.<sup>9</sup>

Rather than ossify the *Laocoön* as a stable signifier for immutable classical ideals, I would like to reconsider it as a ghostly *revenant*, a viral entity that infects and mutates its host and that lies dormant and flares up in unanticipated ways at different moments in the flux of historical time. Two models come to mind here. First, this analysis stands in the shadows of Aby Warburg’s conceptualisation of the *Pathosformel*.<sup>10</sup> I would, however, differentiate my project from the transhistorical, anthropological scope of Warburg’s formidable atlas of postures and expressions in favour of exploring the possibility of a more localised and differentiated history of sensation and affect grounded in the repressed gestures unleashed by specific early modern encounters with the *Laocoön*. A second point of reference then is Alex Nagel and Chris Wood’s theorisation of the ‘anachronic’ condition of artworks as ‘a strange kind of event whose relation to time is plural’.<sup>11</sup> What I share is their interest in the ‘anachronic’ belatedness of artworks;

8. On Winckelmann’s relationship to the *Laocoön* in terms of ideal masculinity and the annihilation of subjective desires see: Alex Potts, *Flesh and the Ideal. Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1994), pp. 136–44; and Simon Richter, *Laocoön’s Body and the Aesthetics of Pain. Winckelmann, Lessing, Herder, Moritz, and Goethe* (Wayne State University Press: Detroit, 1992), chapter 2.

9. Leonard Barkan, *Unearthing the Past. Archaeology and Aesthetics in the Making of Renaissance Culture* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1999), p. 7.

10. On this aspect of Warburg’s rich writings see George Didi-Huberman, ‘Dialektik des Monstrums: Aby Warburg and the Symptom Paradigm’, *Art History*, vol. 24, no. 5, 2001, pp. 621–45; on Warburg and the *Laocoön*, see Richard Brilliant, *My Laocoön. Alternative Claims in the Interpretation of Artworks* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 2000), pp. 35–8.

11. Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* (Zone: New York, 2010), p. 9.



**Fig. 1** Giovanni Antonio da Brescia, *Laocoön and His Two Sons Devoured by the Snake*, engraving, c. 1506–20, 283 × 250 mm. British Museum, London, inv. 1845,0825.707 (Photo: © The Trustees of the British Museum.)

12. Nagel and Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance*, p. 13: “To anachronize is to be belated again, to linger. The work is late, first because it succeeds some reality that it re-presents, and then late again when that re-presentation is repeated for successive recipients. [...] The work of art when it is late, when it repeats, when it hesitates, when it remembers, but also when it projects a future or an ideal is “anachronic”.”

13. The reiteration of the dictum ‘noble simplicity and calm grandeur’ in our surveys, in our seminars, and in our textbooks has imposed beauty and stillness as the defining characteristics of classicism (a case of an Antiquity based on too much Apollo and not enough Dionysus). Both Wincklemann and Lessing, to be fair, were profoundly interested in the fraught relationship between beauty and pain; for a close analysis of this connection in its historical context see: Richter, *Laocoön’s Body and the Aesthetics of Pain*.

however, in addition to embracing the artwork as an accretive object, I would also like to move towards a history of the startled, bewildered spectatorial body caught between sensation and affect.<sup>12</sup> In this regard, I am pushing for a more phenomenologically based interpretation of the past that emerges from a concern with endogenous response which, however, does not sacrifice historical specificity. In order to do this, we must first defrost the cold, eighteenth-century, neo-classical *Laocoön* that we have stored away.<sup>13</sup> Secondly, if we hope to recapture the sense of uncertainty that it once possessed for someone like Titian at a certain moment in the early sixteenth century and then for someone like Poussin looking at it again over a century later, we will need to try and see it through their shocked and confused period eyes. I want to get at the historical details of what happened next – artistic reaction in the days, week, decades, and century after the recovery – rather than ruminate about the *longue durée* of the classical tradition that is the cumbersome domain of historiographers. The challenge then is to proceed as historians, who know all too well what is to come, gazing upon historical subjects in the past, who cannot yet see their own history.



**Fig. 2** Janet Leigh as Marion Crane in *Psycho* (1960) Alfred Hitchcock/Shamley Productions-Paramount.

### Learning to Scream

The beautiful strangeness of the distant past is often best brought into view by proceeding anachronistically rather than by trying to reconstruct it with scientific exactitude. Allow me then to open the discussion somewhere completely unexpected: 1960, the year Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (Fig. 2) is released. In 'Learning to Scream', Linda Williams reminisced how she and her girlfriends went to see the film and spent most of the time with their eyes covered listening to Bernard Hermann's chilling score punctured by the screams of terrified moviegoers.<sup>14</sup> People screamed in their seats, yelled out to the characters in the film, ran out of the cinema in fright, and even stopped showering. *Psycho*, as Williams noted, 'altered the bathing habits of a nation' as well as its viewing habits.<sup>15</sup> It taught them how to scream. It is easy for us to forget today just how uncontrollably moved audiences were when *Psycho* first came out. The invocation of Hitchcock here is not gratuitous, for it is the shock of the unexpected that gets to the heart of the non-idealist and meta-narrative confrontation with the pathos of the moving image.

Let us begin by looking more closely at the stones that came into view on that fateful winter's day in mid-January 1506. Let us imagine ourselves there in that chilly Roman vineyard on the Oppian Hill not far from the Baths of Titus watching as the pieces slowly emerged from the earth – strange, illegible forms covered in the mud of historical time; partial objects twisting, curving, stretching, and denying us the cognitive comfort of immediate identification; and then a face. Today we can picture the *Laocoön* as it is framed in the classicising halls of the Vatican museum (Fig. 3), but imagine the slow revelation of a stone that transforms itself into a facial expression that crystallises into a contorted scream emerging from a hole in the ground. As the day stretches out, a watchful team then unearths another face, also screaming, and then a third face, again, also screaming. Can we experience anew the ambivalence and anxiety unleashed by the discovery of such a gruesome ensemble – a tortuous scene fossilised forevermore in an interminable howl?

And what about intellectual sensation? Are we still able to feel the frisson that must have rippled across the assembled group as a voice among us uttered the name 'Laocoonte'? In 1567, over sixty years after the event, the Florentine

14. Linda Williams, 'Learning to Scream', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 15, no. 30, 1995, pp. 14–17.

15. Williams, 'Learning to Scream', p. 14.



**Fig. 3** Attributed to Agesander, Athenodoros, Polydorus, *Laocoön and His Sons*, ca. 175–150 BC, marble, h. 242 cm. Museo Pio Clementino, Vatican (Photo: Author.)

sculptor Francesco da Sangallo would recount how it was his father Giuliano who first identified the rocks.<sup>16</sup> Can we recapture today the anticipation and the vertiginous excitement that followed as an abject lump of dirt from a buried past, accidentally revealed by an unknowing shovel, was slowly polished into what would become the *Laocoön*?

By the time the *Laocoön* had become a public spectacle, the gestural expressionism of someone like Niccolò dell'Arca from the previous century (Fig. 4) was becoming somewhat less favoured by contemporary artists; at the same time, in 1506, they could not yet know the sculptural force of what was to come – the *figura sforzata* that Michael Cole so carefully identified in artists of the future like Giambologna (see Fig. 17 in Clifton *supra*) or even later on like Francesco Mochi.<sup>17</sup> While the expressive strain was never completely abandoned at any given moment, the historian's task is to examine why it erupts at certain times and not at others. The appearance of something for which there is yet to be an operative semantic structure often causes anxiety; the unanticipated revelation of the *Laocoön* was, in short, traumatic. According to Kirsten Moana Thompson, 'As literal symptom trauma is constituted by its lack of integration into consciousness as history. [...] Horror spectatorship also plays on this "too soon" of trauma, this sudden quality of a violent act that frightens us with unexpected violence'.<sup>18</sup> For the generation at the beginning of the sixteenth century, the emotional intensity of the *Laocoön* must have seemed somewhat of a traumatic disruption at a moment when the classical style was coming to be redefined by the gentle contrapposto that structured works like Michelangelo's *Bacchus* (1497) and *David* (1501–1504). Perhaps this irruption is what Michelangelo was addressing when he himself referred to the *Laocoön* as a 'Portent of Art'.<sup>19</sup> It must have seemed like a strange and alien object, whose stylistic incongruity (that eerie sense of the 'too soon') made time seem out of joint.

And so, on a crisp January morning in 1506, shovel hit stone and the Renaissance and the *Laocoön* invented each other in an irreversible moment of mutual contamination. It was the great fortune for the Renaissance to recover the *Laocoön* in these early years of the sixteenth century; it was also a great fortune for the *Laocoön* to have been found at a moment when young and ambitious artists like Michelangelo and Raphael happened to be cutting their teeth in the city. For an artist like Francesco da Sangallo, the scream of the *Laocoön* expanded the creative mind. In his retrospective account of the discovery, he underlines how a large hole was dug in order for the marbles to be carefully lifted out and that he and other artists 'returned there to draw', chatting all the while about the art of the past and present.<sup>20</sup> Writing two weeks after the find, one Bolognese visitor compared that moment with the Jubilee as a bidding war broke out among Roman collectors.<sup>21</sup> By the summer of 1506, however, Pope Julius II had acquired the sculpture and installed it among his collection of antiquities in the Vatican where generations of artists and poets to come would confront the stony spectacle.

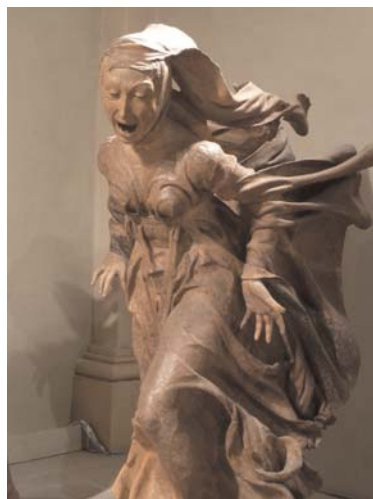
There is no doubt that contemporary spectators came to see the *Laocoön* as a beautiful monument – *mirabile* was a common adjective used at the time.<sup>22</sup> The corporeal and expressive hyperbole of the figures, however, was somewhat of a jolt, and its beauty was borne of pain. What early sixteenth-century viewers found *mirabile* about it was its physical and emotional excess, its sculptural complexity, and the uncanny feeling that the statues were alive.<sup>23</sup> If Italian horror films of the twentieth century would later be characterised by a

16. Francesco da Sangallo in a letter to Vincenzo Maria Borghini (28 February 1567) quoted in *Laocoonte alle origini dei Musei Vaticani* (L'Erma di Bretschneider: Rome, 2006), p. 128.

17. On this see Michael Cole, 'The *Figura Sforzata*: Modelling, Power and the Mannerist Body', *Art History*, vol. 24, no. 4, 2001, pp. 520–51 and Estelle Lingo, 'Mochi's Edge', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2009, pp. 1–16.

18. Kirsten Moana Thompson, *Apocalyptic Dread. American Film at the Turn of the Millennium* (SUNY Press: Albany, 2007), p. 23.

19. *Roma antica, e Moderna, o sia Nuova descrizione di tutti gl'edifizi antichi, e moderni, sagri, e profani della Città di Roma*, vol. 1 (Niccola Roisecco Mercante Libraio: Rome, 1745), p. 104: 'Dal Buonaroti si chiamava Portento dell'Arte, e Plinio



**Fig. 4** Niccolò dell'Arca, *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (detail), 1463, terracotta. Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna (originally in Santa Maria della Vita) (Photo: Sarah S. Wilkins.)

particular tendency towards ‘hallucinatory horror’, perhaps a certain shadow of this tradition can already be sensed in this earlier moment in time.<sup>24</sup>

Rejecting Virgil’s graphic and audible description of Laocoön’s pain, Winckelmann insisted that ‘no awful cry is raised, as Vergil sings of his Laocoön: the opening of the mouth does not allow it’.<sup>25</sup> This, however, was certainly not the perception of the statue at the beginning of the early sixteenth century (nor in Virgil’s time). Writing shortly after the find, Cardinal Jacopo Sadoletto, for instance, was struck by the spectacle of the serpent twisting around and tearing into the Trojan priest’s flesh causing him to emit an ‘immeasurable scream’ [‘gemitum ingentem’] as his entire body tensed and resisted in vain.<sup>26</sup> ‘The torment is real’, Sadoletto insisted, ‘but does the marble die? The soul is horror-stricken at this sight and this mute image hammers into my heart, mixing pity with great trembling’.<sup>27</sup> *De Laocoontis Statua* was perhaps one of the earliest and certainly the most famous poetic response to the *Laocoön*, and as Gian Piero Maragoni pointed out, the sinuous structure of Sadoletto’s Latin poem sought in its rhythmic diction to imitate the serpentine forms of the statue itself.<sup>28</sup> In this instance, the *paragone* between word and image, between poetry and sculpture, also exploited the special affects of an auditory visuality (in addition to and beyond a merely haptic one).

But why did poets focus on what Nigel Spivey would refer to as ‘the audition of Laocoön’s scream’?<sup>29</sup> Here one must remember that our twenty-first-century *Laocoön* is not only the discursive *Laocoön* of Winckelmann’s eighteenth-century classicism, but also the *Laocoön* of twentieth-century chance and conservation.<sup>30</sup> The statue that we have inherited (Fig. 3) only came into view in 1905 when Ludwig Pollak discovered the missing arm in a Roman workshop and in 1957 when Filippo Magi restored the statue incorporating Pollak’s fragment. Prior to this late date, the sculpture upon which viewers would have gazed would have resembled Giovanni Antonio da Brescia’s configuration (Fig. 1) or Baccio Bandinelli’s version in the Uffizi Gallery (Fig. 5).<sup>31</sup> The outstretched limb in Bandinelli’s interpretation may seem awkward and clumsy to us today, yet this was the canonic grouping that viewers beheld well into the twentieth century. Bandinelli’s arrangement frames and balances the father’s head along a continuous diagonal line, opening the form upward and outward. The immediate effect is that his facial expression – the negative slit of his open mouth – becomes the compositional focus of the block (the post-Magi restoration, in contrast, underscores the violence of the struggle as his arm is forced upward and behind him). This minor detail may offer a partial explanation as to why sixteenth-century spectators placed so much attention on Laocoön’s scream.

In 1539, we hear Eurialo d’Ascoli provoking his reader ‘to hear Laocoön’s bitter cry’ [‘Udir di Laocoonte il pianto amaro’] for while he gazed upon those twisted stones, a great pain afflicted his heart [‘Mentr’io miro questo sasso torto/ Per gran dolor, che dentro ’l cor gli affligge’]. The beholder’s empathetic attachment, however, ran the risk of over-contamination in that moment of encounter. In a beautiful passage, Eurialo pinpoints the uncanny quality of the screaming figures:

If they are stones then how can we hear the grief that comes out? And if they are men, how can they suffer such great pain without dying? If they are human, how do they silence their martyrdom? If they are stone, why do they scream all the time? But if neither man nor stone, then what is this concocted figure?<sup>32</sup>

lo riputò per la più bell’Opra, che mai si facesse in marmo’.

20. Da Sangallo quoted in Salvatore Settis, *Laocoonte. Fama e stile* (Donzelli Editore: Rome, 1999), p. 110: ‘et si fece crescere la buca, per poterlo tirar fuori. Et visto, ci tornamo a desinare et sempre si ragionò delle cose antiche, discorrendo ancora di quelle di Fiorenza’.

21. Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti in a letter to Isabella d’Este quoted in Settis, *Laocoonte*, p. 105: ‘El cardinale San Piero ad Vincula glie ne ha voluto dare mille ducati. M(onsigno)re nostro le voleva, il papa gli ha decto che non ne faccia contracto alchuno, che lui le vuole. Tutta Roma die noctuque concorre a quella casa che li pare el jubileo. La magior parte dei Cardinali sono iti ad vedere’.

22. Notable mentions of the *Laocoön* in sixteenth-century documents, letters, poems, treatises, biographies, and other primary sources are collected in Settis, *Laocoonte*, pp. 99–230.

23. On the ocular pleasure generated by the elaborate sculptural coils and loops of the serpents – the *Laocoön*’s ‘snakiness’ – see Madeleine Viljoen, ‘Laocoön’s Snakes: The Reception of the Group in Renaissance Italy’, *Towards a New Laocoön* (Henry Moore Institute: Leeds, 2007), pp. 20–4.

24. Louis Paul, *Italian Horror Film Directors* (McFarland & Co.: London, 2005), p. 9.

25. Winckelmann quoted in Winfried Menninghaus, *Disgust: The Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*, trans. Howard Eiland and Joel Golb (SUNY Press: Albany, 2003), p. 61. Lessing too tried to describe the mouth as a repressed whimper rather than a full-on scream, for the latter would have destroyed the beauty of the work: ‘Imagine him screaming, and then look!... In painting, the wide-open mouth – putting aside the fact that the rest of the face is thereby twisted and distorted in an unnatural and loathsome manner – becomes a mere spot, and in sculpture a mere cavity, with the most disagreeable effect in the world’ (Lessing quoted in Menninghaus, *Disgust*, p. 61).

26. The poem was published in 1532 but already in circulation in manuscript form in 1506. Sadoletto in the original Latin and Italian translation in Gian Pietro Maragoni, *Sadoletto e il Laocoonte. Di un modo di descrivere l’arte* (Edizioni Zara: Parma, 1986), pp. 47–51.

27. Sadoletto quoted in Maragoni, *Sadoletto*, p. 47: ‘Horret ad haec animus, mutaque ab imagine pulsat / Pectora non parvo pietas commixta tremori’. This passage has been recently discussed by Caroline Van Eck, ‘Living Statues: Alfred Gell’s *Art and Agency*, Living Presence Response



and the Sublime', *Art History*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2010, pp. 12–13 where *animus* is translated as 'mind'.

28. Maragoni, *Sadoletto*, pp. 27, 47: the line in Latin culminates with the description of the 'immeasurable scream': 'Connexum refugit corpus, torquentia sese / Membra, latusque retro sinuatum a vulnere cernas. / Ille dolore acri, at laniatu impulsus acerbo, / Dat gemitum ingentem[. . .]'.

29. Nigel Spivey, *Enduring Creation. Art, Pain, and Fortitude* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 2001), p. 25.

30. For a summary of the restorations, see Settis, *Laocoonte*, pp. 231–58.

31. The Laocoön was restored by Giovanni Antonio Montorsoli in 1532, by Agostino Cornacchini from 1725 to 1727 (which is the version Winckelmann would have known), by Antonio Canova in 1816, and by Filippo Magi in 1957. There are numerous catalogues and edited volumes on the Laocoön, most notably: Elisabeth Décultot, Jacques Le Rider, François Queyrel (eds), *Le Laocoon: histoire et réception* (*Revue Germanique Internationale* 19) (PUF: Paris, 2003); Francesco Buranelli (ed.), *Laocoonte. Alle origini dei Musei Vaticani. Quinto centenario dei Musei Vaticani 1506–2006* (L'Erma di Bretschneider: Rome, 2006); G. Sena Chiesa and E. Galletti (eds), *Il Laocoonte dei Musei Vaticani. 500 anni dalla scoperta* (Cisalpine: Milan, 2007). See now the excellent and thorough Digital Sculpture website for an up-to-date timeline and bibliography: <http://www.digitalsculpture.org/laocoon/index.html>.

32. Euralio Morani d'Ascoli (Aurelio Morani de' Guiderocchi), *Stanze sopra le Statue di Laoconte, di Venere, et d'Apollo al Gran Marchese del Vasto* (Campo di Fiori: Rome, 1539), n.p.: 'Se questi è sasso, come può sentire,/ La doglia adunque, ch'ei dimostra fuore?/ O' se pur huomo egli è, senza morire/ Come tanto soffrir può un tal dolore?/ S'huomo è, come tace egli 'l suo martire?/ Se sasso, come grida à tutte l'hore?/ Mà s'huomo egli non è, nè pietra dura,/ Che sia questa mestissima figura?'

33. Euralio d'Ascoli, *Stanze*, n.p.: 'L'aspro dolor, ond'io mai non impeto/ Di riposo, et quiete un'hora sola,/ Mi frange l'ossa dentro, come un vetro[. . .] Misero mè, che quanto è più ristretto,/ Tanto fà dentro più crudele effetto'.

34. Fausto (Evangelista Maddaleni de' Capodiferri) quoted in Settis, *Laocoonte*, p. 126: 'Laocoon ego sum[. . .] Nec tantum hoc iram satiat; sit poena perennis/ ut mea, sub pario marmore vivat, ait./ Dices, me aspicias, veros lapidi esse dolores/ et natis haud fictum exitium atque metum. [. . .] Si mortem atque metum saxo vivumque dolorem/ qui dederunt, possent vocem animamque dare,/ abnuerent; mirum magis est



**Fig. 5** Baccio Bandinelli, *Laocoön*, 1520–25, marble, h. max. 213, original base h. 120 cm. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. (Photo: La Scala, Florence. Courtesy of the Ministero Beni e Att. Culturali.)

And then Eurialo adds: 'the bitter pain does not permit a moment of rest and calm, it shatters my bones inside like glass[. . .]the tighter it gets', he concludes, 'the more cruel the internal effect becomes'.<sup>33</sup>

Another sixteenth-century poem opens with the fantastic utterance: 'I am Laocoön' ['Laocoon ego sum']. The poem then proceeds in the first person as if the authorial voice belonged to the Trojan priest trapped in this stony hell: '[Athena] decreed that my pain, engraved into this marble, would continue forevermore'. 'Look at me!' he commands, 'you too can confirm that my torment in stone is authentic and that my sons' fear and death is not a fiction'. The poet then adds that if the artists who endowed these stones with death and fear were pushed to give them 'a soul and a voice', they would surely have refused for already without sound they have achieved the magical effect of struggle, endurance, lament, tears, fear, and death.<sup>34</sup>

Mimetic exactitude is often plotted as the goal for naturalistic representation in this period. We can relocate this emphasis, however, to address a different order of illusionism that is based on embodied sensation and psychological affect – i.e. things that have the power to move us in a convincing manner – rather than simply arresting the aesthetic moment on the stylistic surface of things.<sup>35</sup> If we consider the claim that 'the entire body escapes through the screaming mouth', then we can begin to rethink naturalism as being about lifelikeness, about pushing representation to the brink of movement, of making things seem *as if* they were really breathing, really capable of moving, really in possession of a soul and a voice, to draw on the vocabulary of the poem cited above.<sup>36</sup> While the idea of the *statua parlante* or 'speaking

statue' was an old critical trope, a 'screaming statue' posed a slightly different challenge.

If critics from Pomponius Gauricus to Lessing would try to thematise and normalise the taste for stillness in sculpture, other poets and artists would respond differently. The cold, resistant skin of the white marble melted away under the words of these early sixteenth-century viewers. Elio Lampridio Cerva described the sculpture as the 'blood-stained Laocoön' ['Laochoonta cruentum']. Gazing upon the hard, colourless statue, Cerva nevertheless hallucinated 'blood-stained gore flowing out' ['Sibila mentiri, saniem manare cruentam'], concluding that 'the stones are bitten, are cut, and will die' ['Morderi credas, saxa, ferire, mori'].<sup>37</sup> It is almost as if the venomous bite of the snake and its slow suffocating embrace was in the process of draining the figures of their life and blood, leaving behind the deathly pallor of marble: 'the marble shows real signs of terror' ['Hic marmor veri signa pavoris habet'].<sup>38</sup> There is a subtle play, then, on the ironic nature of the marble itself as the figures are caught between the psychodynamics of the Pygmalion effect (art becoming life), on the one hand, and the Medusa effect (life becoming art), on the other hand. The projection of sound into silence, colour into marble, and movement into lifeless stone in these responses demonstrates the extensive properties inherent in the moving image that clings onto the empathetic attachment of the viewer and demands a response in kind.

Even laymen commented on this issue of affective verisimilitude at the time. The Florentine priest, Bonsignore Bonsignori, wrote in a letter on 24 January 1506 to a fellow priest: 'it is certainly a marvellous thing to see and all the figures appear to be alive'.<sup>39</sup> Likewise, the Venetian ambassadors touring the Vatican collection in the spring of 1523 reported that they could 'see the veins and even the nerves in every part that you wouldn't be able to see in a living body; all it lacks is a soul'.<sup>40</sup> And here we touch upon the lasting affect of art compared to the fleeting impressions found in nature. Well into the academic debates of the seventeenth century, the *Laocoön* would be valued for the absorptive quality of its theatricality and for its ability to instantiate the sensation of fear and pain in the body; like other prosthetic instruments, art enhanced the spectator's sense of vision, allowing the viewer to see what the human eye could not capture.<sup>41</sup> This is where the artist comes back into the story of reception.<sup>42</sup>

### Outscreaming the Laocoön

As early as 1510, Bramante and Raphael called together a contest to reproduce a wax model of the *Laocoön*. The young Jacopo Sansovino won and his model was cast in bronze by the Venetian cardinal, Domenico Grimani, who later brought it (and Sansovino) to Venice.<sup>43</sup> Here we arrive at our first case study: Titian. Scholars have long since chronicled the various copies of and imitations after the sculpture that were made in the sixteenth century, but my point is different.<sup>44</sup> As demonstrated in the heightened *enargeia* of the sixteenth-century poetic responses, the real challenge for artists was to try and outscreeam the *Laocoön*, to create an image so acute as to enable the viewer to experience the raw sensation of those stones anew. In this regard, instead of describing the moment of artistic encounter and development as a master narrative of *influence* in which causality is constructed retrospectively, the creative process takes place in an instance of contamination and repetition

sine voce animaque/ niti, ferre, queri, flere, timere, mori'.

35. On the 'Pygmalion effect' see: Victor Stoichita, *The Pygmalion Effect. From Ovid to Hitchcock* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2008); Kenneth Gross, *The Dream of the Moving Statue* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 1992). On theories of the 'living image' and 'living presence response', see: Fredrika Jacobs, *The Living Image in Renaissance Art* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2005); Van Eck, 'Alfred Gell's Art and Agency'. For a different interpretation on the tension between 'heterochronicity' and the 'imperative of stillness' that circumscribed early modern sculpture, see Michael Cole, *Ambitious Form. Giambologna, Ammanati, and Danti in Florence* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2011), chapter 4 'Pose'. See also Kim *supra* on horror and mimesis.

36. Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, p. 20. See also Clifton *supra* on the link between the mouth and punctum.

37. Elio Lampridio Cerva quoted in Settis, *Laocoonte*, p. 124.

38. Cerva quoted in Settis, *Laocoonte*, p. 122.

39. Bonsignori quoted in Michel Hochmann, 'Laocoon à Venise', *Le Laocoon. Historie et reception* (PUF: Paris, 2003), p. 128: 'certamente è chosa mirabile a vederla e tutte le figure paiono vive'.

40. Quoted in Settis, *Laocoonte*, p. 176: 'si veggono li nodi, vene e i proprii nervi da ogni parte che più in un corpo vivo non si potrà vedere; né gli manca che lo spirito'.

41. This is the conclusion put forth by Gérard van Opstal in his lecture on 2 July 1667 *Les conférences de l'Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture au XVIIe siècle*, Alain Merot (ed.), (énsb-a: Paris, 1996), p. 76: 'il est difficile de les copier [i.e., ces fortes expressions] sur les personnes meme en qui elles agiraient effectivement à cause de la vitesse des mouvements de l'âme'.

42. As Van Eck, 'Alfred Gell's Art and Agency', p. 5 underlined, Gell's primary concepts are agency, index, prototype, artist, and recipient. In this regard, if Gell overemphasizes agency and Van Eck pushes for the experience of the recipient, I would like to bring back into the mix the crucial role of the artist in the production of objects that solicit 'living presence responses'. While I share many of Van Eck's concerns about the utility of anthropological and aesthetic models in the construction of a more grounded history of response, my argument differs from Van Eck's in that my concern lies with what Deleuze would refer to as a 'zone of indiscernability' rather than an entropic, transcendental model of the sublime. That is, instead of mapping out a unidirectional process in which objects generate controlled



**Fig. 6** Titian, *Bacchus and Ariadne*, 1520–3, oil on canvas, 176.5 × 191 cm. National Gallery of Art, London. (Photo: National Gallery.)

that occurs in a ‘zone of indiscernability’ where the clarity of before and after is still scrambled in the immediacy of *sensation*.

In *Unearthing the Past*, Barkan suggested that while Michelangelo allowed the *Laocoön* to gestate within him, Titian was able to cut and paste the motif more freely in his work.<sup>45</sup> Perhaps paint and canvas facilitated experimentation more readily than the labour-intensive medium of stone.<sup>46</sup> The *Resurrection* triptych (Averoldi Altarpiece) in SS. Nazaro e Celso and the *Bacchus and Ariadne* (Fig. 6) made in the early 1520s are frequently cited as repetitions of the *Laocoön*.<sup>47</sup> It will be useful to differentiate between the literal imitation of the *forms* of antiquity and the more affective reproduction of its *sensation*. Even in the bacchanal for Alfonso d’Este, one can feel the shadow of *Laocoön*’s struggle casting itself upon the twisting gesture of the frantic Ariadne caught between the past tense of her love affair with Theseus, slipping off on the horizon line on the left, and the future tense of Bacchus’s love for her, exploding front and centre. One might say that the sensation of the *Laocoön* finds itself re-enacted in these confused and explosive bodies, while the iconographical markers – the serpents – have been flung onto the body of the bearded man like a footnote: the imitation of forms on the right; the repetition of sensation displaced to the centre-left.

Likewise, while the satirical print known as the *Monkey Laocoön* (Fig. 7) is often mentioned in discussions about Titian and antiquity, few have followed up on Horst Janson’s suggestion that the simian imagery is a critique of degeneration theories put forth by the followers of Galen, who was known to have obtained his anatomical knowledge in antiquity through the dissection of monkeys.<sup>48</sup> Janson’s thesis is both polemical and problematic, but what I

responses, I am interested in the more unpredictable and less linear actualization of delayed (even unconscious) responses that only make sense in retrospect.

43. Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite de più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architetti*, vol. 6, Rosanna Bettarini and Paola Barocchi (eds), (Sansoni: Florence, 1965–1983), p. 178: ‘per consiglio di Domenico cardinal Grimani, fu a Bramante ordinato che si dovesse fare gittare di bronzo quell di Iacopo; e così fatta la forma e gettatolo di metallo, venne benissimo[...] venendo a morte, come cosa rarissima lo lasciò alla Signoria serenissima di Vinezia, la quale, avendolo tenuto molti anni nell’armario della sala del Consiglio de’ Dieci, lo donò finalmente, l’anno 1534, al cardinale di Loreno, che lo condusse in Francia’. See also Francis Haskell and Nicholas Penny, *Taste and the Antique: The Lure of Classical Sculpture, 1500–1900* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1982), p. 244; Irene Favaretto, ‘La tradizione del Laocoonte nell’arte veneta’, *Atti dell’Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti*, vol. 141, 1982–1983, pp. 75–92; Hochmann, ‘Laocoön à Venise’, pp. 91–103.

45. Barkan, *Unearthing the Past*, pp. 12–14.

would like to draw on is the empathetic scream of the suffering beasts invoked in the print for this hits upon the ethics of pain and spectatorship, bringing us back to sensation.

It has been argued that: ‘If we scream, it is always as victims of invisible and insensible forces that scramble every spectacle, and that even lie beyond pain and feeling’.<sup>49</sup> When looking at the *Laocoön*, we do not wince because we are in pain, but because the force of representation has transformed us. It is the pathos of the body in physical pain and emotional anguish rather than a concern solely with the imitation of the ancient source that resonates in Titian’s work. Here I would like to focus on two public commissions: first, the astounding and much copied *Martyrdom of St Peter* in SS. Giovanni e Paolo (1526–1530); and second, the Old Testament cycle for Santo Spirito in Isola (1542–1544). The former was destroyed in a fire in 1867 and is known through its painted and printed reproductions (Figs 8 and 9); the latter were moved in 1656 to the sacristy of Santa Maria della Salute where they remain today (Figs 10–12).

In the second half of the sixteenth century, art theorists would identify the *Laocoön* as the affective model for martyrdom imagery and as a paragon for pain, marvel, death, madness, depression, desperation, nervous tension, caprice, endurance, and epilepsy.<sup>50</sup> The shock of what Una Roman d’Elia has discussed as Titian’s ‘Christian tragedies’ can be compared with the infectious force of *Laocoön*’s howl.<sup>51</sup> For the artist’s contemporaries and for those that came after him, the *Martyrdom of St Peter Martyr* was – in every sense – a horror picture.

Giorgio Vasari noted that the artist painted the victim larger than life, in a wood of tall trees, fallen to the ground with a wound in the head from a soldier. The viewer, he pointed out, could see the fear of death in Peter’s expression, while another friar could be seen fleeing in terror.<sup>52</sup> The Venetian art critic Lodovico Dolce was similarly struck by the face of the fleeing man: ‘The monk is shown running away, with a face that has terror all over it; one has the impression of hearing a shriek, and his movement has the extreme vigor of a man who is afraid for good reason’.<sup>53</sup>

Dolce’s friend, the sixteenth-century Italian *poète maudit*, Pietro Aretino, described the experience of seeing the painting with two companions, Tribolo and Benvenuto. Writing to Tribolo he says:

Looking at it turned you and Benvenuto into an image of stupor. Your eyes and the lights of your intellects were fixed on this work, and you understood all the living terrors of death and all the true pains of life in the brow and in the flesh of he who had fallen on the earth, marveling at the cold and the lividness that appeared at the tip of his nose and the extremities of his body. You could not hold in your voice, but let yourself cry out when, in looking at the companion who flees, you recognized in his countenance the pallor of vile fear.<sup>54</sup>

It has been argued that the use of antithesis was intended to create ‘the calm of faith by emphasizing violent emotions’.<sup>55</sup> However, there is also an element of sadistic pleasure in Aretino’s snark, and here we are perhaps closer to a ‘frenzy of the visible’ than to the atrophic calm of catharsis.<sup>56</sup> In the *post-festum* account, the infamous satirist is watching his friend watch in horror the terrified monk in the painting who witnesses in horror the murder of his companion. One could go so far as to suggest that in his *Schadenfreude*, Aretino feminizes Tribolo and Benvenuto in the way he describes their inability to control their fear and their bodies; i.e. Aretino ‘abjectifies’ them in separating his own subjectivity clearly from theirs. The term ‘you’ punctures the passage, and never does



**Fig. 7** Niccolò Boldrini, *Caricature of the Laocoön in the Form of Apes*, ca. 1540–45, woodcut, 275 × 402 mm. (Photo: © Wikimedia Commons.)

44. P.P. Bober and R.O. Rubenstein, *Renaissance Artists and Antique Sculpture* (Harvey Miller: London, 1986), pp. 151–5; Haskell and Penny, *Taste and the Antique*, pp. 243–7.

46. On the defense of oil painting as new media and sculpture as old media, see Maria H. Loh, ‘The Death of the Medium and Technologies of the New in Early Modern Italy’, in Ulrich Pfisterer and Gabriele Wimböck (eds), *Novità – das ‘Neue’ in der Kunst um 1600. Theorien, Mythen, Praktiken* (Diaphanes: Munich, 2011).

47. See, for instance, David Rosand, ‘Titian’s Saint Sebastians’, *Artibus et Historiae*, vol. 15, no. 30, 1994, p. 27 and Otto J. Brendel, ‘Borrowings from Ancient Art in Titian’, *Art Bulletin*, vol. 37, no. 2, 1955, p. 118.

48. H.W. Janson, ‘Titian’s Laocoon Caricature and the Vesalian-Galenist Controversy’, *Art Bulletin*, vol. 28, no. 1, 1946, pp. 49–53.

49. Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, p. 43.

50. Giovanni Andrea Gilio and Paolo Lomazzo quoted in Settis, *Laocoonte*, pp. 192–3, 194: ‘ciascuno di voi può haver veduto in Roma in molte statue e spzialmente nel Laocoonte di Belvedere, il quale par che con suoi figliuoli dimostri, così annodato dai serpenti, l’angustia, il dolore et il tormento che sentiva in quel atto Certo sarebbe cosa nova e bella vedere un Cristo in Croce per le piaghe, per i sputi, per i scherni e per il sangue trasformato, San Biagio dai pettini lacero e scarnato, Sebastiano pieno di frezze rassimigliare un estrice, Lorenzo ne la graticola arso, incotto, crepato, lacero e difformato’; ‘De i moti del dolore, meraviglia, morte, pazzia, infingardagine, disperatione, molestia, capriccio, patentia et epilepsia’. See also Aretino in Settis, *Laocoonte*, p. 202 who invoked the statue in the narration of the martyrdom of St Catherine of Siena (*Vita di Caterina Vergine*, 1540).

51. Una Roman D’Elia, *The Poetics of Titian’s Religious Paintings* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2005), chapter 3.



**Fig. 8** Seventeenth-century copy after Titian's *Martyrdom of St. Peter Martyr* (original canvas by Titian destroyed in 1867). Santi Giovanni e Paolo, Venice. (Photo: Author.)

52. Vasari, *Le Vite*, vol. 6, p. 160: 'facendovi maggior del vivo il detto Santo martire dentro a una boscaglia d'alberi grandissimi, cascato in terra et assalito dalla fiera d'un soldato, che l'ha in modo ferito nella testa che, essendo semivivo, se gli vede nel viso l'orrore della morte: mentre in un altro frate, che va innanzi fuggendo, si scorge lo spavento e timore della morte'.

53. Dolce quoted in Mark Roskill, *Dolce's Arteino and Venetian Art Theory of the Cinquecento* (University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 2000), p. 191.

54. Aretino quoted in D'Elia, *The Poetics of Titian's Religious Paintings*, p. 66.

55. Patricia Meilman, *Titian and the Altarpiece in Renaissance Venice* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2000), pp. 135–6 (Meilman's monograph should be noted along with D'Elia, *The Poetics of Titian's Religious Paintings* and Thomas Puttfarcken, *Titian and Tragic Painting. Aristotle's 'Poetics' and the Rise of the Modern Artist* (University of Yale Press: New Haven, 2005) as the perfect trilogy on Titian and tragedy. On antithesis see David Summers, 'Contrapposto: Style and Meaning in Renaissance Art', *Art Bulletin*, vol. 59, no. 3, 1977, pp. 336–61 and Clifton *supra*.

Aretino inject 'I' into his description. His is the pleasure of watching the horror experienced by the others and then relating how they were unable to detach representation from reality.

Over a century after Titian's painting was installed, Carlo Ridolfi would hystericize the reading of the image further:

This event is depicted at the edge of a thick wood full of old oak trees and other plants whose branches form a shady curtain for protection from the sun. Here, the saint, fallen to the ground, is overcome by the wicked murderer who, seizing him by the hem of his cape, savagely redoubles his blows, while the glorious martyr, even though he is dying, dipping his fingers in his own blood writes upon the earth: 'I believe in God the Father Almighty', bearing witness until his last breath to the Christian faith.<sup>57</sup>

Ridolfi takes some time to narrate the *istoria* that takes place in this image. What he then adds, however, is the critical punctum – that emotional stab – which

reconfigures the potentiality of horror in spectatorial terms. As the saint is being stabbed to death, Ridolfi observes how ‘his frightened companion, also struck on the head, tries to save himself by fleeing, since the fear of death causes us to abandon our friends for our greater self-interest, and in his pallid face terror reigns, while a gasp seems to issue from his mouth’.<sup>58</sup> Like the command ‘nosce te ipsum’ (to know thyself), the reflexive verb ‘salvarsi’ cuts the reader here, underlining at once the ethical implications of being a witness to horror and the horror of witnessing one’s own potential cowardice in a similar situation. In all three descriptions, the bodily collapse of the martyr and the escape of his companion are reiterated. The visceral jolt of the scene is encapsulated in the double movement towards death and away from life, the sensation of falling and of flight that reverberates through the body of the spectator. And in all three, it is the cry, the shriek, and the gasp that punctures the aesthetic moment.

It is reductive to link all screams in early modern Italian art to the *Laocoön*, but in the case of Titian’s martyrdom altarpiece, the *Laocoön* is the missing link or rather, to be historically accurate, Sansovino’s vision of the *Laocoön* is the missing link. Sansovino – the child prodigy who triumphed in Bramante and Raphael’s contest in 1510 and who was a former lodger in the house of Giuliano da Sangallo (who named the statue in 1506) – would himself arrive in Venice in 1527, but his bronze *Laocoön* had been on display in the Palazzo Ducale since 1525 when Cardinal Grimani’s collection was bequeathed to the Venetian State. The year 1527 corresponds to the Sack of Rome, but it was also right in the middle of Titian’s painter’s block for the martyrdom altarpiece, which he struggled to deliver from early 1526 when he received the commission until April 1530 when it was finally unveiled. It was also Sansovino who would then give Titian the commission for the ceiling paintings at Santo Spirito some years later in 1542 when Vasari abandoned the project.<sup>59</sup>

If D’Elia situated Titian’s ‘Christian tragedies’ within the Venetian revival of ancient tragedy and if Madlyn Kahr read the Santo Spirito ‘sacrifice cycle’ as a political allegory of recent military losses in the Eastern territories of Venice, drawing stylistically from a number of Tusco-Roman sources (Giulio Romano in particular) lurking in Titian’s form, I would like to push these iconographical and social historical arguments somewhat further.<sup>60</sup> Giovanni Battista Giralaldi’s *Orbecche* was one of the earliest and most intense of the cinquecento dramas, a tragedy about a Persian king who murders his daughter’s secret husband and children and then presents their fragmented corpses to her as a gift.<sup>61</sup> *Orbecche* later stabs her father, becomes queen, and eventually commits suicide. The play was first performed for the Duke of Ferrara, Ercole d’Este, in 1541 and published in 1543 – in other words, at the very moment Titian was about to take over the Santo Spirito project (Titian, of course, had been in contact with the D’Este court from the 1520s onward when he was painting the bacchanals for Alfonso d’Este).

Contextualisation, however, only gets us so far. In other words, can we push the social historical data further here to say something different, to offer a new history of the moving image that brings us beyond known conversations about courtly patronage? In both Giralaldi’s tragedy and Titian’s paintings, an intensely ‘Dionysian’ image of antiquity emerges that channels the violent sensation and affect expressed in the *Laocoön*. Jacopo’s own son, Francesco Sansovino, would later describe Titian’s cycle in his history of the Venetian state, *Venetia città nobilissima et singolare* (1581), as the three images ‘in which we see Abraham



**Fig. 9** Martino Rota after Titian, *Martyrdom of St Peter Martyr*, ca. 1567–70, engraving, 399 × 273 mm. (Photo: © Wikimedia Commons.)

56. As Settis, *Laocoonte*, pp. 200–1 pointed out, leave it to Aretino to compare the expression of the *Laocoön* to the screaming face of erotic *jouissance* in the *Ragionamento della Nanna e Antonia* (Venice, 1534): ‘faccia quel viso arcigno che a Belvedere fa quella figura di marmo ai serpi che l’assassino in mezzo dei suoi figli’.

57. Carlo Ridolfi, *The Life of Titian*, trans. Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella (Penn State University Press: University Park, 1996), p. 78; Carlo Ridolfi, *Le meraviglie dell’arte*, vol. 1 (Tipografia e Fonderia Cartallier: Venice, 1835), pp. 217–18: ‘Lo avvenimento è rappresentato nel principio di folto bosco d’annose quercie e d’altre piante ripieno, che formano de’ rami loro ombrosa cortina per riparo del sole. Quindi il Santo caduto a terra è sopraffatto dall’empio omicida, che afferrandogli il lembo della cappa, raddoppia fieramente il colpo, mentre il Martire glorioso tingendo il dito nel proprio sangue scrive in terra, benchè si muora, *Io credo in Dio Padre onnipotente*, autenticando fin nell’estremo punto la cristiana fede’.

58. Ridolfi, *Life of Titian*, pp. 78–9; Ridolfi, *Le meraviglie*, vol. 1, p. 218: ‘Intanto il compagno intorrito, percorso anch’egli sopra della testa, tenta con la fuga salvarsi, poiché il timore della morte fa che si abbandoni nel maggior uopo l’amico, nel cui pallido volto campeggia il timore, e dalla bocca par ch’eschi lo anelito’.

59. Vasari, *Le Vite*, vol. 6, p. 178: ‘fu da Giuliano da Sangallo, architetto di papa Iulio Secondo,



**Fig. 10** Titian, *Abraham and Isaac*, 1542–44, oil on canvas, 328 × 285 cm. Santa Maria della Salute, Venice (originally in Santo Spirito in Isola). (Photo: akg-images/Cameraphoto.)



**Fig. 11** Titian, *Cain and Abel*, 1542–44, oil on canvas, 298 × 282 cm. Santa Maria della Salute, Venice (originally in Santo Spirito in Isola). (Photo: akg-images/Erich Lessing.)



**Fig. 12** Titian, *David and Goliath*, 1542–44, oil on canvas, 300 × 285 cm. Santa Maria della Salute, Venice (originally in Santo Spirito in Isola). (Photo: akg-images/Cameraphoto.)

who sacrifices [Isaac], Cain who murders Abel, and David who slaughters Goliath'.<sup>62</sup> Sansovino's use of the non-continuous simple present tense – 'sacrifica', 'occide', and 'ammazza' – translates the reiterative brute force of the actions into textual form.

Kahr described the Santo Spirito paintings as 'an alien, though exalted, achievement' in Titian's oeuvre, insisting that the 'effect of brutal power and violence' was 'incompatible with his artistic personality as we know it from his other works' and that Titian soon 'felt free to return to a direction more consistent with his natural bent'.<sup>63</sup> Kahr's resistance to the darker, anti-Apollonian aspects of early modern antiquity is not unusual (although when Apollo finally makes his appearance at the end of Titian's long career, it would be as the detached, merciless executioner in *The Flaying of Marsyas*). Instead of Kahr's vision of antiquity and the Renaissance as an exceedingly humane and humanistic culture, we might turn instead to the assessment of the seventeenth-century Venetian art critic, Marco Boschini, who would describe the *David and Goliath* as a double assault upon the senses and the intellect: 'In the centre of this painting, one sees a large figure, so horrible and terrifying, represented with a fury that is so horrendous that it sends everything else into a confusion'.<sup>64</sup> Gazing up at the image of *Cain and Abel* he felt paralysed by a shameful silence as all thought evacuated from his mind, and raising his eyes to the *Sacrifice of Isaac*, he was shaken by the artist's pictorial command of madness, terror, and violence.<sup>65</sup>

Paint and canvas function here as the thin membrane between aesthetic experience and the vulnerability of the spectator's body. In Titian's depiction of *David and Goliath* and *Cain and Abel*, it is the gaping wound of the giant's severed neck and the bursting gash on the younger brother's head that stare back down at the viewer from the ceiling. The temporal tension invoked by these two wounds – a sense of arriving too late – is set off against the acquiescent face of the young Isaac who returns our gaze in what was believed to have been the central panel. Like the sons in the Laocoön group, the impending death of a child strikes at the heart of the beholder.<sup>66</sup> A sentimental trick perhaps, but the repetition of some scenarios, as we are about to hear, never ceases to affect.

### Don't Look Now

In this final section, I would like to turn to Poussin. As with Winckelmann's *Laocoön* (or even Kahr's humanistic Titian), the rationalist, academic persona of Poussin needs some critical readjustment.<sup>67</sup> Celebrated as the *peintre philosophe* by generations of academicians and academics, it is easy to overlook the chilling quality that seeps through the surface of Poussin's canvases where distant towns are smothered by smoke and fire as in the background in the *Landscape with Orpheus and Eurydice*; where thunder booms and lightning strikes with indifference as in the *Tree Struck by Lightning*; where plague and destruction underline man's helplessness as in the *Plague at Ashdod*; where bodies are smuggled across leaky boundaries as in the *Landscape with the Ashes of Phocion*; and where death has a voice of its own as in the *Arcadian Shepherds*.<sup>68</sup> Poussin's biographer, the arch-classicist Giovanni Bellori, was quick to note that Giambattista Marino praised the young French painter for being 'quick and efficacious with inventions and the *affetti*'.<sup>69</sup> Again, the intensity of sensation and affect did not necessarily contradict an abiding interest in antiquity.

In his formative years in Rome, Poussin was fortunate to be awarded the commission for the *Martyrdom of St Erasmus* (Fig. 13), which would decorate one of the altars in St Peter's. Poussin is reported by one of his biographers to have been disappointed by the poor reception of this image.<sup>70</sup> Yet the painting caused quite a stir at the time and was praised by its fans for its 'passion, emotion, and invention'.<sup>71</sup> Bellori could not help but describe the image in gruesome, graphic detail:

The saint is represented nude and supine on a bench or block of wood: the body is stretched out and prepared for martyrdom, the chest hanging over in the foreground with the head and bound hands toward the ground; while the executioner, having opened the innards, cuts the entrails loose with his right hand and pulls them out with his left, and at the back his companion turns a winch and winds them round it like a rope. The saint, half alive, expresses his extreme suffering in all his limbs and in his face.<sup>72</sup>

As with the descriptions of the *Laocoön* and Titian's *Martyrdom of St Peter*, the tactile elaboration of viscera, fluids, and the violent entry into the body convey immediate, endogenous responses. As with Titian's paintings for SS. Giovanni e Paolo and Santo Spirito, the *Laocoön* is the missing link for Poussin executed this spectacular image in the very moment in the 1620s when he was studying ancient statuary in Rome with his friend the Flemish sculptor François Duquesnoy.<sup>73</sup>

Sometime around the end of the decade, Poussin would also paint the startling *Massacre of the Innocents* (Fig. 14) now in Chantilly – this is perhaps the image that prompted Francis Bacon to say later on that 'the best human cry in painting was made by Poussin'.<sup>74</sup> In these same years, Poussin's friend and promoter, Marino, was composing his own grisly *Strage degli innocenti* (published posthumously in 1632).<sup>75</sup> Harald Hendrix situated Marino's poem within the visual imagery of artists such as Jusepe de Ribera whose 'aesthetics of horror' aimed at 'maximizing the pain of pain' and who emerged from the same early seventeenth-century Neapolitan context as Marino.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, Marino constructs the tension of the imminent massacre through the sensation and affect of distinctively aural details:

Hearing the signal of the regal trumpet, thousands of hands and thousands of weapons rise and the iron descends upon thousands of heads and blood floods out of thousands of wounds. The hall reverberates with the cries of women; the air is cut by the screams of children. Over there faces are stained by wrath and here by death. The assassins revel; the assassinated wail.<sup>77</sup>

Turning to the massacre itself, Marino delights in an ekphrasis of gore: a child is killed on his mother's breast transforming the breast from a 'cup of milk' into a 'chalice of blood' and another is ripped out of his screaming mother's arms, swung around three or four times in the air, before when being hurled against a wall.<sup>78</sup> 'In the end', Marino writes, 'his limbs broken and bones snapped, the child lay stretched out on the ground all mashed and chopped, and through his lips and nostrils there flowed white marrow in great quantity, mixed with blood'.<sup>79</sup> For both Marino and Poussin, the graphic horror of the content loses itself in the vertiginous pleasure of form, which was punctured at its very heart by the representation of the piercing noise that escapes from the gaping cavities of disfigured faces.

As with Titian's Santo Spirito cycle discussed above, is it mere coincidence that for Poussin these studies of ancient and modern screams climaxed at the end of the decade with the *Martyrdom of St Erasmus* and the *Massacre of the*

condotto a Roma'; Tommaso Temanza, *Vite dei più celebri architetti e scultori veneziani che fiorirono nel secolo decimosesto* (Edizioni Labor: Milan, 1966), p. 202: 'Mentre il Sansovino tali cose faceva, abitava con Giuliano da Sangallo[...]'.

60. Madlyn Kahr, 'Titian's Old Testament Cycles' *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, vol. 29, 1966, pp. 200–3.

61. On the early modern theatre of cruelty see Ferdinando Neri, *La tragedia italiana del cinquecento* (Galletti e Cocci: Florence, 1904), pp. 137–47 and Rosanna Gorriss, 'La tragedia della crudeltà', in Elio Mosele (ed.), *Dalla tragedia rinascimentale alla tragicommedia barocca. Esperienze teatrali a confronto in Italia e in Francia* (Scena editore: Fasano, 1993), pp. 295–309.

62. Quoted in Italian in Kahr, 'Titian's Old Testament Cycles', p. 194.

63. Kahr, 'Titian's Old Testament Cycle', p. 205.

64. Marco Boschini, *La carta del navigare pitoresco*, Anna Pallucchini (ed.), (Istituto per la collaborazione culturale: Venice-Rome, 1966), p. 189: 'Int'el quadro de mezo un figuron/ Se vede, cusì oribile e tremendo,/ Rapresentà con un furor sì orendo,/ Che ogni altro questo ha messo in confusion'.

65. Boschini, *La carta*, p. 190: '(C.) Siben me sento con l'inzegno vuodo,/ Che quasi el mio parlar se ne vergogna'.

66. On the pathos of the sons in ancient sculptural traditions, see Caroline Vout, 'Laocoön's Children and the Limits of Representation', *Art History*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2010, pp. 396–419; on this theme in early modern literature and art see Anthony Colantuono, *The Tender Infant: Invenzione and Figura in the Art of Poussin* (PhD Dissertation, John Hopkins University, 1986).

67. For an analysis of this tradition see David Carrier, *Poussin's Paintings. A Study in Art-Historical Methodology* (Pennsylvania State University Press: University Park, 1993), chapter 1.

68. *Landscape with Orpheus and Eurydice*, 1650–3, Paris, Musée du Louvre; *Tree Struck by Lightning*, 1651, Rouen, Musée des Beaux-Arts; *The Plague in Ashdod*, 1631, Paris: Musée du Louvre; *Landscape with the Ashes of Phocion*, 1648, Liverpool, Walker Art Gallery; *Arcadian Shepherds*, 1650, Paris, Musée du Louvre. I would like to signal the following study of Poussin that was published online just as this volume was being sent to the printers and which provides an excellent analysis of Poussin in relation to a less heroic 'Sublime': Nigel Saint, 'Louis Marin, Poussin and the Sublime', *Art History*, vol. 34, no.



5, 2011. I regret not having had more time to engage with its salient points of shared interest.

69. Giovanni Pietro Bellori in Evelina Borea (ed.), *Le vite de' pittori, scultori e architetti moderni* (Giulio Einaudi editore: Turin, 1976), p. 424: 'pronto ed efficace nelle invenzione e ne gli affetti'.

70. Passeri wrote of this painting that Nicolas always said that it was not well received and he never knew whether it was a failure on his part or due to the 'spitefulness of superintendant at that time' (in French translation): *Vies de Poussin*. Bellori, *Félibien, Passeri, Sandart, Stefan Germer* (ed.), (Macula: Paris, 1994), p. 130).

71. It was compared to the Valentin Boulogne's compositionally similar *Martyrdom of Saints Processus and Martinian*, which was judged superior for its 'naturalism, force, and colours' (in French translation in *Vies*, p. 145).

72. English translation: Giovanni Pietro Bellori, *The Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, trans. Alice Sedgwick Wohl (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2005), p. 312; Bellori, *Le vite*, pp. 428–9: 'Vien figurato il Santo ignudo e supino sopra uno scanno o ceppo di legno: resta il corpo disteso e disposto al martirio, pendendo avanti il petto, con la testa e le mani legate verso terra; mentre il manigoldo, aperte l'interiora, con la destra gli distacca le budella e con la sinistra le tira fuori, e dietro il compagno gira una burbara e le avvolge intorno a guisa di fune. Il Santo semivivo esprime in tutte le membra e nel volto l'estremo suo patimento'.

73. Poussin was also copying Titian's *Bacchanals*, which had been in Rome since 1598, in this period; see Maria H. Loh, *Titian Remade: Repetition and the Transformation of Early Modern Italian Art* (Getty Research Institute: Los Angeles, 2007), pp. 64–71.

74. Bacon quoted in Kristine Stiles and Peter Howard Selz (eds), *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art. A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings* (California University Press: Berkeley, 1996), p. 199. I would like to thank Conor Kissane for sharing this quote with me.

75. For Poussin and Marino see Elisabeth Cropper and Charles Dempsey, *Nicolas Poussin. Friendship and the Love of Painting* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1996), chapter 7 who identify the *Chantilly Massacre* as an overdoor in the Palazzo Giustiniani commissioned in the early 1630s rather than around 1628 as the Musée Condé dates it.

76. Harald Hendrix, 'The Repulsive Body: Images of Torture in Seventeenth-Century Naples', in Florike Egmond and Robert Zwijnenber (eds), *Bodily Extremities. Preoccupations*



**Fig. 13** Nicolas Poussin, *Martyrdom of St Erasmus*, 1628–29, oil on canvas, 320 × 186 cm. Pinacoteca, Vatican. (Photo: akg-images/Nimatallah.)

*Innocents?* The first painting repeats the sensation of the body as it is being violated and broken. St Erasmus reads as an upside-down and inverted *Laocoön* as the sinuous intestines snake out from within his own body. The



**Fig. 14** Nicolas Poussin, *Massacre of the Innocents*, 1628–29, oil on canvas, 147 × 171 cm. Musée Condé, Chantilly. (Photo: akg-images/André Held.)

second painting reproduces the sensation of the Laocoön's struggle to protect his children, his piteous cry in the face of death, and his useless resistance against a more powerful assailant. Both images generate an affective, sensate response that emerges from the somaesthetic encounter before a figure in agony. While it might be a far stretch to trace these images morphologically onto the body of the *Laocoön*, an argument, however, is being made for the repetition of *Laocoön*'s scream in both images, a scream that would resonate in Poussin's art for a long time to come.<sup>80</sup>

The most chilling example of this sensation would find expression in the *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake* (Fig. 15).<sup>81</sup> A necessary disclaimer here: I would like to avoid both the clinical deconstruction of the canvas undertaken by Louis Marin in *Sublime Poussin* (1995), which is perhaps one of the most thoughtful (and difficult) readings of Poussin's work, as well as T.J. Clark's moving account of his immersive communion with the painting in *The Sight of Death* (2006), which sought to counter what he perceived to be Marin's bloodless dissection of a beautiful masterpiece. To be sure, the affective force of Poussin's snake painting lies precisely in its ambivalent vacillation between the semiotic and aesthetic extremes of interpretation – we are somewhere in between the calculated chill of Roman Polanski and the pathos-ridden melodrama of Douglas Sirk. We are, in short, in Hitchcock territory.

What is so fascinating about this painting is its decidedly anti-humanist and supernatural streak. Sheila McTighe located the London painting within early seventeenth-century commentaries about arcane ancient theories regarding the frenzy of putrescence and rebirth. Thus, we find in an early

with the Human Body in Early Modern European Culture (Ashgate: Aldershot, 2003), pp. 81, 69.

77. Giambattista Marino, *Strage degli innocenti* (Giacomo Scaglia: Venice, 1633), p. 87 (stanza 14): 'Udito il segno de la regia tromba,/ Ecco alzar mille man, mill'armi horrende,/ Già sopra mille capi il ferro piomba,/ Già fuor di mille piaghe il sangue scende./ Del pianto feminil l'atrio rimbomba,/ Al grido pueril l'aria si fende/ Là tinti d'ira, è qui di morte i visi/ Fremono gli uccisor, gemon gli uccisi'.

78. Marino quoted in Hendrix, 'The Repulsive Body', p. 86.

79. Marino quoted in Cropper and Dempsey, *Nicolas Poussin*, p. 265; for the Italian original: 'Già di latte, or di sangue è fatta coppa'; 'Poi con robusta man lo scaglia e spinge/ Contro il muro vicin fra duri sassi;/ Pria però che l'aventi e che 'l percota,/ Tre volte e quattro intorno il rota'; 'Al fin, rotto le membra, infranto l'ossa,/ Steso al suol tutto pesto e tutto trito,/ Per le labra e le nari in copia grande/ Con la bianca midolla il sangue spande'.

80. While this follows the argument put forth by Anthony Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin* (Pallas Athene: London, 1995), p. 88, that 'The face of the saint shows anguish, but in the convention of the *Laocoön*, and his body preserves the noble forms of a classical marble', I differ from Blunt in his

seventeenth-century French translation of Plutarch the following seemingly fantastic explanation:

Just as bulls, when they decompose, engender bees; and horses engender wasps; similarly decomposing asses give rise to snails; also the bodies of men, when the spine's liquid melts and fixes on [the body's] exterior, produces serpents.<sup>82</sup>

For McTighe, the *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake* tapped into heretical libertine beliefs that 'life could spontaneously generate within nature, outside of divine creation'.<sup>83</sup> Drawing from the same ancient sources, Malcolm Bull asked, in regards to this morbid tradition: 'Is Poussin's painting perhaps one of the few ever to attempt to depict the effects of smell?' (olfactory horror, after all, was something that Poussin had explored in earlier works like *The Plague of Ashdod*).<sup>84</sup> Without an identifiable narrative other than the events that unfold before our eyes, Poussin's landscape is not about violence, which runs the risk of celebrating the tragic and heroic. Nor is it about terrorism, which finds justification in the logic of motives (political, ideological, religious, or otherwise). Instead, the artist presents the viewer with a horror picture – a representation, a fiction that both reiterates its own meaninglessness all while actualising a genuine embodied response in the face of the falsehood.

To a greater extent than Titian's 'Christian tragedies' and Poussin's own religious images, this painting taught its historical viewer 'how to scream' in front of the painting. Poussin's snake painting depicts a freak accident, the discovery of which is relayed in a series of refracted and visceral reactions stemming from the man who flees in fright, to the various figures at a distance who respond, in turn, to a sign of horror, rather than to the sight of death itself. Early modern spectators took great delight in describing this image. The seventeenth-century French critic, André Félibien praised Poussin's dark landscape at length in the *Entretiens*. His description is almost cinematic: beginning with a close-up of the horror stricken mask-like face of the running man, Félibien then pulls out to describe the sensation of fear caused by the sight of the snake and the physical effects it imposes upon the body:

the eyebrows go up, the eyes and mouth open wider, as if to seek asylum and ask for help. The hair stands up on the head, the blood recedes from the face, leaving it pale and distraught, and all one's members become so impotent that one can scarcely speak or run.<sup>85</sup>

Poussin's figures, Félibien concludes, excel at creating 'emotions that few other Painters have been able to represent as worthily as he'.<sup>86</sup>

What we have here is an early modern horror picture, an image whose intention was to express the 'different effects of horror and fear', as the legend in Etienne Baudet's engraving after the painting indicated.<sup>87</sup> Scholars have been divided on the source for the painting: Anthony Blunt drew upon eighteenth-century sources such as Baudet's print to locate the subject both geographically (the snake-infested region of the Pontine Marshes outside of Rome) and historically (an actual event that occurred in c. 1641); in contrast, Elizabeth Cropper and Charles Dempsey questioned the contemporaneity of the scene, interpreting it instead as an inspired imitation of classical funerary reliefs in the Barberini collection directed towards the expression of *affetti*.<sup>88</sup> However, unlike in Poussin's history paintings where identifiable characters rise and fall, here the victims are nobodies. In this

idealist reading of the Laocoön's nobility and classicism.

81. I am not the first to make the connection between the Laocoön and the National Gallery painting. Richard Deacon's towering wood, aluminium, and steel sculpture *Laocoön* (1996), the centrepiece of an exhibition at the Henry Moore Institute in 2007, was made in response to the sculptor's close study of the Roman prototype and of the affect produced by the serpent in Poussin's landscape; see Penelope Curtis, 'Deacon's Snakes and Ladders', *Towards a New Laocoön* (Henry Moore Institute: Leeds, 2007), p. 59. On Poussin's obsession with serpents see: Malcolm Bull, 'Poussin's Snakes' in Richard Kendall (ed.), *Cézanne and Poussin. A Symposium* (Sheffield Academic Press: Sheffield, 1993), pp. 30–50.

82. Plutarch quoted in Sheila McTighe, *Nicolas Poussin's Landscape Allegories* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1996), p. 132.

83. McTighe, *Nicolas Poussin*, p. 130.

84. On Poussin and miasma, see Sheila Barker, 'Poussin, Plague, and Early Modern Medicine', *Art Bulletin*, vol. 86, no. 4, 2004, pp. 659–89.

85. Félibien from the *Entretiens sur les vies et ouvrages des plus excellents peintres anciens et modernes* quoted in Louis Marin, *Sublime Poussin*, trans. Catherine Porter (Stanford University Press: Stanford, 1999), p. 65.

86. Félibien quoted in Marin, *Sublime Poussin*, p. 64.

87. The French inscription on the print reads: 'Divers effets d'horreur et de crainte sont icy exprimés. Un jeune homme mort proche d'une fontaine a tout le corps envelope par un serpent d'une grandeur enorme: Cet aspect effroyable fait fuir un autre homme dont les regards troublez et les cheveux herissez sur son front epouvantent une femme plus éloignée assise au bord du chemin: Et les cris de celle cy encore plus loing tourner la teste a quelques pescheurs dont un est assis aupres d'un gran lac avec ses compagnons qui jouent a la mourre, Et d'autres conduisent une barque et retirent leurs filets. L'on tient que le Poussin peignit ce tableau a l'occasion d'un accident semblable qui arriva de son temps aux environs de Rome' (for an image of the print see British Museum no. U,8.68 / AN145530001).

88. The explanation offered by Blunt, *Poussin*, p. 287 sought to contextualise and contain the strangeness of the image, whereas Cropper and Dempsey, *Nicolas Poussin*, pp. 291–3 were more interested in the rhetorical force of *affetti* in Poussin's paintings.



**Fig. 15** Nicolas Poussin, *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake*, 1648, oil on canvas, 118.2 × 197.8 cm. National Gallery, London. (Photo: National Gallery.)

regard, it does not really matter whether the painting draws from an ancient story or illustrates a current event; the *istoria*, to return to Alberti's formula, 'will move spectators when the men painted in the picture outwardly demonstrate their own feelings as clearly as possible'. '[T]hese feelings', moreover, 'are known from movements of the body'. The horrified man runs, but we look first into the corner and see what he saw moments before him. Like an after-image in his mind, we share in the simultaneity of the representation that haunts the subject after the embodied referent is no longer there. There is no heroism, no clear moral, not even an explanation, just the shadows in Plato's cave and the emotional projection of the beholder.

Herein lies both the pleasure and the anxiety generated by the special affects of the moving image. In François Fénelon's early eighteenth-century *Dialogues of the Dead*, Poussin describes the invention to the ghost of Leonardo da Vinci, animating the scene from left to right highlighting all the gruesome details from the 'monstrous snake' to the 'livid' corpse to the 'surprise and horror' of the second man, and the 'aftereffect of terror' in the face of the woman who cannot see the source of horror but can only react to the running man.<sup>89</sup> Hitchcock can help us here to differentiate between two types of screams. First, there is the shrill blood curdling scream of disorganised fear; second, and the repressed scream of pure anxiety – the kind that doesn't come out right away. The most famous of the audible screams in the history of film occurs in the shower scene in *Psycho* when Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) is confronted with the inevitability of her untimely death at the hands of an ambiguous Norman/Mother (Anthony Perkins). However, one of the most chilling of silent screams in Hitchcock's oeuvre, as Slavoj Žižek pointed out, occurs in *The Birds* (Fig. 16) as Lydia Brenner (Jessica Tandy) emerges

89. The significant passages from Fénelon are reprinted in Marin, *Sublime Poussin*, pp. 62–4; for an excellent analysis of Poussin's painting and Fénelon's text see: Walter E. Rex, 'The Landscape Demythologized: From Poussin's Serpents to Fénelon's 'Shade,' and Diderot's Ghost', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 30, no. 4, 1997, pp. 401–19.



Fig. 16 Jessica Tandy as Lydia Brenner in *Birds* (1963) Alfred Hitchcock/Universal Studios.

90. Slavoj Žižek, *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (dir. Sophie Fiennes, 2006).

91. Fénelon quoted in Marin, *Sublime Poussin*, p. 63.

92. Fénelon quoted in Marin, *Sublime Poussin*, pp. 62–3.

93. Argento quoted in Maitland McDough, *Broken Mirror/Broken Minds. The Dark Dreams of Dario Argento* (Sun Tavern Fields: London, 1991), p. 244.

94. Poussin quoted in Philip Sohm, *Style in the Art Theory of Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2001), p. 136.

95. Hitchcock quoted in François Truffaut, *Hitchcock: Dialogue between Truffaut and Hitchcock* (Touchstone Books: New York, 1985), pp. 282–3.

from the house where she has just discovered her dead neighbour whose face has been disfigured.<sup>90</sup> Hers is the choked scream of amorphous anxiety that paralyses the voice, denying the very speech that artists and poets sought so hard to infuse in the figures of their moving images. It was the immediate sensation and the haunting affect of these screams that artists like Titian and Poussin sought to reproduce in their works.

Again, Hitchcock is not entirely an unwelcomed visitor from an anachronistic future yet to come. Fénelon, speaking as the historical character of Poussin, would articulate this distinction through the 'big' and 'small' screams of the running man and the alarmed woman in the landscape:

These two frights have the qualities that pain is said to have: a big one keeps silent, a small one speaks out. The man's fright renders him immobile: the woman's which is the lesser, is more marked by the grimace on her face; one sees in her a feminine fear that can hold nothing back; she expresses her full alarm, give sway to her feelings; she falls to a seated position and forgets what she is carrying; she extends her arms and seems to cry out.<sup>91</sup>

When Fénelon's Poussin finishes explaining the woman's immobile scream, he asks Leonardo for his approval: 'Is it not true that these different degrees of fear make a sort of game that touches and pleases?'<sup>92</sup> This line always reminded me of something that the Italian cult director Dario Argento said about his horror films: 'I like when people are disgusted, because it means you've made an impression on them'.<sup>93</sup>

In a famous letter to his friend Chantelou, Poussin identified five different rhetorical styles or 'modes' (the Dorian, Phrygian, Lydian, Hypolidian, and Ionic) which when properly deployed, 'filled the soul of the beholders' and had the 'power to arouse the soul of the spectator to diverse emotions'.<sup>94</sup> Hitchcock as we know felt very much the same way. His remarks about the success of *Psycho* provide us with an insightful summary concerning the affective force at play in representations of horror:

My main satisfaction is that the film had an effect on the audiences, and I consider that very important. I don't care about the subject matter; I don't care about the acting; but I do care about the pieces of film and photography and the sound track and all of the technical ingredients that make the audience scream.<sup>95</sup>

What is a scream other than the disarticulation of speech? The utterance that fails to communicate. The thought that cannot yet crystallise. Sensation rising to the surface. Special affects that grip the sympathetic nervous system. A zone of indiscernability flooded with potentiality. The pathos of the moving image that lurks in the temporal fold of the early modern horror picture. Of course Hitchcock cared about content, but form was the vehicle for generating artistic meaning and affect. His famous disclaimer ‘it’s only a movie’ brings us back, in the final analysis, to the question of representation that lies at the heart of horror. For the sculptor, poet, painter, and director, the pleasure resided in the ability to create an image that could move its beholder in spite of his/her sense of good judgment and claims to aesthetic disinterestedness. If *Psycho* successfully taught Baby Boomers how to scream in the cinema, the *Laocoön* taught early modern spectators how to scream before the portentous spectacle of antiquity and this – rather than the ‘noble simplicity and quiet grandeur’ of antiquity – was what artists like Titian and Poussin sought to reproduce in the visual language and new media of their respective contemporary moments.

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