

READING CARAVAGGIO Basic Instincts and Their Discontents

The point, then, is not to heal the split between words and images, but to see what interests and powers it serves. W. J. T. MITCHELL

Reading Caravaggio?

Caravaggio's *The Cardsharps* ("I Bari"), ca. 1594–95, in Fort Worth, Texas (fig. 3.1), and his *Fortune-Teller*, in the Louvre (fig. 3.2,) have always seemed to me utterly contemporary—perhaps because they seem to relate beauty to identity.

For me, *The Cardsharps* is a visual narrative about vision, time, and identity formation; about beauty and desire. The cards evoke Narcissus' mirror, and the youth looking into the cards is accordingly totally self-absorbed.¹ To get a better sense of the visual narrative, I suggest we resist the temptation to read the prefabricated narrative of card-playing and cheating into the visual image.² If we read the image as a surface, foregrounding its visuality at the expense of the realism of perspective, the older man's look, distorted by desire, can be seen as being directed at the beautiful youth's face. The other youth, coarser than this Narcissus, looks intently at the beautiful youth's face, perhaps in astonishment; let's make him the stand-in for the viewer. He is the one that Aptekar quotes in "*Where'd you get the red hair?*," reversing him from right to left.

All three figures are almost separate emblems: they are not connected as human figures; they are only visually, not psychologically or narratively, engaged with one another. The narrative distracts, attracts attention away from the beauty, but also incorporates the viewer through her representative, behind whom we stand and whose back is turned

1. See chapter 8 for an analysis of narcissism and Caravaggio's *Narcissus* that resonates with this painting. The combination of self-absorption and the cards-as-mirror recalls Fried's (1997) detailed attention to the effects of immersion and the shock of separation in Caravaggio. The duality of these two effects is not at stake here, since the first term, "immersion" for Fried, contradicts the presence of the mirror that I contend to be at issue here, and the second, the "shock of separation," is not relevant to *The Cardsharps*.

2. Although my interpretation moves in a different direction, generated by the contemporary response to the painting, I do not wish to suggest that there are no symbolic meanings attached to the cards and the cheating. On the card symbolism of this painting, see Wind 1989.



Figure 3.1. Caravaggio, *The Cardsharps* (*"I Bari"*), ca. 1594–1595. Oil on canvas, 39 x 54 in. The Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas.

3. The very absence of symptoms of a particular class in the youth's face is, of course, a sign of his upper-class identity. In the same way as unspecified gender is male and unspecified race is white, unspecified class is upper.

to us. The torn sleeve, coarsely sewn, showing threads, sets this youth apart from the timeless and classless beauty of the other.³ Here, Narcissus' ear and eyebrows draw rhythmic waves, tender baroque curves, which contrast sharply with the vertical stripes of the older man's clothing.

The face of the focal figure is slightly whiter. Why is whiteness connected to superiority, here situated in age, features, class? Our culture seems unable to divest skin color (and hair color, for that matter) of value. The fact that skin—of figures and surfaces—matters is underlined by the meticulous rendering of the tablecloth, the feathers, the fabric of the clothes. Three faces ordered from dark to light, coarse to smooth, invested with



values. The subtle difference in skin color between the two young men distinguishes ordinary mortals, like us—viewers—from divine, or desired, subjects.

Unlike the greater distinction that sets off the older and darker man as the villain, the figure whom I interpret as the stand-in for the viewer is portrayed as (potentially) innocent but poor. His possible innocence is represented by means of time: the downy hair on his upper lip inscribes the tenderness of his inchoate identity. But, our narrative continues, the poverty represented by the threadiness of the fabric predicts the loss of innocence, while also explaining and perhaps even excusing it. This slight element of visual narrative marginalizes the action—the cheating—and kicks the literary or “iconographic”

Figure 3.2. Caravaggio, *The Fortune-Teller*, ca. 1596–1597. Oil on canvas, 39 x 52 3/8 in. Louvre, Paris.

narrative to the bottom edge of the image, in favor of a narrative of visual interpellation. The frills on the shirt of the beautiful youth honor Beauty, even though in the narrative, this beauty is problematic. For this narrative leads us from the past, which dressed the one so well and the other so poorly, to the future, in which the one will have an identity that he need not even contemplate, whereas the other will have an identity that moves him downwards, inexorably. The “you” of the painting—its viewers—are addressed by those signs of a narrative of class difference as profoundly influential, precisely because the narrative is so superficially inscribed.

But I keep wondering if such a reading is in any way possible. What has happened over time that I can now *read* into this baroque painting a major preoccupation of our time? This chapter addresses this question of reading from the double perspective of the relationship between language and images and between past and present.⁴ I will argue that this double “confusion” is characteristic of the historical Baroque as it is recycled today—preposterously.⁵

Some time ago, while on a gallery tour of SoHo, I saw a gigantic work by New York-based artist Ken Aptekar, called *I'm six years old and hiding behind my hands*, from 1996 (fig. 3.3). It measured 120" × 120" and consisted of sixteen panels of oil on wood, with sandblasted plates of glass bolted, one inch away, over the painted surface. A richly painterly work, it confused me, as it would, I expect, many art historians. For although it struck me as both highly original and acutely contemporary—truly “postmodern”—it was “simply” a copy of François Boucher’s *Allegory of Painting*, in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. Draperies and flesh, clouds, and layers and layers of folds—but with an exuberant gilded frame that cast strange shadows on that portion of the painting which, although also blue, went beyond Boucher’s masterpiece, thus making me aware that it was more than just a “copy” of Boucher’s painting.

Most confusingly, the glass plates covered the luxuriously visual work with words: a text so emphatically autobiographical that I almost felt voyeuristic in reading it. The intimacy of the scene described in the narrative ambivalently attracted and excluded me. And yet, the primary effect of this work, which offered a text that overlaid an image hidden behind transparent glass, was an invitation to read. Hence, read was precisely what I did, feeling slightly annoyed because while I was reading I could not look, and also slightly guilty, as I have learned to feel whenever words come to stand in the way of my “pure” visual engagement with art. This unease was as intimate as the story of the six-year-old.

I read the text even though my reading was constantly interrupted by the painting which was looking back at me and forever reminding me that I ought to look at it first. It was a story of “maternal time,” with no plot to speak of; the story of a six-year-old boy, of

4. There is a long tradition of studies on the relations between the visual and the literary art of a period. One example of a word-and-image approach to Caravaggio is offered by Cropper (1991). Although my approach is altogether different, both in thrust and its conception of reading, the theoretical underpinnings of what I have to say in this chapter surely do not exclude a work like Cropper’s. But in terms of my “wavering” position in this study, I hold that the very distinction between “words” and “images” is itself challenged by the artworks discussed.

5. Again, I would like to keep the notion of “shared time” (Fabian 1994, 98) current in this context.

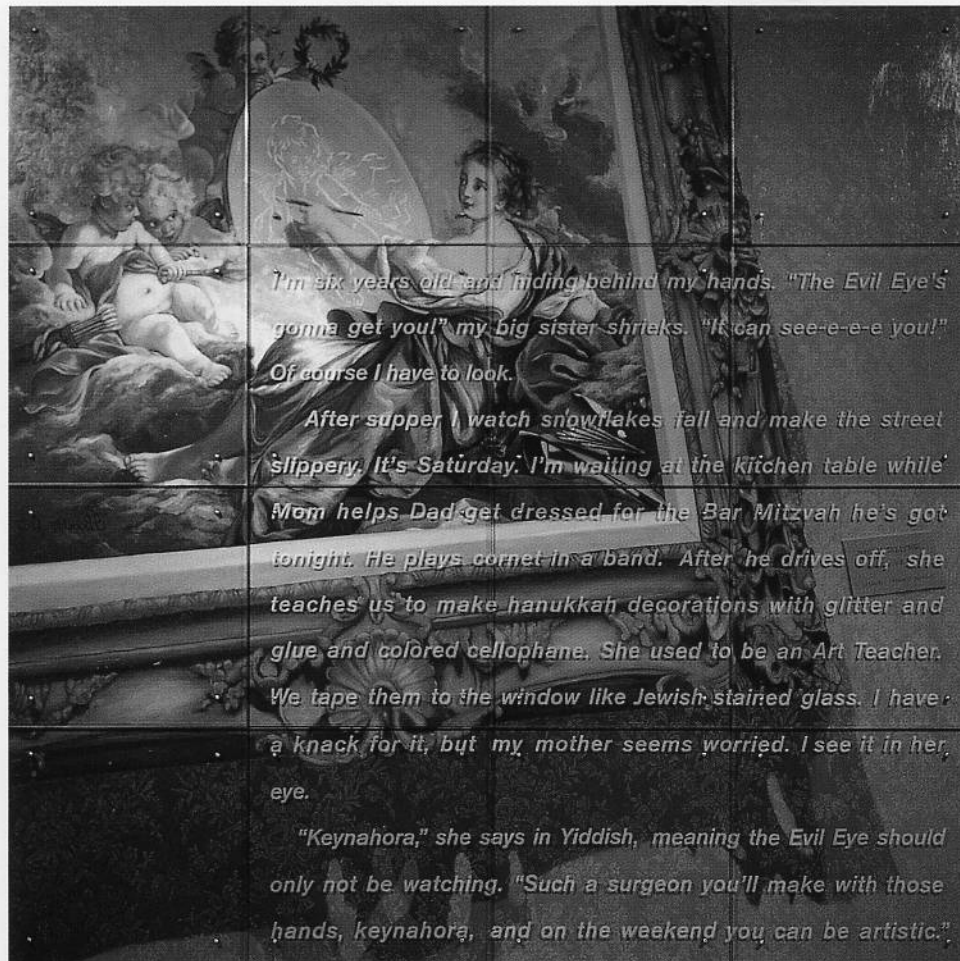


Figure 3.3. Ken Apter, *I'm six years old and hiding behind my hands*, 1996. Oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts, 120 x 120 in. (sixteen panels). Steinbaun Krauss Gallery, New York.

a homey, familial situation, a loving mother who taught her children to make decorations and yet worried when her son caught on too eagerly and too well. The hand of the allegorical figure, also quite motherly, also teaching art to the putti/children she is portraying, casts a shadow. In the same way as Boucher's painting casts a shadow over Apter's painting and the letters in turn cast theirs, the shadow of the autobiography talks about another painter's hands behind which the boy is hiding.

The work's intimacy seemed important, and it was, because the image overwritten by autobiography challenged everything we always thought we knew about the difference between the domains of the visual and the verbal. When Paul de Man, in a famous 1979 essay, deconstructed the opposition between semiology and rhetoric, he was only able to

do so because he had first constructed it. And that he was only able to do because he assumed, like most people, that the realm of words is unquestionably primary and unique. As de Man, along with many others, demonstrates, the assumptions not only *that* the verbal is different from the visual but also regarding *how* these media are different, are so common that they seem almost axiomatic, “basic,” in no need of being spelled out, and can be acted upon, as if “instinctively.”

In this and the following chapter, I take issue with several such assumptions regarding what is visual and what is verbal, and discuss the extent to which cultural interaction can become tricky when difference is taken as a ground for separation. In response to those instinctive, doxic self-evidences, I will suggest how even elementary semiotic concepts can enhance our understanding of “what goes on” in cultural interaction through artifacts. My point is not simply to assert the impossibility either of distinguishing or conflating the linguistic and the visual domains. Rather, in a constructive endeavor, I wish to explore ways in which this very impossibility can help articulate an interpretive method or procedure that does more justice to the artifacts, and to the two domains.

Misfiring

Aptekar’s word-and-image work constitutes an intervention in a culture which is thoroughly mixed in its media but which confines its institutionalized self-reflection—say, the humanities—to separatist disciplines. I see his work as a reflection that refuses such separatism, and put it on a par with philosophical practice. His work self-consciously intervenes in the stream of mixed-media artifacts that surround us. Let me, therefore, begin with a “text” that is a kind of popular-culture representation of the word/image combination that Aptekar’s work probes. In the context of this chapter it seems appropriate to point out that the reason I call all artifacts “texts” is not to reduce them to language but rather to reactivate the etymological riches of the notion that artifacts are fabricated, complex, and structured, that they have a complex “surface” that matters, like a sophisticated fabric, a texture as invoked in Leibniz’s “texturology.”

The cartoon, the comic strip, the emblem, but also film, tenaciously refuse the reduction our disciplinary boundaries have enforced. But the “word-ness” of images is not limited to these explicitly mixed texts. Just as language cannot be reduced to words and syntax but needs visualization in order to function, so images are inseparable from language, *in their very visuality*.⁶

As obvious as this may seem, academic reflection does not readily admit it, let alone draw consequences from it. An anecdotal example in Paul de Man’s essay “Semiology

6. This argument underlies my studies *Reading “Rembrandt”: Beyond the Word-Image Opposition* (1991) and *The Mottled Screen: Reading Proust Visually* (1997b).

and Rhetoric" (1979), to which I have already referred, and which opens his brilliant book *Allegories of Reading*, demonstrates the kind of basic instincts I have in mind here. De Man uses an incident from the satirical American TV series *All in the Family* to question the easy continuity between semiotics (this is the term I will use in place of his "semiology") and rhetoric in literary studies as well as, in the end, the distinction or indifference between them.

De Man recalls how the main character of that series is confronted with the vagaries of language:

Asked by his wife whether he wants to have his bowling shoes laced over or laced under, Archie Bunker answers with a question: "What's the difference?" Being a reader of sublime simplicity, his wife replies by patiently explaining the difference between lacing over and lacing under, whatever this may be, but provokes only ire. "What's the difference" did not ask for difference but means instead "I don't give a damn what the difference is." (1979, 9)

Indifferent to the importance of Bunker's indifference to difference, de Man goes on to argue that the misunderstanding is very likely to provoke an existential crisis, for what is at stake is the problem of meaning. He explains:

A perfectly clear syntactical paradigm (the question) engenders a sentence that has at least two meanings, of which the one asserts and the other denies its own illocutionary mode. It is not so that there are simply two meanings, one literal and the other figural, and that we have to decide which one of these meanings is the right one in this particular situation. The confusion can only be cleared up by the intervention of an extra-textual intention, such as Archie Bunker putting his wife straight; but the very anger he displays is indicative of more than impatience; it reveals his despair when confronted with a structure of linguistic meaning that he cannot control and that holds the discouraging prospect of an infinity of similar future confusions. (10)

De Man uses this example to introduce a discussion that ends up giving poets, as the most profound, or encompassing, philosophers of language and meaning, the last word in the matter. I was struck by the ease with which he considered Archie Bunker's "intention" as an external intervention, as extra-textual, notably in his argument against the opposition between internal and external criticism. For Archie Bunker is, of course, a textual figure, and the disambiguizing signs in the filmic text—his flabbergasted face, his shrugging, even his intonation, which helps to distinguish the rhetorical from the literal question—are part of a text that does not allow such a distinction. The look of contempt on his face, the overzealous seriousness of his wife, Edith, and *her* despair over her husband's failure to acknowledge her as a subject, are all part of the semiotic system that



Figure 3.4. Episode from *All in the Family* television series.

produced this text (fig. 3.4). The ambiguity of his question—as the interactive speech act (the “real” question, engaging his wife) and as the rhetorical, solipsistic one expressing indifference to difference (the rhetorical question)—can be taken here as a *mise en abyme* of the issue to which this chapter is devoted: What’s a word, what’s an image, and what difference does it make to identify a difference?

At the other end of the spectrum of possible attitudes toward the relation between images and words, I would like to evoke, in anticipation of the next chapter, Jackie Brookner’s declaration of materialism in “The Heart of Matter” (1993), which informs several of her works, including *Of Earth and Cotton* from 1995. The artist’s writing is interspersed with entries from a dictionary that are printed in italics. One such interruption has the entries “humble,” “humus,” and “homage,” in that order. The work, a combination of sculpture, installation, and process art, “is designed to invite people from all walks of life to consider their relationship to the source of their survival” (Edwards n.d.). It contains, among other elements, sculpted “portraits” of the feet of former sharecroppers from the cotton belt of the United States. The simple citation from a source as mun-

dane as a dictionary drives the point home that words and images feed each other and are inextricably bound together. Brookner comments in a language that is itself evocative of matter: "Hidden in the roots of our words we find what we seem to want to forget—that we are literally the same stuff as earth" (1993, 8). Indeed, the very fact that her portraits of feet are made of dirt inevitably recycles that other text, the story of creation in Genesis. In this "word-less" work, language is persistently and crucially present.

De Man ignores the visual nature of the object he is looking at as well as the bodily nature of speech. What he calls semiotic is avowedly just grammar; but that reduction is mobilized for the sake of establishing an opposition that he can then deconstruct in favor of ambiguity. The gesture, seemingly highly theoretical, might in the end be co-opted as antitheoretical, playing as it does into the hands of those who have the "gut-instinct" that semiotics is reductive.⁷

What happens in the episode of *All in the Family* cited by de Man would have considerably complicated his view of language and semiotics if he had taken the episode for what it was: a representation in a medium that in and of itself does not allow distinctions between word and image or between verbal and visual behavior and representation, a "discussion" with the culture in which it intervenes as much as one between the two main characters. And, to boot, these two discussions are devoted to the same issue: the question, "What difference does it make?"

I am not so sure that Edith Bunker is the one who "mistakenly understood" Archie's rhetorical question for a literal one. For underneath that issue lies another, fundamental to an understanding of language: that of relevance.⁸ The question is rhetorical only if one knows that there is no difference, but since for Edith there clearly is, the ambiguity de Man signals in the exchange becomes even more layered. Hence, we too cannot be so sure which of the two figures in the episode is misfiring.⁹

Let me take Aptekar's text-and-image as a cue for challenging the certainties of image, language, and the difference between them. For if we don't get it through the difficulty of reading the text without seeing the image and vice versa, in other words through the difficulty of isolating either, then the relationship between the represented Boucher and the rest of Aptekar's painting drives the point home: the mythological woman and the mother whose shadow shapes the painting are related by an ambiguity much like the one between Archie and Edith: Who is communicating, who is misfiring?

The fleeting "popular-culture" genre of the cartoon seems a much simpler case than a television series: there is no movement, the visual image is simplified by stylized drawing, and there is only one very short speech by each character. Here is an example from *Tom*, by German cartoonist Thomas Körner (fig. 3.5).¹⁰ The woman, fulfilling a bureau-

7. See, for example, Mitchell 1994, 14n.

8. See Sperber and Wilson 1995 for a linguistic theory based on relevance.

9. For the concept of misfiring (a speech act), see in particular Felman's masterful book (1983).

10. This cartoon was brought to my attention by Gerd Gemuenden of Dartmouth College.



Figure 3.5. Thomas Körner, Cartoon from *Tom*, 1993. Jochen Enterprises, Berlin.

cratic function, is asking the man what his nationality is. The man, represented as the stereotypical German, answers the question as if it were an order. This is a misfiring different from the one that made Archie Bunker rebuff his wife rather than taking her up on her offer of unlimited caring. In a considerably more complex interpretation than de Man would have given, but still interested in demonstrating ambiguity, I would suggest that Archie's misfiring consists of taking a real question for an implicit demonstration of subservience; Edith, in turn, misfires by taking a rhetorical question for a real one, believing against all odds that she will be taken seriously as a reward for her labor and care. The German man in the cartoon misfires in that he responds to the topic of nationality—according to the cartoon, a painful one in Germany today—by stepping back into the national identity of the past that produced the problem of national identity in the present in the first place (the blind obedience and submission to authority that caused so much unspeakable grief). He misfires by acting out, instead of stating, the answer. But in his very act of misfiring he states a truth: that nationalism backfires. Thus, he has the word of wisdom in today's debate on multiculturalism. By the same token, he

suspends the certainty of misfiring by endorsing the criterion of relevance. For his “misfiring” truth inserts the past within the present, inserts history within the question of (national) identity that is so present today.

Connecting the question of felicitousness of speech acts to that of relevance, as the Archie Bunker example suggested, the “truth” of the act of misfiring—which makes the man in the cartoon an adequate speaker after all—is that the questions bureaucracy asks are inappropriate, irrelevant, and even harmful. We learned that long ago from Althusser, who, in his famous essay on the work of ideology, proposed the important concept of *interpellation* as a means of taking linguistics one step beyond itself and of providing the analytical philosophy of language with a logic it could not quite accommodate.¹¹ Interpellation is the speech act of the social environment, for Althusser embodied in the state’s representative, the policeman, who calls out “Hey, you!,” making the subject turn around because of being addressed and thus constituting him as subject into subjection. For my purposes here, the concept of interpellation casts a net over more than just the state. But for fear of falling into the hopeless trap of the dichotomy between the social and the psychic, or state and culture, I make cultural identity the thematic focus of this chapter, whose theoretical focus is the identity of media.

Interpellation is a specifically relevant form of a more general “second-personhood.” Linguistic theory, especially in Emile Benveniste’s terms, argued that the “second person,” the “you” to whom every speech act is addressed, constitutes the subject in language. I will later return to the conclusion he drew from this, namely, that the essence of language is deixis, not reference. Althusser argued that this function of address, this “you” that constitutes the subject, is available, and, in fact, a privileged function with which ideology can work. The policeman saying “you” makes *you*, specifically, into *me*, that is, makes me turn around, feeling addressed at the same time as I feel unsettled, taken out of myself, already in prison so to speak. In the same way, the very fact that his nationality is asked and thus made relevant, makes the German dummy fall back into the kind of nationality that ideology has staked out for him: the devastating one inherited from national socialism and its ideological state apparatuses. But by thus submitting to ideology, the man-as-figure, or as sign, unwittingly also sets the woman straight, critiquing *her* submission: if he is acting out German nationality, she is acting out the result of her interpellation by the state that turned her into a willing instrument of oppression. He interpellates her as much as she does him. Thus, the words alone, the represented exchange, the two speech acts of question and answer, become acts of oppression and submission as well as a historical analysis of the past that Germany carries along with it in the present. By articulating a philosophy of language that refuses the limits of the dis-

11. See Althusser 1971. Kaja Silverman reassessed the importance of Althusser’s view for our time in her introductory chapter to *Male Subjectivity* (1992).

ciplines in its challenge to disciplining, the cartoon becomes a popular-culture work of (neo-)conceptual art.

Thus, speech acts already challenge the distinction between the inside and the outside of language, which is a precondition for the analysis of only the words of a multimedia text. If we take the visual representation of his body as part of his speech act, Archie Bunker's rhetorical question, I have argued, is clearly rhetorical, even if the effect of his speech act is contingent upon its irreducible ambiguity. It works—the audience laughs *and* gets the message—even because of its ambiguity: the now less ambiguous rhetorical question carries the memory of the kind of interaction it could have initiated if it had been “serious.” But, while such a broadly semiotic, instead of literary, analysis makes the speech acts less ambiguous, it also makes the delimitation of the speech acts from one another more ambiguous. In the cartoon, the visual dimension of the text also significantly qualifies the linguistic aspect.

Interpellation is just one example of a speech act. It is a strong case that spells out how address—the way people speak to you, and thereby tell you who you are and make you believe it—shapes subjectivity and society all in one move. Aptekar's paintings make interpellation a major focus, but they make it work through the combined effort of both visual and linguistic speech acts. Combined, integrated, inseparable, yet not indistinguishable, not indifferent; collaborative and competing, yet not similar. In the gap between them *and* the connection that bridges that gap, I wish to locate the tension between the two realms, in which culture cushions its citizens to believe they are what they are destined to be. Aptekar examines and explores what it means to have an identity, to be (told) who you are. Is it a matter of wearing the right costume, having the right colors—hair, skin, clothes—doing the right thing, things that “fit”?¹² He offers an alternative to the grids of social organization: speech acts that matter to the way things—and people—look.

Look, then, at the cartoon, that representation of stereotypical Germanness, of stereotypical “bureaucraticness,” and the equally stereotypical representation of gender: male victim and female bitch. Interpellation does not affect the mutual construction of state and citizens alone. But since the overt topic of this text is the meaning of nationality, it should be pointed out that the image does a lot of work to complicate nationality further. On first sight, the skyscrapers outside the window suggest that the exchange takes place in the United States, in the New World, where the skyscraper was invented. The outrageous appearance of the female bureaucrat with eyes blinded behind glasses, a moustache, a fish bone in her hair, and netted stockings, also alludes to a certain kind of “Americanness” as it is envisaged in popular European culture.¹³

12. See the exhibition *Some Place* by Edwin Janssen et al., 1997.

13. The fish bone is also the signature mark of the cartoonist.

Other “symptoms” in the image further elaborate on the fact that this scene is set, not in America, but in the imaginary America that German popular culture has been eyeing for the purpose of improving its own national self-image. The antennae on the roofs of the skyscrapers signify that this is “Manhattan on the Rhine,” a fake, enviously copied Americanness, hopelessly betrayed by the failure of the bureaucratic management of immigration to extirpate the nationalism that ravaged German history in the past. Against this background—or rather through the “screen” of this visual foreground—the verbal exchange becomes even more poignant. By answering “Jawoll!,” the man implies that the real question is, “You *are* German, I hope?” and thus cuts right through the pretence that this bureaucracy is open to foreigners, an openness that the question, allowing for a variety of answers, overtly suggests. He gives the authority figure the answer she wants to hear: Thank heavens, yes, I am “one of us.” But at the same time, the man’s answer plays on the assumed American critique of German nationalism by making the man look too dumb to be allowed in, too dumb for words. Different nationalisms and their representations by their others hold each other in mortal combat.

The point is that once we admit that the speech acts as quoted do not enable us to delimit where the word stops and the image begins, then the visual continues this expansion, and as a result, the very attempt to distinguish word from image falls flat. Not that there is no difference. But in this case, Bunker’s rhetorical question—What difference does it make?—takes hold. Or, rephrased in terms of a more philosophical self-reflection, What interests and powers does it serve? (See the opening epigraph from Mitchell.)

Inside the Readable¹⁴

Mitchell’s question concerns the “readability of art.” By this term I do not mean the metaphorical transfer of the jargon of literary theory to the study of visual art but a more precise deployment of “reading” as a semiotic activity. Reading is a form of meaning-making which can briefly be characterized as follows.¹⁵ It is self-consciously interactive, an activity of a reader/viewer in response to an image/text. This activity responds to discrete signs, which are not necessarily discretely exposed in the image but can be described as discrete in the act of reading. These signs are “read” in terms of a “language,” which has a semantic and syntactic network that preexists the image.

Finally, reading is a proposal for meaning. But most important, reading is predicated on the passage of time: the time it takes to walk through the text or image, to process the signs, to produce the meaning. To pave the way for making a programmatic case for tak-

14. This heading is an allusion to *Inside the Visible*, the 1996 exhibition of women’s art organized by Catherine de Zegher.

15. The reader is referred to the introduction to my book *On Meaning-Making* (1994a), for a more elaborate explication of the semiotic basis of reading.

ing the time to read, I wish to insist on the notion that images can—indeed must—be read, regardless of how much “language” is in them. Reading thus conceived does not comprehend all aspects of the reception of visual images—nor of texts, for that matter—but constitutes an important part of that reception which I would like to foreground—not isolate—here.

De Man’s argument about an irreducible tension between rhetoric and semiotics is really about rhetoric and grammar. Moreover, it is really epistemological.¹⁶ Interestingly, in his attempt to put semiotics in its place, he appeals to Peirce. It is Peirce’s concept of the *interpretant*—the new sign that any sign produces in the mind of its recipients—as a necessary element of signification that brackets the sign-object relation as semantic and the sign-sign relation as syntax. The interpretant is not the person interpreting but a sign that constitutes the interpretation of another sign. The interpretant is not a word or an image but a happening and its result. It is the sign-interpretant relation that is at stake, not only in the Archie Bunker episode and the German cartoon, but in all language use. The notion of the direction taken by the chain of interpretants—in other words, the notion of relevance—cannot be discarded, and each speech act is embedded in the framework set up by the one preceding it and on which it further expands.

Both the Archie Bunker episode and the cartoon also demonstrated that this feature of language—to always be “in use”—soliciting interpretants *within the domain of language itself*, blocks any attempt to separate the “inside” from the “outside” of language. As a consequence, even if one held a totally language-centered view of semiotics, one would be forced to “step out” of this self-assigned “prison house of language” (Jameson 1981). In that case, the seemingly simple, one-word “symptom” of Germanness would be “thickened” by such seemingly futile details as the teapot in the filing cabinet, the bee in the embedded picture of the dog (a detail in a detail), and the fake wood varnish of the desk, with its curves and waves as an index of “surface” underscoring the fact that, in an everyday, homey kind of baroque, surface matters. All these details work to further fill in the values of homeliness that underlie them, and interpellate its readers to respond to these. These are not just details, or visual “fillers,” but answers to further questions about the stakes of nationalism and its intrusion into the very construction of “home,” which in turn raise new questions; in other words, they are part of the conversation; they, too, are “speeches.”

What I am trying to propose is neither a denial of a distinction between the media of language and visual representation nor an argument for equal attention to both. Instead, I am trying to show the relevance of a semiotic perspective that takes its clues from a speech-act theory that does not, in a theoretical territorialism, close its borders accord-

16. It starts out with a statement by Richard Ohlman which makes de Man’s argument look simple but actually quite nicely highlights the issue in its complexity: “But whereas the rules of grammar concern the relationships among sound, syntax, and meaning, the rules of illocutionary acts concern relationships among people.” The centrality of rules in Ohlman’s argument ties in with Althusser’s qualification of interpellation, which is one form of “second-personhood” (Ohlman 1972, 50). On “second-personhood,” see Code 1991.

ing to the dictates of logic; a perspective that challenges such policing boundaries, and entices the thinker found in every cultural critic to refuse to yield to the interpellation of academic disciplining that imitates the nationalistic nation-state. This perspective, inevitably derived from Peirce's (1984) concept of the sign as "moving" from one interpretant to the next while at the same time "moving" the sign users, would have as its primary focus that which defines speech acts most keenly: the primacy of the "second person." This primacy takes texts out of a formalist and autonomist idealization and sees them as dynamic. At the same time, a semiotic perspective also privileges meaning and the ways in which meaning is produced, considering aspects and details as signs rather than just forms or material elements. This semiotic conception, I contend, is not only congenial with Caravaggio's baroque mode of storytelling; his specific mode of producing second-person narratives is a case, almost a theory, of such a semiotic. Peirce's concept of the sign is only a theoretically and linguistically articulated version of Caravaggio's visual one. But this I can only contend if I am first willing to "read" his paintings.

I BEGAN MY APPEAL for a semiotic perspective by giving examples of exchanges between speakers because these examples showed the complication of the delimitation of language already *within* language, and thus demonstrated the "natural" expansion of the domain of meaning-production. But I also had a second reason for starting with these examples. Both the irritated exchange between Archie and Edith, and the political one between the bureaucrat and the German subject are only effective because they are acts of "second-personhood" beyond the present of the incidental interpellation. They need the past in the present, and they "move" their second person into a future in which that person becomes what he or she is. Reading—the production of interpretants—is the subsequent activity they solicit. The speeches, the signs, would have neither purpose nor meaning outside the situation in which the second person, who is addressed, "reflects" the signs "back" with an interpretant, a new, "more developed sign," as Peirce would have it.

It never hurts to reiterate Peirce's famous definition of the sign:

A sign, or *representamen*, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object*. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the *ground* of the representamen. (1984, 13; emphasis added)

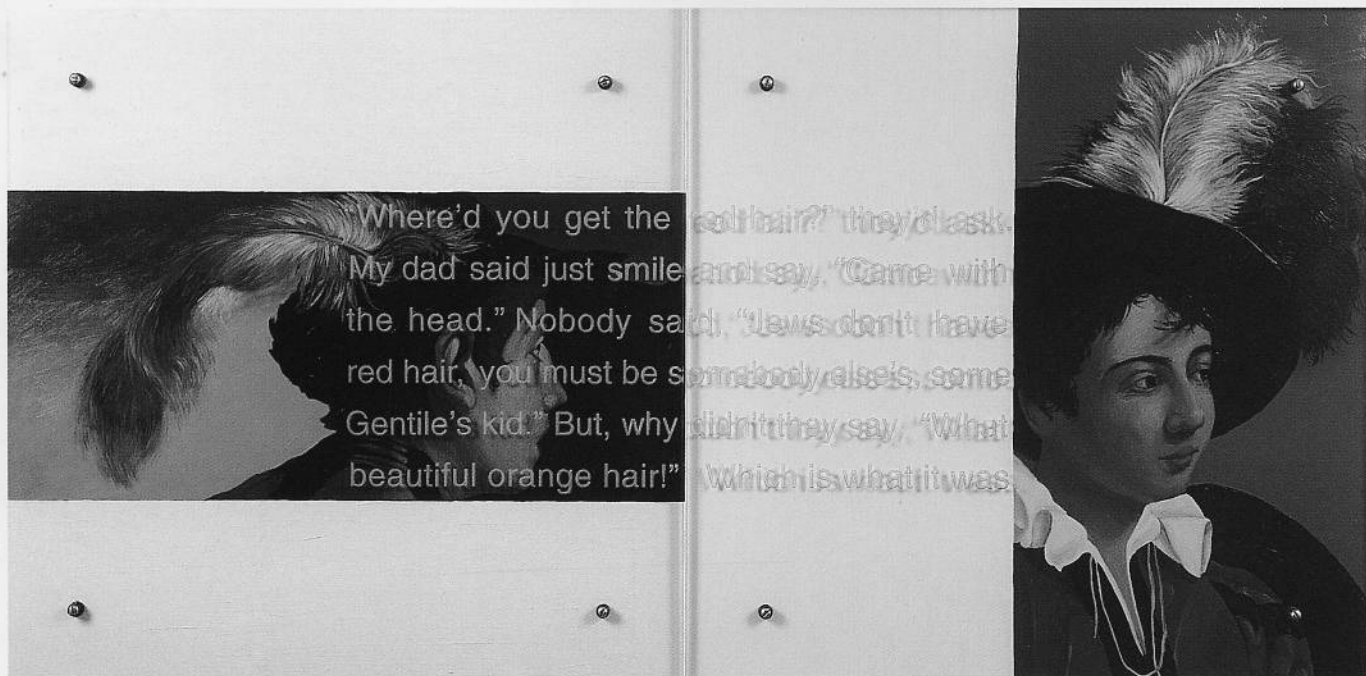
“[The sign ...] which stands to somebody” refers to more than the need for the concept of an *interpretant*. I would like to take it literally, or visually, if you like, so that it rotates 90 degrees twice in succession, thus becoming reversible. Second-personhood, then, is installed not, or at least not only, within the imagetext but in the working space (Stella 1986) between sign and viewer.

Interpellation and Identity

In Aptekar's 1996 work “Where'd you get the red hair?” (fig. 3.6), this embodied second-personhood of signification is literalized in a double move: the text is a second-person direct discourse, a quote from the phantom of the past, when the child was interpellated, “spoken into” being a redhead for the rest of his life. The text of this work—again sandblasted on glass bolted over the image—reads:

“Where'd you get the red hair?” they'd ask. My dad said just smile and say, “Came with the head.” Nobody said, “Jews don't have red hair, you must be somebody else's, some Gentile's kid.” But, why didn't they say, “What beautiful orange hair!” Which is what it was.

Figure 3.6. Ken Aptekar, “Where'd you get the red hair?” 1996. Oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts, 60 x 30 in. (diptych). Collection of Richard and Dana Levy, Albuquerque, New Mexico.



The relevance of red hair is established as a coloristic token of identity. This relevance gives relief to a feature of the boy's body. The relief is extremely ambivalent: it wounds the boy's self with the infliction, from the outside, of a criticism that stays inside him like a festering bullet. Yet at the same time it abducts the feature from him. From the intimacy of his privacy, where the red hair was pleasurable, beautiful, something he was proud of, it is taken away from him to become some dubious occasion for jokes.

This ambivalence is overdetermined by another ambivalence, which remains implicit in the speech act but is performed nevertheless, in the next sentence. The Jewishness, an equally pleasurable aspect of his identity, is made dubious as well: "Nobody said, 'Jews don't have red hair, you must be somebody else's, some Gentile's kid.'" ¹⁷ The relevance given to it from the outside, superimposed on the doubt already cast on it, leaves him with a changed, perhaps damaged, even shattered sense of self. "Where'd you get the red hair?" is a question as rhetorical as Archie Bunker's, and as dependent for its efficacy on the possibility of its serious status as a question that requires an answer. It is also dependent on the interpretant it produces in the boy—the doubt cast on his Jewish identity—which is made relevant in the same way, through its ambivalence. ¹⁸

But second-personhood has another dimension based on the care bestowed on the child, the protection offered against the interpellations from outside yet an interpellation itself. The second sentence of the text is, "My dad said just smile and say, 'Came with the head.'" The father props the child up with a joke that will neutralize the harshness of the attack on his identity by steeling him to show his inner strength. Which, then, is another way of talking him into being who he must be: a tough kid. The outside culture and the family, potential hatred and ambivalent love, function in structurally similar ways. The boy responds with a toughness unlike the toughness suggested by the father: the autobiographical text ends with an endorsement of beauty. As we will see in a moment, this episode has a sequel.

The image overlaid by this double interpellation is also double: two portraits of young men, both wearing hats, one seen obliquely from the back, the other seen only partially from the front. The left one has a feather hanging down, the right one a feather standing up. The left head subtly seems to be planted on shoulders that sag, although we don't see them. The oblique line of his back, the half-open mouth, and the hanging feather glue themselves to the words that knock the boy into discouragement. The right head, turning toward the viewer, emanates the encouragement given by the father. The two boys are quoted from Caravaggio, the left one from *The Cardsharps*, the right one from his *Fortune-Teller*. Two faces, two sides of identity. Aptekar's cultural criticism always has more than one side. Two quotations from paintings about deceptive appear-

17. For me, as a European, this aspect of the text wasn't immediately clear. In the United States and especially in the American Midwest, the artist explained to me, red hair is associated with Irish or Scottish, but not Jewish, descent (Aptekar, personal communication, 14 February 1997).

18. The issue of cultural and ethnic identity is often broached in terms of quoting Caravaggio. See also chapters 7 and 8. There are three reasons for this. First, Caravaggio's "naturalism" refers beauty and pleasure to the domain of (cultural) reality. Second, his own insistence on what can only anachronistically be called "class" brings identity to the fore. Third, precisely because ethnicity is not an obvious issue in his work, the paintings lend themselves to a more complex practice of quotation. On issues of identity in contemporary art, see McEvilley 1992.



ances and identity formation. Aptekar protests the impotence of our culture to divest skin color of value by reasserting the beauty of his "marked" hair color. He points us to Caravaggio.

Caravaggio's ambiguous figure in *The Cardsharps* whose identity, literally, hangs on a thread is the first one Aptekar quotes. His proud head of red hair threatens to hang like the youth's feather. The boy being interpellated can only defend himself by turning his back to the community whose rhetorical question casts him out. The fall of the feather and the face shying away demonstrate the vulnerability of the subject as it is constructed in second-personhood. But in the second quotation, the boy redresses himself, defends himself, strengthened by his father's sustained domination enough to change the latter's advice. The youth in Caravaggio's second painting, *The Fortune-Teller*, who in the predetermined narrative is also a victim of theft, visually embodies the tender, still vulnerable and unstable, yet growing self-confidence of a body who dares to respond. The touching hands of the fortune teller and the youth, again juxtaposed as poor and rich, no longer suggest too strong a contrast based on class. They look into each other's eyes, and their hands touch. One of the boy's hands rests at his side in relaxed confidence. By quoting this happy result of the threatening confrontation with the outside world, Aptekar gives his younger self a feather in his cap for being "tough" in a way he chooses himself. Here, beauty, taking the shape of surface, curves, pleats and folds, is healing.

The story of this little boy's interpellation as a redheaded Jew continues. In the same year as Aptekar made "Where'd you get the red hair?" he painted/wrote another work similarly entitled, *Where'd you get the red hair, they ask* (fig. 3.7), where the boy, who in the first work is already half turned away, is now cropped, so that all we get to see of him is his back, the feather, and the ear that hears the interpellation. The ear turns up again in Caravaggio's *Narcissus*. You can turn away from what you see but not from hearing the discourse that shapes you. The two works form not so much a diptych as a sequence of chapters. The first text is written in the past tense, the second in the present. The speaker is different, the voices have changed. The second text reads:

"Where'd you get the red hair?" they ask. I know they're thinking, "You're not really Jewish. Jews don't have red hair." So am I somebody else's, some Gentile's kid? I'm amazed they even

Figure 3.7. Ken Aptekar, *Where'd you get the red hair, they ask*, 1996. Oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts, 80 x 20 in. (four panels). Collection of The Progressive Corporation, Mayfield Village, Ohio.

notice the wonderful color, the hair's so short. At the barbershop Dad says "Give him a Princeton, Charlie." Crestfallen, I watch my red hair collect on the floor, get swept up, thrown out.

"Came with the head," I reply.

The Caravaggio quotations alternate with other intertexts. The upper panel shows a rich blond head from Louise-Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun's *Marie-Antoinette and Her Three Children*; it is the main figure, a motherly one, whose piercing eyes emanate fatherly authority. The second panel has the cropped poor youth from Caravaggio's *The Cardsharps*, who tries to close himself off from the social discourse but cannot fail to hear its repetitive beat (in "maternal" time). Then there is the stiff, almost glasslike face from Georges de la Tour's cheating cardplayers, also at the Louvre, considered by many to be a quotation from Caravaggio. The lower image has the face of a boy turning toward the viewer, in a gesture that inserts punctuality and time, narrative time, even if we don't know what the narrative is about. But turning so punctually toward the viewer is a way of engaging the latter, drawing him inside the story. And "crestfallen" is just the right word for the face with the resigned eyes and tight mouth.

This second Aptekar painting also reflects on the way the surrounding culture addresses the boy with a social discourse that connects outward appearance with "deep" identity. But this time, the testing discourse comes from within. Here, the voice of authority that bites into the boy's sense of self comes from within the group: "You're not *really* Jewish" suggests as much. The second round of embattlement comes from inside an even smaller circle: the father who propped the child up with his advice in the first work now takes him to get a "Princeton," a waspish haircut that all but deprives him of the contested hair. The meaning of the hair thus also changes. While the boy's hair is still connected to the question of Jewishness, the tone of the tough father who orders both the barber and the boy around, suggests that in the father's eyes, beauty and masculinity are incompatible. Beauty—the hair—has to fall. The son toughens up, but only to become a professional creator of beauty.

The helmet, which the quoted boy in the Caravaggio painting carries for his master, changes its meaning due to the severing act of the quoter. "Came with the head," was the boy's reply, and the words describing that act of bravery are inscribed on top of the painted helmet, the instrument of protection of the head. The story ends in the present tense, with the boy's affirmation of his identity, albeit at the cost of its visibility.

Peirce's definition of the sign renders perfectly this fragility of the subject. The confrontation of "to stand to," or before, some *body* recalls the position of the German character standing there at the mercy of the bureaucracy as a *sign* of his troubled nationality.

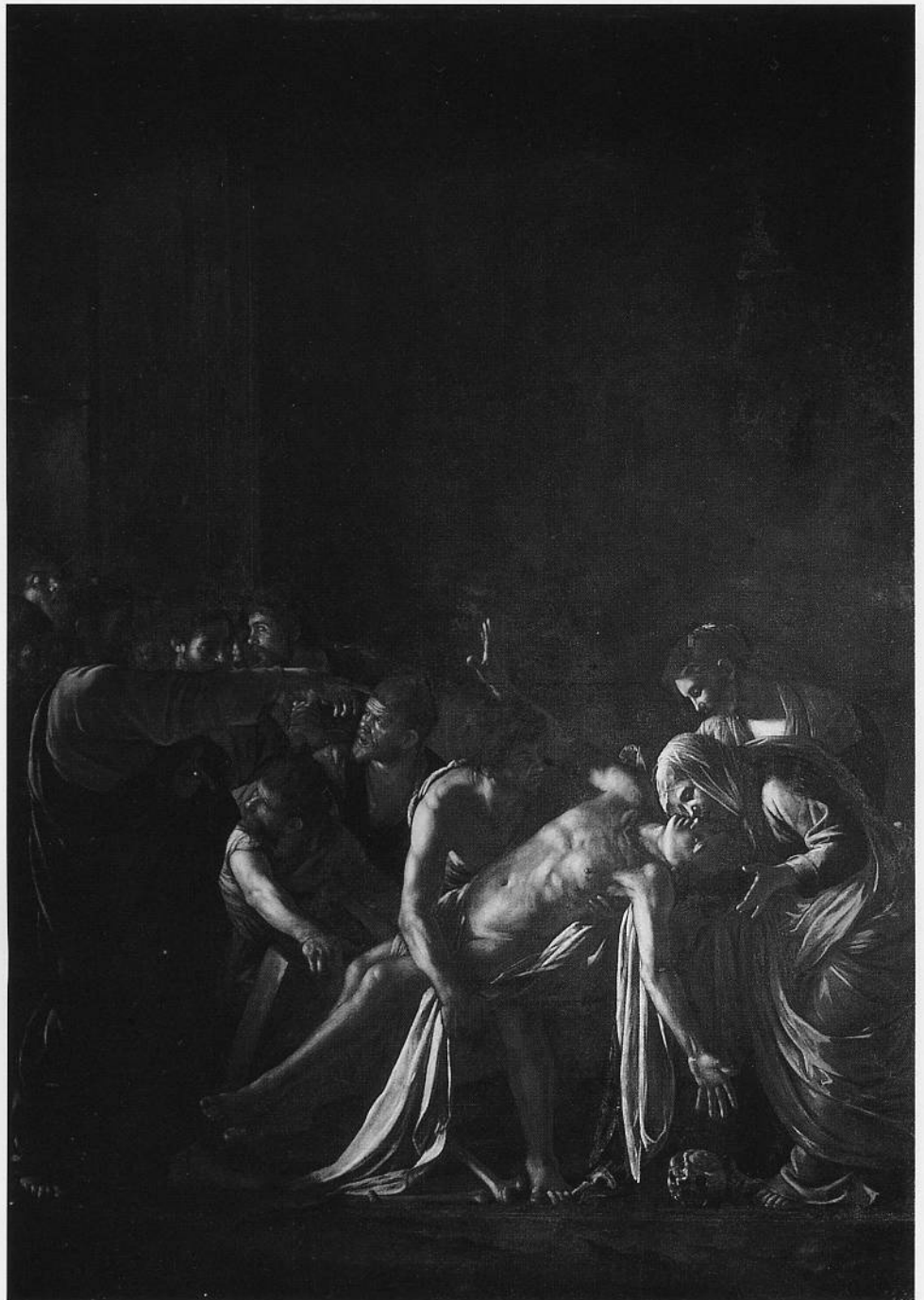


Figure 3.8. Caravaggio, *The Resurrection of Lazarus*, 1608–1609. Oil on canvas, 12 1/6 in. x 9 ft. Museo Nazionale, Messina.

Mercifully, she—the sign of bureaucracy—does not bother to look at him, but we do: he stands *to us* as a sign of Germanness. But thus he sets us up as viewers, as subjects whose looking includes stereotyping, as subjects who are somehow “defined” by stereotyping, as the bodies he stands in for. *We* are the second persons, that is to say, to quote Teresa de Lauretis’s words, “the body in whom and for whom semiosis takes effect.”¹⁹

Caravaggio’s painting *The Resurrection of Lazarus*, already discussed in chapter 2 and with a discussion of which Louis Marin, that master of word and image studies, ended his book *Détruire la peinture* (*To Destroy Painting*, 1995), can be taken as an allegory of that fundamental principle of semiotics (fig. 3.8). To be sure, this image cannot be “read” without an appeal to the preestablished text it is supposed to “illustrate,” but neither can it be reduced to only that function of readability. In chapter 1, I argued that this painting’s readability is situated in the trajectory of the tiny blots of white that create the traveling light.

As I mentioned there, Marin points out how it is that the narrative works: the image, typical of the visual medium, represents two moments, each narrated by the gesture of a hand, “a *gesture of pointing and an answer to it* captured in the same moment, as if in a snapshot” (1995, 166). A snapshot would in fact not allow this, yet it rings true. Indeed, the term here indicates a visual poetics that is “photographic” in that it inscribes the fleeting pace of that genre.²⁰

Marin’s analysis emphasizes the second-person character of this story, and with Aptekar’s works in the corner of my eye, I see the story of the process of identity formation repeated here, after Aptekar, by Caravaggio. For Lazarus, semiosis is a matter of life and death. It is literally in and for his body that “semiosis takes effect.” But if Lazarus’s opened hand, dropping the skull that he was clutching as an index of his state of deadness, is an answer to Jesus’ pointed finger, then there is a third moment that follows during which the skull is dropped to the floor and the hand raised so as to catch the light that shows it. No snapshot can represent two consecutive moments in one sign. The collapse of these two moments turns the sign into a sign of time itself: the time it takes to call—or point—a subject into being, halfway between what he assumed he was and what he is allowed to be.

This relation between narrative, including the way it fictionalizes identity, and time, the process of this instilling by reiterated interpellation, makes a case for the readability of art, indeed, for the need to read. Aptekar’s use of words, however beautiful his writing may be, is not in itself a necessary or sufficient condition for the readability of his work. It is the combined and conflicting appeal of both words and images that draws the viewer inside, in the second-person mode, so that the tension between outside interpellation

19. See Lauretis 1983, 182–83.

20. In the last chapter of my book *The Mottled Screen* (1997b), I expand on what a “poetics of the snapshot” could mean, through an analysis of Proust’s visual narrative.

21. Expressions are deictic, not referential, only when they have meaning in relation to the utterance. Deictic words are *I*, *you*, but not *she*; *yesterday*, *today*, but not *some day*; *here*, *there*, but not *in Rome*. Deixis presupposes and emphasizes the presence of the speaking subject and her addressee, her "second person." First person and second person exchange roles and presuppose each other.

and inside authority is resolved, leaving the child weakened but capable of fending for himself.

But my primary concern here is not the ways in which visual images can narrate. I take these images as an aggrandized example, an allegory, of the shift *within* visual narration that earlier examples have demonstrated. In other words, I take Caravaggio's *Lazarus* as a shifter of narrative from *iconic* representation to *indexical* pointing but specified in relation to the "speech" act "uttered," in other words as *deictic*.²¹ This linguistic mode, which, for Benveniste, is the essence of language itself, is also at the heart of Caravaggio's paradoxical mode of narration. The friezelike representation that, Marin argues, has all the signs of a carved, low-relief frieze on a tombstone, thus changes from a sign of death to a sign of life, both for the figures themselves and in its mode of signification.

The symptom of that shift is the obscurity, the invisibility even, of Jesus' face. This obscurity hints at a complication of intentionality, much in line with Derrida's questioning of intention as cited in the introduction. It changes the concept of agency involved. What matters in this story, what constitutes the agency, is the line established between Jesus' hand, his body, and Lazarus's hand, which initiates his return to life, thus starting a new life cycle, a new narrative. But not only does this Jesus give life to Lazarus with his pointing finger, his embodied index; he also *receives* from Lazarus's response confirmation of his own divine status. In other words, the story that develops in time from left to right in this image "argues" for the importance, in narrative, of the contact, the constituting complementarity, between first and second person. But, specifying indexicality as a general code connecting contiguous items, this contact emanates from, and reaches, the bodily coordinates of the figures who do the "speaking" or who are otherwise engaged in semiosis.

Thus, the definition of the sign can flesh out Benveniste's view, and expand it: the subject is shaped by the sign it represents to others. Aptekar's redhead adds to this view both the processual nature of this shaping and the dialectic of inside and outside that sustains it. This makes every sign a position in the *I/you* exchange that defines language. It gives the idea of a visual language a dimension we didn't know it had. This readability of the subject to itself internalizes the other in a second personhood emphatically embodied in an "impure" visual domain. This emphasis on that impurity we can, perhaps preposterously, through Aptekar, attribute to Caravaggio.