Reading a "Titian": Visual Methods and the Limits of Interpretation

Eamonn Carrabine, University of Essex, UK

Abstract

Contemporary criminology is witnessing something of a "visual turn" and as researchers develop their methods of enquiry it is clear that interdisciplinary scholarship will play a key role in shaping inventive approaches in it. But this should be in a context where there is a strong awareness of what different disciplines do and a sharpened sense of what they can bring to debate, not a naïve, eclectic or lowest common denominator interdisciplinarity. In this paper, I discuss some of the different ways art historians have "read" images and the multiple connections they have forged to understand an artwork. The discipline of art history itself has undergone some fundamental changes since the 1970s and the first section sets out some of the "old" and "new" methods in more detail, before turning to how these approaches have been mobilized in a single example: Titian's *Flaying of Marsyas*, which dates from the 1570s, and is among the most disturbing images in the entire history of art. By focusing on this painting the different intellectual positions and controversies surrounding an artwork are then outlined, to indicate the range and complexity involved in developing a convincing visual analysis.

Keywords

art, iconography, methods, narrative, semiotics, Titian

The growing popularity of visual methods across the social sciences is a striking development over the last couple of decades or so, to the extent that Puwar (2009: 382) was moved to describe "the recent fetishisation of visual methods" in her introduction to a special issue on Bourdieu and post-colonialism. Contemporary criminology was rather late to recognize their use, even as Hayward (2009:12) cautioned against "simply importing images into a discipline defined by words and numbers" and encouraging instead "a new methodological orientation towards the visual that is capable of encompassing meaning, affect, situation, symbolic power and efficiency, and spectacle in the same 'frame'" (Hayward 2009:12). I will have more to say on the tensions between "word" and "image", where the word is associated with "law, literacy, and the rule of elites", while the image is equated "with popular superstition, illiteracy, and licentiousness" (Mitchell 2015:13), later in this paper. Especially since they are deep seated and concern a certain privileging of textual narrative over visual description, even in disciplines like art history where one would expect this not to be so[1].

It is also the case that different approaches are often "reinvented over and over again without gaining much methodological depth and often without consideration of long-existing classics in the field" (Pauwels 2011:3). Such treatments are unhelpful, implying that method can be divorced from theoretical issues and ignores some of the fraught encounters that have shaped the use of visual material in and across disciplines. There are now many excellent guide books on using visual methods (see, for example, Adams, 2010, Pink, 2013, and Rose, 2016) providing systematic evaluations of the different ways of doing research with visual material and how these approaches might be developed in the future. In what follows I concentrate on my own research, which focuses on the iconography of punishment and explores some of the dominant ways penal landscapes have been represented in the visual arts since the 1500s. The overall ambition is to indicate how punishment has an art history and by

studying it as such the suggestion is that the gap between the disciplines might be bridged. It is driven by the premise that the history of punishment and the history of art are linked in ways that have yet to be fully recognized. The discipline of art history itself has undergone some fundamental changes since the 1970s and the first section sets out some of the "old" and "new" methods in more detail, before turning to how these approaches have been mobilized in a single example: Titian's *Flaying of Marsyas*, which dates from the 1570s, and is among the most disturbing images in the entire history of art. By focusing on this particular painting the different intellectual positions and controversies surrounding an artwork can be outlined, to indicate the range and complexity of developing a convincing visual analysis. Many of these arguments will be unfamiliar to a criminological audience, but what I hope to demonstrate is that this form of methodological juxtaposition can yield important insights enabling genuinely interdisciplinary scholarship to flourish.

Iconography, Semiotics and Narrative

The term iconography is derived from two Greek words: *eikon,* meaning "image", and *graphe* meaning "writing" and is primarily concerned with the meaning, subject matter, or content of works of art. The method addresses the way "an artist 'writes' the image, as well as what the image itself 'writes' – that is the story it tells" (Adams 2010:43). The terms 'iconology' and 'iconography' came to prominence in the early decades of the twentieth century and were associated with a succession of German scholars who laid the foundations for the modern discipline of art history, insisting that visual analysis involved a thorough knowledge of literary, biblical and mythological sources in order to grasp the intertextuality on which symbolic systems depend. They were concerned with the meaning of works of art, and their approach was a reaction against the predominantly formal analysis of how a painting looks, in terms of mood or colour, at the expense of the subject matter. Instead, as

one influential definition put it, “iconography is that branch of the history of art which concerns itself with the subject matter or meaning of works of art, as opposed to their form” (Panofsky, 1957:26). It is an approach emphasising the intellectual content of a work of art, how the symbols and signs in it would have been understood at the time it was produced.

The iconographers distanced themselves from what came to be known as formalism, as set out in Wölfflin’s (1915/1950) *Principles of Art History,* which established a method of comparative visual analysis that studied paintings in terms of form and style. Although his terms were employed to capture the transitions from the classical style of the Renaissance to the Baroque, they have since become widely used outside his original formulation. He maintained that paintings could be analysed both in terms of their regional historical context but also in terms of formal oppositions between “linear” and “painterly” form, flatness and depth, and “closed” (schematic) versus “open” (illusionistic) form. Wölfflin’s approach deliberately ignores the subject-matter or “content” of paintings in order to concentrate on their visual appearance or form, and the two became the major, rival analytic strategies by which generations of art historians were taught to look at and to interpret images. Style as proposed by Wölfflin and iconography by Panofsky were set up as a contrast between “form and meaning” as the institutionalization of art history took hold and sought intellectual credibility.

By the 1970s the discipline and its methods were increasingly criticized, along several dimensions, which have been summarized as follows:

> the narrowness of its range of subject matter and concentration on individual artists whom it classifies as geniuses; for its restricted set of methods, consisting chiefly of connoisseurship, the analysis of style and iconography, quality, the canon, dating arguments and biography, for the uniformity of degree curricula offered by departments of the history of art, for its ignoring not only of the social context of art, artists and public, but also structures of power, especially those of relations between art historians and the owners of valuable works of art; and perhaps most important of all, for the lack of attention paid to the changes which

> had been taking places in the related disciplines of literature and history in the 1960s.
>
> (Fernie 1995:18-19)

The most serious charges laid here were the cardinal sins of being untheoretical and ignorant of the latest developments in continental philosophy. This insularity was all the more problematic given the sophisticated understandings of art these thinkers were developing. For example, Foucault's (1966) extraordinary reading of *Las Meninas*, the enigmatic 1656 painting by Velazquez, is one that completely bypasses conventional art historical methods and played an unwitting, but nevertheless significant role, in facilitating the critique of their limitations. Foucault's analysis highlights the ways the picture works as a discourse, through describing how the complex arrangement of visual exchanges in it speaks to various subject positions in complex and uncertain ways. The significance of the painting rests in its self-reflexive awareness of what it means to represent the world and for Foucault it illuminates an epistemic shift in Western culture, serving as a pivot around which his archaeologies of knowledge can then proceed.

Likewise, Lacan used Holbein's (1533) painting *The Ambassadors* in his 1960s seminars on psychoanalysis, the gaze and subjectivity. When the picture is viewed from an orthodox position, the viewer shares their confidence, vanity and mastery of all surveyed. But something strange, a shadowy phallic shape, blots the bottom of the canvas. It is only when the painting is glanced at an oblique angle, once the position of illusory control is vacated, does the smeared shape resolve into a human skull and the gaze come into full view. For Lacan (1977:92) "It reflects our own nothingness, in the figure of death's head". At around the same time Barthes (1967/1977) was proclaiming the "death of the author", setting himself against the cult of biographical interpretation and the tendency to explain a work of art through some personal experience of the artist (as in Van Gogh's madness or Tchaikovsky's sexuality), a distorting tendency shifting our focus from language to a life. His argument is

not that the writer is irrelevant, but rather that the author figure is itself something of a fiction, and instead he sought to indicate how all human interpretation in society is filtered through language, and this includes non-verbal areas of communication. Indeed, it is this "stretching" of the concept of language to read as speech acts the messages of gesture, clothing, perfume, and so on, that is one of the defining achievements of semiology (Hawkes, 1977:125). Semiology is a term coined by the founder of modern linguistics Ferdinand de Saussure (whose lectures were first published posthumously in 1915) to describe a general science of signs, of which linguistics is only one element. Saussure conceived it as a science that would study the laws governing signification, and this ambition remained just an idea until the 1960s when anthropologists, literary critics, and philosophers began to benefit from the methodological insights afforded by extending these theoretical propositions to social practices.

Lacan's overall project is one asserting the structural linguistic basis of psychoanalysis. It is the ability to speak that distinguishes the human subject, and which separates the social from the natural world. In Lacan the "talking cure" is founded on spoken truth, stressing the paradox that there is no subject except in representation, yet no representation can capture us completely. It is this "not here" and "not now" dynamic that Jacques Derrida exposes in his penetrating critique of structuralism. Derrida's method was that of "deconstruction", which meant both destruction and retrieval, and "brings into the open the 'blind spots' in all philosophical writing if not all creative writing" (Sturrock, 2003:123). Informed by psychoanalysis he was more interested in failure and dysfunction than searching for the regularities of structure, upsetting the boundaries between philosophy and literature, to the extent that he shattered the very stability of language. Derrida's strategy is to focus on a repressed theme, pursue its textual traces and indicate how they subvert the apparatus striving to hold them in place. In his critique of Saussure he notes how speech is

systematically privileged over written language, becoming a metaphor of truth and authenticity, which is also at the root of Derrida's unease with Lacanian psychonalysis. Indeed, what Derrida brings to the fore is the politics of metaphor and by forensically studying the words of many influential philosophers he reveals how they have suppressed the unsettling effects of their own language. By problematizing the stability of meaning deconstruction paved the way for post-structuralist approaches to social relations. Lacanian psychoanalysis provided the fundamental conceptual and methodological apparatus for Julie Kristeva, but who maintained that Lacan concentrated too exclusively on verbal language at the expense of other modes of signification. Although she cannot strictly be regarded as a feminist, Kristeva drew on marginality, subversion and dissidence in her accounts of signifying practice and disruptive processes. Unlike Lacan she stresses all the sensory registers and not just the verbal, highlighting touch, taste, smell, sight and voice.

Both Derrida and Kristeva were well aware of the achievements of structuralism, yet their interventions were decisive in contributing to the fragmentation of the approach and undermining its very foundations. While Derrida mainly concentrated on philosophical and literary texts, he also deconstructed works of art – most notably in his *The Truth in Painting* (Derrida, 1978) to explore the limits of interpretation, playing on the boundaries of a painting, what constitutes the "inside" and "outside" of the frame (a structure that itself occupies a transitional position). Kristeva's (1972/1988) essay on "Giotto's Joy" ties revolutions in the history of art with her own distinctive blend of semiology and psychoanalysis. She begins by noting the singular achievements of Giotto's (1267-1336) frescoes, completed in about 1305 at the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, where his paintings physically bond with the architecture depicting biblical and evangelical episodes. She then contrasts this "narrative symbolic sequence" and its "fidelity to ideological dogma" with the disrupting emergence of unconscious fantasy in the shape of "naked bodies, violence, sex,

death" in Giotto's representation of Hell on the Chapel's end wall, where the outlines of characters become "blurred", colours "disappear," "weaken," or "darken", and the "distinct architecture" of the frescoes on the side walls dissolve into "discontinuity, curves, and chaos" (Kristeva, 1972/1988:28-30). Kristeva (1982) is perhaps most well-known for the concept of "abjection" developed in her psychoanalytic study of fear, *Powers of Horror*. The abject, she writes, is "something rejected from which one does not feel part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons us and ends up engulfing us" (Kristeva, 1982:4). Abjection produces disturbing feelings of exclusion, disgust and repulsion and has inspired new ways of thinking about the monstrous across the humanities.

What must have been so attractive to Anglo-American art historians is how these French thinkers were able to effortlessly move from text to image without even changing gear and with almost complete disregard for traditional interpretive practices. Conceiving of the "status of painting as sign" was "fundamental for this alternative or New Art History" that regards "reading to be a complex and intricate a process", while conventional iconography can just attend to the banal and trivial: left to "the comparatively simple decoding of emblems and motifs" (Bryson 1988:xvii). The emphasis on the work of art as a visual system of signs is the starting point for Bryson's (1983:xii) break with conventional art history, which has privileged an understanding of painting as "the record of a perception". It is a mode of cognition that is increasingly, since the fifteenth century at least, concerned with offering paintings that convincingly imitate the essential appearance of events and objects in the world. This mimetic doctrine can be traced back to the "aesthetics of antiquity" and has influenced much traditional art history, but seeing the making of marks in line and paint as copies of things in the world suppresses "the social character of the image" (id.) and ignores how the act of recognition organised in a painting arises from the interplay of political,

economic and signifying practices. In Bryson's (1981:6) earlier study of French painting in the *Ancien Régime* he addresses the dichotomous relationships between "word" and "image" by examining the kind of stories pictures tell, drawing a distinction between the "discursive" aspects of an image (posing questions on visual art's language-like qualities and relationships to written text) and those "figural" features that place the image as primarily a visual experience – it's "being-as-image" – that is entirely independent of language. The tension between words and images was later explored by Bal (1991) in her *Reading "Rembrandt"* where she strives to reconcile a semiotics of visual art with a "narratology" of it, drawing on her background in literary studies she studied the interplay of verbal and visual elements to understand the role of narrative in pictures. In particular, she examines how a still image tells a dynamic story unfolding in time, identifying "how textuality determines the rhetorical effect of paintings" (Bal, 1991:31). In the rest of the paper I will indicate how these different interpretive procedures can be used to analyse a picture, in order to indicate something of the range and implications of their use.

Reading "Titian"

Titian's (c.1570-1576) *The Flaying of Marsyas* (Figure 1) is considered by some to be among the greatest paintings in the Western canon, for others it is an intolerable image and are unable to look at it. There is no doubt that Titian intended viewers to be shocked by the cruelty of the scene. Even as representations of atrocious suffering were becoming increasingly popular among Renaissance and Baroque artists, it remains an unnerving and controversial picture. The paradox is an old one: how is that such a gruesome subject should become an aesthetic occasion, an indication of an artist's greatness, inviting certain kinds of pleasure rather than as something to be appalled by. Indeed, the spectacle of death is "inevitably intertwined with all the contexts and values of every civilization, part or present"

(De Pascale, 2007:6). In the Western tradition, the Roman Catholic Church fostered for centuries an almost inexhaustible visual fascination with horrific torment. Yet the suffering deemed most worthy of representation is that which is "understood to be the product of wrath, divine or human" (Sontag, 2003:36). Of all the crimes and failings mortals can commit, in the eyes of the gods, the most serious is the failure to recognize the omnipotent power of the deities. In Titian's rendering of a vindictive act of divine punishment we are pushed to the very limits of representation and as such it offers an exemplary instance of the complexities involved in analysing painting. As a first step, it is worth noting that the painting was only rediscovered in 1924 and not every art historian accepts the attribution to Titian (though it appears to have been in his studio when he died in 1576). There is still some dispute as to whether it is even finished, with researchers speculating that his workshop or even later artists added further touches after his death. Questions have also been posed as to whether the painting has been "trimmed at the sides" and whether it conceptually points "beyond its own boundaries" to a "lost accompanying work", so that even this basic scholarship can be mobilised in a deconstructionist spirit, highlighting the impure boundaries of an artist and their work, so that a "Titian" is always referring to a "potentially collective author" (Held, 2008:184).

Equally we do not know if the painting results from a specific commission, or even when it was begun, adding further levels of ambiguity to the questions of why this mythological scene has been in painted in this way, and for whom, as well as when. It was a painting to which Titian returned to time and again, over a decade and a half, rethinking and reworking details, yet there is nothing else quite like it in his extraordinary output. This partly explains why Panofsky relegated discussion of it to a footnote in his posthumously published book *Problems in Titian, Mostly Iconographic*:

> Since I have never seen the original, which comes from the collection of Thomas Howard Earl of Arundel and Surrey (died 1646) and is now in the Archiepiscopal

> Palace at Kromeriz, formerly Kremsier, in Czechoslovakia, I do not dare pronounce on the authenticity of the now almost generally accepted *Flaying of Marsyas*…It is admittedly difficult to attribute the painting to anyone else…but it is equally difficult to accept Titian's responsibility for a composition which in gratuitous brutality (the little dog lapping up the blood) not only outdoes its model, one of Giulio Romano's frecoes in the *Palazzo* del Te at Mantua, but also, and more importantly, evinces a *horror vacui* normally foreign to Titian who, like Henry James' Linda Pallant, "knew the values of intervals." In the Kromeriz picture no square inch is vacant.
>
> (Panofsky, 1969:171)

Aside from the issue of Titian's authorship of the painting, Panofsky is clearly troubled by both the formal tones of the picture (*horror vacui* is a term derived from the Latin "fear of empty space" and is used by art historians to describe the artistic practice of meticulously filling, or in some instances cluttering, a canvas with details) as much as the graphic cruelty on display. It has been argued that these misgivings are bound up with Panofsky's attempt to locate the great Venetian master in a humanist pantheon, but the *Marsyas* is even more disturbing as it makes "Titian something other than a 'humanist'" (Campbell, 2016:65) and explains it's almost total excision from a lengthy chapter on "Titian and Ovid" in the book. Similarly there is no mention of it in Edgar Wind's (1968:15-16) *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, which sought to unravel the use of allegory and "deliberate obliqueness in the use of metaphor" in "some of the greatest Renaissance paintings", as "disguise is one of the great forces of revelation". Again, it is an odd omission as the book is steeped in Neoplatonic thought, which in this context refers to how art can yield hidden wisdom, overcome contradictory human aspirations (such as between materiality and spirituality), and is characterised by the liberal values of responsibility and tolerance that is the hallmark of postwar iconological research[2]. Wind (1968:175) notes that the "torture of the mortal by the god who inspires him was a central theme in the revival of ancient mysteries" and its illustration inspired many variations on this subject in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

More recent scholars in the tradition have gone to considerable lengths to read the pictorial narrative in the *Marsyas* through allegorical exegesis and iconographic identification.

All begin by establishing that the origins of the monstrous scene lie in an ancient tale from Ovid, which tells the story of how the Olympian god Apollo had the satyr – a hybrid creature of human and goat – Marsyas flayed alive for having beaten him in a musical duel. Having learnt to play the primitive panpipe so well Marsyas was rash enough to challenge Apollo, the inventor of music and his cultivated lyre, to a contest in which the winner could inflict the punishment of his choosing upon the loser. Among the judges was the unfortunate King Midas[3] and Apollo won by resorting to trickery, including playing his lyre upside down, which Marsyas was unable to do. Inevitably he loses, and Apollo claims the right to have Marsyas skinned alive. Ovid hardly mentions the contest, but relishes describing the torment that Titian later paints:

> Why do you tear me from my self, he cries?
> Ah cruel! must my skin be made the prize?
> This for a silly pipe? he roaring said.
> Mean-while the skin from off his limbs
> was flay'd.
> All bare, and raw, one large continu'd
> wound,
> With streams of blood his body bath'd the
> ground.
> The blueish veins their trembling pulse
> disclos'd.
> The stringy nerves lay naked, and expos'd.
> His guts appear'd, distinctly each express'd.
> With ev'ry shining fibre of his breast.
>
> (Ovid, 42BC-18AD, *Metamorphoses*, 383)

An iconographic approach would then identify the individual figures in the painting, describing the extent to which it follows Ovid's text and the elements that the painter adds of his own creation.

Marsyas is fairly easily identified and Titian has placed the huge body of the satyr at the centre of the picture, hanging upside down from a tree, emphasising his majestic

proportions. Some have read it as an allusion to da Vinci's (ca.1492) famous "Vitruvian Man", an inversion of one of the most "iconic Renaissance idealizations of the human" (Campbell, 2016:67) while others highlight the "immediate association to it is the Crucifixion of Christ" and Marsyas as "half-human, half-beast, is, after all, dual natured like Christ" (Hart, 2007:270). The scene further resembles the martyrdom of a saint – particularly St Peter who, it is maintained, was crucified upside down – and Marsyas appears as wearily resigned to his fate as any Christian martyr. In a further departure from Ovid's graphic cruelty the torturers appear to be carrying out their gruesome task in rapt absorption, as if they are patiently conducting a medical anatomy. It has even been argued that "Titian projected his own self-portrait onto the figure of Midas, characterised as a melancholic" (Held, 2008:187), an impassive witness to the brutality he has unleashed. Identifying the various characters in the painting is clearly not straightforward, not least since the most difficult to discern is Apollo, some regard the musician as representing the deity and others insist that the kneeling figure with the laurel wreath holding a knife is Apollo. The musician has also been described as Orpheus, another legendary figure from ancient myth, around whom several stories centre on his musical abilities. Although Ovid's text provides an important point of comparison for scholars, Titian's visual composition is now also often compared to the design of a fresco by Giulio Romano for ducal residence in Mantua, as suggested by Panofsky above. It bears some remarkable similarities to the drawing (Figure 2) and is likely to have been a key inspiration as various elements from it have been appropriated by Titian. However, it significantly departs from the overt sexuality of Romano's version, where the flaying clearly emphasises an imminent castration and the addition of a satyr child, along with two domesticated dogs – one lapping up blood, and the other drooling in anticipation – are further deviations from pictorial and textual conventions.

At the deeper iconological level, which for Panofsky (1939/2009:222) meant reconstructing the "intrinsic meaning" of a painting, several of his followers have sought to apply humanist ideas to such an analysis. In this interpretive framework, there is an emphasis on Neoplatonic harmony, where "polarisations are overcome on the path of knowledge, in which the soul leaves the prison of the body, of matter, and returns to its divine origin" and on this reading "Apollo is redeeming the soul of Marsyas and is purifying him by flaying him and thus releasing the inner self" (Held, 2008:188). The stripping away of the skin from the body is an act of sacrificial purification, where the punishment of arrogance is also bound up with the triumph of music. Apollo claims victory over the sound of the panpipes, which dangle from the tree, also symbolising defeat. In her helpful summary of these interpretations Jutta Held explains how the layers of meaning are derived from medieval hermeneutics and theological allegory. As she puts it:

> For these interpreters, Midas and Apollo are the key figures, Midas is the saturnine artist, depicted in a gesture of melancholy, with whom Titian identifies himself and who is meditating on Apollo's divine music (rather than on the god's brutality!)…the arrangement of the figures, and thus the composition of the painting, supports this idea of integrating Marsyas as a creature of nature into the cosmic order. His navel forms the centre of the painting; a system of orthogonals and diagonals, the Golden Section, allegedly serves as the basis for the composition, which thus follows Neoplatonic or Pythagorean number combinations…This method of turning paintings back into geometric relations of proportion was an analytical procedure that was apparently supported by the theory of perception.
>
> (Held, 2008:188)

Held is quick to point out that these harmonising interpretative procedures are closely tied to postwar art history practices[4], that would come to be denounced as 'old' or 'traditional' approaches, as they have failed to acknowledge the very violence of the image and how it is bound up with absolutist power. Such a consideration yields up several possibilities that are explored in the next section, as they run counter to these orthodox views, and highlight additional meanings that are now taken to define the 'new' art history – though this term

refers to a range of developments that are highly diverse and often contradictory – but it had its origins in Marxist explorations of the economic and social context of art.

Visual Abjection

The iconographical approach is often criticised for its indifference to the social dynamics of art, preferring instead the immersion in biblical, literary and mythological sources to decipher symbolic systems. King Phillip II of Spain, for example, commissioned many classical mythology scenes from Titian and it has been convincingly argued that Phillip was less interested in Neoplatonic allegories than in possessing pictures of naked women, where a coarser and more erotic dimension to his compositions has been identified (Burke, 2001:40). In each of these images the figures (Actaeon, Callisto, Diana, Europa and Lucretia) are "all in some way subjected to the power of another actor, and, more than this, rendered abject in the process, their bodies becoming distinctly unlovely" (Zorach, 1999:244). This process of visual abjection is crucial to understanding the brutality on display in Titian's depiction of the flaying of Marsyas. The huge body of the satyr dominates the scene, while Apollo is relatively smaller, kneeling and "driven by the wish to find the source of creativity" (Rösing, 2013:105)[5]. If traditional art history had suppressed Apollo's act of violence, then Marxist interpretations have addressed the ideologically charged meanings of the painting – the powerful will destroy those who attempt to challenge the established order. In some accounts, Apollo is regarded as the Catholic pope fighting Protestant heresy, while others see the painting as an allegory of the prince defeating his enemies and punishing the hubris of rebellious subordinates (Held, 2008:191). Writers in the Marxist tradition explore how social structures and cultural codes are mediated through visual representation, locating artworks in the contemporary conditions of material life and expressing specific class interests[6]. There has also been speculation that the painting was inspired by the flaying of a Venetian

commander, Marco Antonio Bragadin, at the hands of Turkish forces following their capture of the military stronghold of Famagusta in August 1571, which was on the island of Cyprus and had been a Venetian colony since the late fifteenth century (Puppi, YEAR:120). Yet turning to Ovidian mythology to offer a personal interpretation of a real-life execution is a "curious response" and while the report of Bragadin's harrowing fate[7] will have had traumatic repercussions in Venice it does seem to "more readily explain why work on the picture was broken off, not why it was begun" (Campbell, 2016:72). That the picture depicts the annihilation of an uncivilised, half-human creature by the god of beauty could suggest a nascent awareness of how European colonial violence was set to conquer the world and certainly speaks to the dialectic of master and slave.

The subaltern does not look back defiantly, and the idyllic autumnal woodland setting is a further counterpoint to the cruelty on display, while the painting itself seems to be all about the different sensory experiences the medium engages. As one commentator notes the defining feature of the picture is skin: "human skin as opposed to animal fur, the skin as constitutive organ of the human being, the second skin of clothes and colour, the skin of the painter's canvas, and even that kind of mental skin or canvas able to contain cruel pictures of invasion and fragmentation, be it in the mind of the artist or the spectator" (Rösing, 2013:100). For another the experiences of sight and touch are the oppositional sensations sustained in the work (Campbell, 2016:75) and in this Kristeva's understanding of the abject is especially important. The essence of the abject is the skin which forms on warm milk, it is "neither solid nor liquid", and lies on the disturbing border "between the animate and inanimate" and has been compared to the fascinating yet repulsive feelings evoked by Titian through his use of colour, paint, flesh and leaky bodily matter across his later work (Zorach, 1999:247). In Kristeva, the process of abjection is crucial to her post-Freudian psychoanalytical theory of the constitution of the subject, where a child learns to differentiate

itself from its mother. Differentiation can take various forms, but all must confront the repulsive sensation of abjection as we establish our fragile grip upon individual subjectivity. Consequently, the *Flaying* can be read as a visceral drama of subject formation, a narrative of "catastrophic separation or division" (Campbell, 2016:83), betraying a preoccupation with the boundaries of the human and the very origins of humanity.

Further psychoanalytic readings have concentrated on the child in the lower right of the picture, as the only figure whose gaze directly addresses the viewer. The child witnessing a violent adult transgression "makes the scene a primal scene" (Rösing, 2013:107). In Freud, the term primal scene refers to the child's fantasy of sexual activity between adults, particularly the parents, and answers the universal question of childhood: "where do I come from?" (Adams, 1993). The primal scene is closely related to the gaze and the power of sight to enchant the observer. It is in film studies that the theory of the gaze initially registered in Laura Mulvey's (1975) highly influential essay on visual pleasure, sexual desire and patriarchal power. Drawing on Freudian and Lacanian concepts she argued that the organisation of looks in classic Hollywood film is structured to gratify the "male gaze" in three ways: the look from camera to scene; the look from the spectator to the action; and the looks between characters in the film. It did not take long for art historians to recognise the importance of Mulvey's thinking, as it addressed the question of viewing that had long been absent from the modern discipline. There had been no problem studying the makers of art and celebrating the genius of individual artists, but "there was little by way of a corresponding focus on the function of spectatorship" (Bryson, 2001:6) and its explanatory power has meant that very few art historians have attempted to develop an alternative understanding of "the Gaze".

A key exception is Mieke Bal whose approach differs from Mulvey's in fundamental ways. Although both share a political commitment to a feminist analysis of how sexual

difference is constituted in visual representation, they have contrasting ways of "understanding how vision unfolds in the field of power, Mulvey's theory is *optical*, Bal's is *rhetorical*" (Bryson, 2001:8, emphasis in original). In Bal sight is figured as semiotic, it is signs rather than scenes that are the fundamental building blocks of vision and her originality lies in considering visual art as a narrative. Specifically, she draws on a structuralist informed narratology, which maintains that all stories are told from a particular point of view, which she terms "focalization" and effectively disperses the gaze[8]. It is an approach that regards images as a language and involves not deciphering classical paintings as "word-for-word" translations of biblical, historical or mythical fables, but rather "an analysis of visual images as narratives in and of themselves that can do justice to an aspect of images and their effect that neither iconography nor other art historical practices can quite articulate" (Bal, 2001:54). She still maintains that images have to be interpreted and read, because artworks remain both "social" and "textual", just like any other source of historical evidence, but she is careful to acknowledge the active nature of signification and that the occasion of meaning making is always located in particular contextual circumstances.

As such the Titian painting invites interpretations informed by post-structuralist and deconstructionist ideas. Here attention is drawn to the ambivalent senses provoked by the "pictorial facts", which each of the positions mentioned above attempt to subdue by imposing a consistent and authoritative interpretation of the painting. Some of the contradictions have been summarised as follows:

> There is evidence that argues in favour of regarding the significant meaning of the painting as lying in a just act of punishment (which is even seen as a redemptive deed to some extent); but there are also indications to support a view of the painting as, if not an objection to, then at least as a lamentation over the cruelty of the Olympian god. On the one hand, Titian brutalises the act of violence by having Apollo carry out the deed with his own hands…Apollo is thus not the god of cosmic harmonies, but primarily and palpably a murderous avenger. On the other hand, he is acting carefully and unemotionally (as if conducting an anatomical dissection), and does not appear as a passionately punitive god in the way that Michaelangelo's Christ does in the Last Judgement.

(Held, 2008:191-2)

There are further discrepancies, that I have alluded to earlier, and these conflicting readings will remain unresolved. Derrida terms this contradictory and elusive sense "différance" to convey the volatility of signification, as it combines both the structural meaning "to differ" (to be distinguishable from something else) with the temporal meaning "to defer" (to give way, yield to another's authority). I do not want to suggest that the painting is an infinitely "open" text, where meaning is always "deferred", rather that the methodological approaches discussed in this paper establish interpretive procedures that will involve certain exclusions, as meaning-making inevitably occurs within an already existing set of social relations: "the social frame does not 'surround' but is *part* of the work" (Bryson, 2001:5, emphasis in original).

Conclusion

In this discussion of 'new' and 'old' methods of art history I clearly have not exhausted the horizon of possibilities. I have not considered, for example, Titian's use of colour in the composition and the almost frenzied manipulation of paint in the scene, which has struck many commentators, and has been regarded as a bold portent of modernism – more of the twentieth than the sixteenth century. Nor have I considered in any depth the complex human-animal relationships depicted in the picture[9]. Instead, what I hope to have avoided are overly simplistic approaches and give a sense of how more recent interpretive procedures are aware of ambivalences, contradictions and plural readings. Although the readings are many, they are not infinite and nor are they arbitrary, the strength of Marxist, feminist, and psychoanalytic perspectives is that they each identify certain kinds of "structure" as central to their analysis. Of course, this raises important questions over their compatibility and their

subsequent deconstruction by post-structuralist thinkers indicates how methodological principles are often developed in conscious opposition to other theoretical positions.

The distinction drawn between "old" and "new" art histories is also problematic, not least since much of what is "good about it was not new" and the term operates as a form of "ideological policing" that is too busy disqualifying predecessors to emerge as truly separate from them, where what is "new about it is not good" (Orton and Pollock, 1996:xviii). By setting out a broad range of possible interpretations of visual signification I do not want to suggest that "anything goes" and that interpretation is ultimately futile, nor invoke the facile conclusion that it all depends on the individual subjectivity of the interpreter. Instead I am persuaded by Bal's (1991:13) insistence that a work of art is to be understood not as a given with a singular, unified meaning, but as an effect, a set of all possible readings: "it is not a dialectic resolution but rather a radicalization of the poles of opposition" that "leaves room for more than two kinds of meaning, and stimulates thinking about other possibilities". Her major book *Reading "Rembrandt"* combines semiotic insights with a deep commitment to feminism and psychoanalysis to explore the interactions between words and images. It is a complex, but rewarding book full of methodological and theoretical inventiveness that offers a model of analysis of genuinely interdisciplinary scholarship. Given that so much visual criminology is concerned with traumatic events then it is vital that we develop our own "pictorial intelligence" (Alpers and Baxandall, 1994). In doing so we will need to borrow histories, theories and methods from our neighbours in art history, but we should not do so naively or eclectically. Instead, we need a strong sense of what it is that different disciplines bring to debates in these interdisciplinary times and to be able to intervene in them competently, critically and imaginatively. If this paper help prompt an awareness of different ways of thinking about images in criminology, then it will have achieved its aims.

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Figure 1 Titian, *The Flaying of Marsyas*, c. 1570-1575, oil on canvas.

Figure 2 Giulio Romano, *Apollo Flaying Marsysas*, c. 1525-1535, pen, ink and wash over chalk.

[1] In his introduction to a ground breaking collection of essays on art by leading French thinkers (including Barthes, Baudrillard, Foucault, Kristeva and Serres) Bryson makes the point that so much anglo-american art history "reacts to the image by seeking documentation: that is where it does its reading – in documents" and he occasionally has the "sense that patronage studies, in particular, will read *anything* rather than read the painting" (1988:xvi, emphasis in original). The collection was explicitly designed to address this audience and highlighted the importance of reading a painting as a semiotic sign and opened up this world to the then contemporary currents in "critical theory", which had become the umbrella term to cover feminism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, postcolonialism and poststructuralism. This movement transformed art history as an academic discipline and was foundational to the "new" art history that had begun to invade and challenge the tranquil domains of the visual arts. Scholars from various disciplines, most notably from literary studies and philosophy, have migrated to the field and revitalized art history, suggesting there is much to be gained from pursuing interdisciplinary strategies and crossing disciplinary borders.

[2] Wind was a student of Panofsky and was among a group of scholars who used to meet in Aby Warburg's library in Hamburg in the years before Hitler came to power and was part of the great diaspora of Central Europeans, most of them Jewish, who sought refuge abroad with the advent of Nazism. Panofsky emigrated to the United States in 1933 and Wind played a key role in moving Warburg's library to London and establishing the Warburg Institute, so that knowledge of the iconographical approach spread widely in the Anglophone world after the war. Indeed, Wind was to be the first professor of art history at Oxford (under the Faculty of Modern History) from 1955 until his retirement in 1967.

[3] He does not appear in Ovid's version of the Marsyas story, but was the judge in an earlier dispute between Apollo and Pan, and being notorious for his foolishness voted against Apollo, and so infuriated the god that he punished Midas by transforming his ears into those of an ass. This story is told by Ovid in *Metamorphoses* XI, 146-93, while the Marsyas story is in *Metamorphoses* VI, 382-400, and there are many further variants in the tradition of the myth.

[4] Wind (1968:173) notes how the "musical contest between Apollo and Marsyas was therefore concerned with the relative powers of Dionysian darkness and Apollonian clarity; and if the contest ended with the flaying of Marsyas, it was because flaying was itself a Dionysian rite, a tragic ordeal of purification by which the ugliness of the outward man was thrown off and the beauty of his inward self revealed." For some commentators Marsyas represents the pure, wild Dionysian spirit of art, which must be tamed by the Apollonian aspect of it, blending with the laws of harmonious proportion and found in the music of strings. On this reading the significant meaning of the painting is that it is an act of redemption, rather than a portrayal of gratuitous cruelty, a metaphor of transformation, and ultimately harmony (Salisbury, 1993).

[5] Melanie Hart (2007:277) has insisted that some of the figures in the painting represent different attitudes to suffering and creativity, noting the psychotic disposition of Apollo: the lack of empathy, the vengefulness and cool obsession – dissecting the body in such a way as to find out how a mere mortal can rival himself as a maker of beautiful music. In the novel *The Silence of the Lambs* the homicidal genius Hannibal 'the Cannibal' Lecter advises the FBI agent Clarice Starling to see the painting, in her efforts to track down a schizoid serial killer who flays the bodies of his victims. Dr Lecter advises: '"When you're back in

Washington, go to the National Gallery and look at Titian's *Flaying of Marsyas* before they send it back to Czechoslovakia. Wonderful for details, Titian – look at helpful Pan, bringing the bucket of water"' (Harris, 1988/1990:143). I am grateful to Mark Bushell for pointing this out to me.

[6] The tradition can be traced back to the work of émigré Marxist art historians such as Frederick Antal, Arnold Hauser and Meyer Schapiro who were marginalised in the Cold War but pioneered what is often termed the "social history of art". It became influential in the 1970s, most notably in John Berger's (1972:33) book and television series *Ways of Seeing,* which called for a radically new way of looking at the "entire art of the past" so that it now becomes a "political issue". He insisted that works of art have become "holy relics", surrounded by an "atmosphere of entirely bogus religiosity" (Berger, 1972:21), and then explained how the ideological ties between painting and property are usually ignored by art experts and historians. The book and television series were intended to be polemical, and generated heated responses not only from traditional art historians and treasure houses, but the challenges were taken up and art history's centre of gravity shifted and encouraged art historians to "break their own mould" (Rees and Borzello, 1986:6).

[7] He was first "dragged around the walls, with sacks of earth and stones on his back; next, tied onto a chair, he was hoisted to the yardarm of the Turkish flagship and exposed to the taunts of sailors. Finally, he was taken to the place of execution in the main square, tied naked to a column, and, literally, flayed alive…" (Freedberg, 1986:150 in *FMR* 45). It was reported that 350 Venetian soldiers were massacred and the grisly details of their demise will have shocked Venice, but within weeks the Venetian fleet defeated that of Turkey at the battle of Lepanto so that fear turned to joy and according to Freedberg (id.) the deeper meaning of the Marsyas legend for Titian was that "torment in the end laid truth bare, and as in the Christian legend, sacrifice begot redemption".

[8] In her study of the semiotics of rape in two versions of the *Lucretia* theme by Rembrandt (1664 and 1666), which was an originary myth in Roman culture, the story is told from Lucretia's viewpoint (Bal, 1991). This was certainly not the case in Rembrandt's principle source, in Livy, where the rape of the virtuous Lucretia by the son of the leading Tarquin dynasty leads to their overthrow and the foundation of the Roman republic. Lucretia, having been raped, kills herself to prove her chastity and the myth makes the "woman's violated and dying body serve the purpose of masculine political power" (Pollock, 1999:158). In both Rembrandt's portrayals, the story appears to be reversed, showing the consequences of the rape for Lucretia and her inability to tell it except through masculine terms.

[9] Piers Beirne (forthcoming) has attended to the meaning and effects of animal imagery in eighteenth century art in his efforts to develop a nonspeciesist criminology, while the exchange of letters between Katya Andreadakis and her father, John Berger, over the relationships between flesh and fur in Titian offer further startling insights into the painting (see Berger, 2015:67-80).