

Auguste Rodin, *Orpheus and Euridice*, 1893, marble, 50 x 30 x 28".



IT IS A RECURRING EXPERIENCE: I am doing a studio visit, and there on the artist's shelf is a book by Kaja Silverman. I see *The Subject of Semiotics* (1983) or *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (1992): The artist has an interest in psychoanalysis. Or instead I see *The Acoustic Mirror* (1988) or *Speaking About Godard* (1998; written with Harun Farocki): The artist, as all good artists should be, is a feminist, and possibly a cinephile. Indeed, I first met Silverman at a lecture in the late '90s at the Louvre, where she presented a reading of Marguerite Duras and Alain Resnais's collaboration *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959). Along with Deleuze, Silverman has become the author one turns to for a deep understanding of the cinematic monuments of the postwar era: the films of Godard, Resnais, Fassbinder. That night at the Louvre, she appeared dressed like a character straight out of a film noir, and her stunning reading of *Hiroshima* brought not a few tears to the eye—and the audience to its feet.

This, too, is a recurring experience: In recent years, I have repeatedly seen Silverman deliver a no less than two-hour-long lecture on Gerhard Richter, only to be greeted with the kind of wild enthusiasm usually reserved for performances and concerts. But there has been an irony for me in all this. Since the mid-'90s, Silverman's work has shifted away from its earlier concentration on literature and film and moved into a direct confrontation with the phenomena of vision itself and, increasingly, with visual art. There has been a major essay on Cindy Sherman, published in *The Threshold of the Visible World* (1996); others on artists such as Jeff Wall ("Total Visibility" [2003]) or Eija-Liisa Ahtila ("How to Stage the Death of God" [2002]). There have been books: an epochal rethinking of the very act of looking, in the philosophical treatise *World Spectators* (2000), where Silverman casts seeing not as implicitly rapacious and violent but as a gift we bestow on the objects and beings of the world, an act of "world affirmation," as she puts it there. And in the wake of this text, in 2002, Silverman wrote a monograph on James Coleman, devoting a chapter to each of the projected-image works the artist had produced since the early '90s. This study stands among the pinnacles of recent art criticism, but since it was published as an exhibition catalogue

(for the Lenbachhaus in Munich), I suspect that very few artists and writers have in fact encountered it. Thus the irony and the impossible position of our greatest critics today: Whether the field has acknowledged it or not, a major voice within art criticism has emerged.

This misrecognition of Silverman's primary concerns should change with the recent publication of her long-awaited book *Flesh of My Flesh* (Stanford University Press, 2009). This volume elaborates on the shift in Silverman's attention from cinema to time-based art more generally: photography, video, projected images—the whole panoply of artistic practices that Silverman has come to call photography or cinema "by other means." And yet the cast in this work is immense: There are essays on Richter, Coleman, and filmmaker Terrence Malick, but also on Leonardo da Vinci, and German Expressionist painter Paula Modersohn-Becker. There are appearances by Freud and Romain Rolland, Rainer Maria Rilke and Lou Andreas-Salomé, Friedrich Nietzsche and Marcel Proust, Ovid and Walter Benjamin. The book, in other words, is unclassifiable. And yet its stakes are simple, really. Like so much of Silverman's recent work, *Flesh of My Flesh* is about love. During a decade in which the art world found itself obsessed with what it awkwardly called relational aesthetics, Silverman—along with some of her closest interlocutors, including Leo Bersani—instead used aesthetics to explore in the deepest of ways what human "relationality" could be said to be. We are thus witness in *Flesh of My Flesh* to another major shift in Silverman's thought: From being one of the foremost theorists of desire, she has moved toward a thinking—a true imagining—of the conditions of both love and joy. As *Flesh of My Flesh* shows us, these are two affects that our times—of infinite war and indiscriminate destruction; of massive ethnic, national, and religious polarization—must consider anew. The times, in other words, have produced a call. They have been a summons. As I realized when I visited with Silverman this past fall, surrounded by the violent unrest caused by the financial and political crises of the University of California campuses, both hers and my own: First and foremost *Flesh of My Flesh* is a response.

—George Baker

Primal Siblings

GEORGE BAKER in conversation with [Kaja Silverman](#)



This page: Terrence Malick, *The Thin Red Line*, 1998, still from a color film in 35 mm, 170 minutes. © 2010 Fox Film Corporation.
Opposite page: Leonardo da Vinci, *A Cloudburst of Material Possessions*, ca. 1510. © 2010 Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

GEORGE BAKER: Where did *Flesh of My Flesh* begin?

KAJA SILVERMAN: I guess the answer to that question would have to be “in my unconscious.” Although the book was not yet a gleam in my conscious mind’s eye, I started writing it in 1999, with an essay on Terrence Malick’s *Thin Red Line* [1998]. I was drawn to the film because I found it so emotionally overwhelming and because the affects that it precipitated in me felt both ontologically and historically *true*, even though I could not link them to anything in the present. This was very mysterious, and it became even more so later, because one by one, the events that were specific to each of these affects occurred. Some were political—September 11, 2001; the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Others were personal—the loss of love, breast cancer. Much later, after I had written the chapters on Gerhard Richter, Leonardo, and James Coleman, I realized that all of the lessons that I had learned from these events, and that I was bringing to the writing of the book, were already implicit in my first experience of Malick’s film.

GB: In your new book, you cite Marguerite Duras: “Oblivion begins with the eyes.” *World Spectators* expounds a kind of theory of the visual itself, and *Flesh of My Flesh* expands this theorization by confronting several specific artistic and cinematic projects. Why has vision become your most pressing concern? What is vision for you?

KS: A lot of our thinking on vision is guided by three axioms that were introduced in the 1960s and ’70s and consolidated in the 1980s. They are that the look is violent, that images are ideologically mystifying, and that politically engaged artists and theorists must expose this violence and undo this mystification. I have never been comfortable with this account of vision or of art, and in the mid-’90s I began trying to develop alternatives. My first attempt to do this was *The Threshold of the Visible World*, in which I distinguished the look from the gaze, argued for the “productivity” of the look, and linked this productivity to “the active gift of love.” My thinking took a phenomenological turn after I wrote *Threshold*, and this led me to think about the field of vision in ontological—

as well as psychic and social—terms. In *World Spectators*, I argued that we can only be fully ourselves if we are seen in the way that allows us to *appear*, and that we and everything else in the world are constantly searching for this look, whose fundamental mode is affirmation. In my new book, I build on this account of seeing and being seen, but this time I am more concerned with the *recognition of kinship* than with the *affirmation* of the visible world. I also talk about why we so often fail to provide it.

GB: In your work, you often try to stage “impossible” confrontations, usually in a redemptive mode. In *World Spectators*, for instance, you allow two modes of thinking to collide and engage each other: psychoanalysis and phenomenology. You seem to want to imagine what would occur if these philosophical modes—which have been considered incompatible—came into contact. The impossible object of thought of *Flesh of My Flesh* is what you’re calling analogy, as well as its continued existence within modernity. What do you mean by *analogy*?

KS: An analogy is a relationship of greater or lesser similarity between two or more ontologically equal terms—a corresponding *with*, rather than a corresponding *to*. Everything relates to everything else in this way, because analogy is the structure of Being. These analogies are also untranscendable, and they house a saving power. However, because we are constantly refusing to acknowledge the resemblances that connect us to certain people or groups of people, we are almost always psychically estranged from the totality to which we belong. This refusal has disastrous consequences both for them and for us.

GB: As you say at the beginning of *Flesh of My Flesh*, analogy was a philosophical model belonging to the Renaissance worldview. It has also been described as a way of thinking about the world that is similar to how myth operates: Like must be linked with like; similitude takes priority over difference. But within modernity we have wanted to position rationality against mythic thinking.

KS: What we call “reason” is essentially negation: the definition of what things are through the specification of what they are *not*. It is thus profoundly divisive. We need to relearn the art of analogical

thinking and to practice it in a way that is not eviscerated by metaphysics. Platonic and Christian analogies link our world to a “higher” world. They are also static, hierarchical, unilateral, and divinely authored. Everything resembles God, because he created man in his image, and lesser beings in man’s image, and still lesser beings in the image of these beings, yet God does not resemble anything else; he is purely self-referential.

This is not the only way, though, in which resemblance has ever been thought or lived. There is a countermodernity that can be traced back to Leonardo, one that is emphatically worldly and committed to the kind of nonhierarchical, unauthored, dynamic, and reversible analogies that are the topic of my book. This countermodernity also looks backward—to Ovid, who had a similar understanding of resemblance, and to the figure of the mother, whom Leonardo and a number of other practitioners, such as Marcel Proust, Roland Barthes, and W. G. Sebald, never abandoned.

GB: You do return to myth to elaborate your notion of analogy, and your book tracks an engagement throughout the modern period with the story of Orpheus and Eurydice in particular. How did you become interested in this myth?

KS: I was invited by the curators of the Louvre’s 2003 exhibition of Leonardo drawings and manuscripts to talk at a conference about the images that James Coleman had embedded within the show. A couple of these images were digital renditions of Leonardo’s drawings of an

“Orpheus machine,” and Coleman suggested that I read Angelo Poliziano’s *Orfeo* [1471], for which Leonardo designed this machine. When I did, I was stunned by the opera’s misogyny and fascinated by Leonardo’s attempt to neutralize it. After the conference, I spent a lot of time in the exhibition and discovered that the Orpheus machine

was not the only reference to this myth: Leonardo also alludes to it in *Portrait of a Musician* [circa 1490], a digital rendition of which Coleman had placed in the same room, and both of these images seemed connected to *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne* [circa 1508], which was included in the exhibition, and on which Freud based his claim that Leonardo never turned away from the mother. I decided to read Virgil’s and Ovid’s versions of the myth and found them so rich that I continued my research. This led me to Rainer Maria Rilke, Lou Andreas-Salomé, Paula Modersohn-Becker, and Wilhelm Jensen. I discovered that the myth was everywhere in Western culture until Freud displaced it with the Oedipus myth.

GB: I can see that this myth is important to you because it is

about the confrontation with mortality and it is staged through a look.

KS: It actually contains several looks—at least in its Ovidian form. This version of the story begins with the marriage of Orpheus and Eurydice, which is full of bad omens. Shortly after their wedding, Eurydice is bitten by a snake and dies. After a brief period of mourning, Orpheus descends to Hades, hoping to persuade Pluto and Proserpina to allow him to take Eurydice back to earth. They grant his wish, but only on the condition that he not look at her during their return journey. Orpheus walks ahead of Eurydice, so as to avoid violating the gods’ prohibition, but at the climactic moment in their journey, he turns to look at her, and she dies a second time. He is terrified by this encounter with mortality and tries to distance himself from it by redefining death as something that happens to women. Since this renders women repellent to him, he turns away from them. Orpheus also tries to protect himself from death by retreating to a secluded spot and using his music to overcome nature.

There is a lot of irony in Ovid’s narration of this story, calling Orpheus’s behavior into question and eliciting sympathy for Eurydice. This irony is not present in most interpretations of this story. Rather, Ovid’s commentators idealized Orpheus, and a number of them argued that Orpheus capitulates to the devil, the flesh, and/or the world when he turns around to see Eurydice.





This page: **Gerhard Richter, *Betty*, 1977**, oil on canvas, 19 ¹/₈ x 15 ¹/₈".
Opposite page: **Gerhard Richter, *Marian*, 1983**, oil on canvas, 78 ³/₄ x 78 ³/₄".

This placed a new moratorium on the act of looking back, making Orpheus's subsequent turn away from women emblematic of what the male subject must do if he wants to achieve perfection.

GB: You seem to propose within your book that the Oedipus myth should be displaced by the Orpheus myth as a story of subjectivity. You have been writing against the Oedipal since your earliest work, but here we are given an entirely different story. You call it "Orpheus Rex."

KS: The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice provides a much more compelling account of gender than does the Oedipus myth—one based on mortality instead of castration. The story is also crucial because it helps us to see the foundational nature of gender: The turn away from woman is a turn away from *all* relationality.

Ovid gives the myth a redemptive coda as well. In Book XI of the *Metamorphoses*, Orpheus is attacked by a band of women who say, "Look, there's the man who hates us." They strip him of his power to coerce and compel nature, and they dismember his body. Orpheus is transformed by death. When he arrives in Hades, he searches for his "dear" Eurydice and, when he finds her, lovingly embraces her. They spend their time walking side by side through Hades and reenacting what happened on the slope leading from Hades to earth in a way that undoes its violence—turning it into a reversible and ontologically equalizing analogy. Sometimes Eurydice walks ahead and Orpheus follows, and at other times he walks ahead and she follows; and when it is his turn to look back, his look no longer kills. In the first part of his version of the myth, Ovid tells us what heterosexuality is. In the second, he shows us what heterorelativity would look like—if we were ever to have it.

GB: It occurred to me that this book is as much about masculinity and male subjectivity as was your *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*. The first half of the book revises our stories of modernism by focusing on the ties and dialogues between figures ranging from Freud to Rolland, Nietzsche to Andreas-Salomé, and Rilke to Modersohn-Becker. And this part of your story deals with not just the turning away from mortality but also the turning away from woman and the inability to deal with sexual difference.

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KS: It's actually the refusal to deal with sexual *resemblance*: the attempt to prevent death from being something that happens to men as well as to women by proving that women are radically

different, both physically and psychically. Although Freud famously declared that the aim of life is death, he was terrified of dying. In 1923, he was diagnosed with jaw cancer, the disease that would ultimately kill him, and between then and 1939, he had thirty-three operations, each one of which tore away a piece of his face. It was during this period of bodily decomposition that he wrote the essays associating the female genitals with mutilation: "Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes" [1925], "Female Sexuality" [1931], and "Femininity" [1933].

GB: So the very project of defining sexual difference was a

turning away from mortality for Freud?

KS: Absolutely. That is also true for three of the other figures I discuss in the first half of my book: Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust.

GB: Men who isolate themselves—"great solitaires," you call them. This is a lived version of the very project of modernism as autonomy: To separate art from the world occasioned for these writers and thinkers a literal withdrawal from the world itself. The counterhistory of modernity that the first half of your book seems to trace is the tragic story of how what you just called heterorelativity does not exist. The Orpheus story is mobilized in Rilke's writings, it is mobilized in the other accounts that you trace for us, and it is implicit in certain texts of Freud's. But somehow these male writers never recognize the myth's extreme kernel of potential.

KS: I wouldn't say that they never recognized this potential. Rilke understood that his desire for solitude was a malady, and he knew that many of his

contemporaries were suffering from the same malady. He also viewed this collective illness as the last chapter in the history of masculinity, a history in which there is no room for others because there is no place for women. No longer willing even to *fight* an external foe, the male subject has now interiorized the categories of master and slave and is absorbed in the claustal drama of overcoming *himself*. Since this is an unrealizable goal, Rilke wrote in a letter to Annette Kolb, the "man of the 'new grain'" is "going to pieces," and when his "salutary decomposition" is complete, he will begin his slow journey toward woman. The poet concludes his letter with the hope that woman will "wait for and . . . receive this tardy lover." So it's clear that Rilke understood the diagnostic value of the first part of Ovid's story and the redemptive potential of the second part, and he returned to the myth over and over again, in an attempt to realize that potential. Two of the other authors I discuss went even further. Andreas-Salomé based her analytic practice on the coda to the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, and Wilhelm Jensen not only reprised the analogy with which Ovid ends his story but also restored Eurydice to the world.

GB: In the climactic chapter of your book, you deal with a very clear and simple example of the analogical in Gerhard Richter's painting, which is his project of interrelating painting and photography. Or, perhaps more specifically, of aligning

the projects of abstraction and photography: Here Richter creates an analogy that's defined on the level of forms. But this runs counter to everything we've been told about the way in which artists of Richter's generation used photography to erode the plenitude of painting as a medium. Turning to photography in a mode of distance or irony, artists such as Richter also eviscerated the modes of authorship that painting once supported, annihilating

subjectivity as a model of expression and depth. How can your thoughts on analogy be applied to such an artist?

KS: I taught a graduate seminar on Richter in fall 2002, when his retrospective was at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. My students and I spent a lot of time in front of his photo-



pictures and many hours discussing the passages in *The Daily Practice of Painting* [1995] where he talks about photography. Some members of the seminar wondered why we were focusing on these passages instead of on the canonical texts on photography, but I found them conceptually dazzling and philosophically transformative. Through my engagement with Richter's art and writing, I eventually came to see that we have completely misunderstood what a photograph is.

GB: How? You call this chapter "Photography by Other Means."

KS: A photograph isn't a representation or even an index. It is, rather, a special kind of *analogy*—the kind that our culture most needs. A photograph and its "referent" have so many affinities that we are unable to separate them from each other, but also enough differences to keep us from conflating them. This couple—and I use the word *couple* advisedly, because the two parts of a photographic analogy have as much of a right to be called that as Orpheus and Eurydice—helps us to see that similarity is not sameness and that difference does not automatically translate into opposition. They also show us that *there really is a world* and that not all images are human constructions. The oft-repeated mantra that a photograph is "only a representation" is a defensive maneuver—an attempt to make this disclosure go away.

GB: If this is what a photograph is, then the question that follows for Richter becomes not one of how photography displaces painting or opposes abstraction. Instead it is: What is abstraction given by photography? What does photography receive from abstraction? How does each form relate to and connect with the other?

KS: Abstraction is often celebrated as the vehicle through which art established its autonomy. Art had to get rid of similitude, because only by being unlike everything else could it shake off the burden of representation and become a thing unto itself. But the notion of an autonomous artwork is closely linked to that of the solitary male subject and is susceptible to the same critique. Not only did a number of modernist artists try to prove that they were self-sufficient by creating autonomous works of art, but their repudiation of aesthetic referentiality was yet another way of rejecting analogy. In fact, there is no separate domain

where art dwells, just as there is no higher world over which a god or a demiurge presides. Paintings, poems, buildings, and symphonies belong to the same totality we belong to. They are also integrated into this totality the same way we are: through ontologically equalizing similarities. Richter has been telling us all of this since the mid-'60s, first through his photo-pictures, then through his abstract paintings, and most recently through his overpainted and blown-up photographs.

GB: Your ultimate gambit is that Richter places German history into some kind of analogy with his own set of family relationships, with his own biography. How do you

move from the formal analogies you find in his work—from seeing his painting as a kind of "photography by other means"—to a reading of his project as an overarching search for connections between historical events and lived experiences?

KS: For a long time after September 11, 2001, I was deeply preoccupied with the issue of mortality, both personally and politically. Eventually I came to see that finitude is the most enabling and capacious of all the analogies that link us to others. Unfortunately, though, it is also the one we are least likely to acknowledge and for which we are most likely to punish others. Richter arrived at a similar understanding of mortality in the '80s, also through the intersection of history and his life. In the '60s, he recounts in an interview, a group of concentration-camp photographs sought him out and made two very difficult demands on him: They asked him to see his own mortality in the emaciated bodies of the camp inmates and to recognize his own capacity for violence in the behavior of those

who put them there. Instead of acknowledging the truth of these analogies, he feminized death and put the murder weapon in someone else's hand. Only much later, by tracing the analogies that connected

this period of history to the one memorialized in *October 18, 1977* [1988], and his daughter Betty to Ulrike Meinhof and Gudrun Ensslin, was Richter able to acknowledge his finitude and his potential for violence. These analogies are intimately conjoined with the formal ones you just asked about. In both of these situations, Richter sought to analogize a group of photographs by painting photo-pictures. He was unable to do this with the first group because he refused to recognize the concentration-camp inmates and their victimizers as his kin. However, he was able to correspond with the second group of photographs not only as a painter but also as a photographer, because he responded to the similar demands they made on him.

GB: Why did you call the book *Flesh of My Flesh*?

KS: It is what Adam says to Eve when she is presented to him for the first time by God.

GB: The title also evokes Merleau-Ponty's notion of the flesh of the world.

KS: Yes, of course. It also evokes some closely related passages in the *Metamorphoses* and Leonardo's notebooks that may have been the source of this concept. But unlike Merleau-Ponty's flesh of the world, whose structuring principle is chiasmus, and which is "anonymous," the structuring principle of the totality I am evoking through the concept of flesh is analogy—and

analogy is much more particularizing than chiasmus. As I attempt to demonstrate in my book, it is through the most private and unique aspects of our lives that we correspond with other beings. Each of us also has a distinct ontological "style," and although we are all finite beings, both temporally and spatially, each of us must find our own "path" to death.

My project diverges from Merleau-Ponty's in several other ways as well. "Flesh of my flesh" is a reference to the mother, both because each of us emerged from a maternal body and because the turn away from women almost always begins with her. Finally, I am as concerned with recognition as I am with analogy, because until we

acknowledge the resemblances that connect us to others, they have no psychic, social, or historical efficacy. When we recognize some aspect of ourselves in another being, it is almost always



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through a personal pronoun. We say “I,” “me,” or “my.” It was consequently very important for me to have the last of these words in the title of my book.

GB: This whole project has called up another kind of counterhistory for you, which is the need to write differently about photography’s history.

KS: Yes, I’m now working on a book about photography, approaching the medium through the discourse that surrounded it during the first two decades of its existence, rather than through the discourse in which it is now embedded. I begin with the claim, which I make in the last chapter of *Flesh of My Flesh*, that a photograph is an analogy.

GB: One can easily see the connection between analogy and the analog. There is somehow a verbal alignment of this idea with what was, at least until recently, the physical condition of the photographic image.

KS: Yes, it’s a striking coincidence. I also define photography using three other concepts, the first of which is the “pencil of nature,” the title Henry Fox Talbot gave to his 1844–46 book of photographic plates, and a phrase that shows up in many early descriptions of the medium. As it helps us to see, photography was initially perceived as a graphic rather than scopic practice, and as issuing from the world, rather than from a human source. The second concept I’m using arises from the “recipient plate,” which is what early photographers called the sensitized surfaces they exposed to light. We think of reception as a passive act. But it was not so easy at that time to receive what nature “gave,” and the search for an adequate recipient plate consumed an enormous amount of time and energy; this encouraged photographers to think of themselves as receivers. And although this challenge to human agency was eventually overcome within the domain of photography, it continued to reverberate elsewhere. Freud, Rilke, and Proust all think of the human psyche as a photographic plate that is exposed to

the external world, and Rilke and Proust, along with Cézanne, also describe their artmaking in these terms.



Opposite page: Gerhard Richter, *January*, 1989, oil on canvas, 10' 6" x 13' 1½". This page: Leonardo da Vinci, *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne*, ca. 1508, oil on wood, 66⅞ x 51¼".

GB: You already describe artistic creation in receptive terms in *Flesh of My Flesh*.

KS: Yes, many of the artists and writers I discuss there think of themselves as receivers—Rilke and Proust, as I have already suggested, but also Andreas-Salomé, Leonardo, Coleman, and

Richter. In fact, about ten years ago I wrote an essay called “The Author as Receiver” [2001], in which I talk about three other authorial receivers: Jean-Luc Godard, Mallarmé, and John Keats. Richter and Godard make a direct link between photography and this kind of authorship, and it is implicitly there in Mallarmé.

But to look ahead again, the third concept through which I am now rethinking photography is “unstoppable development.” We are used to considering a photograph immobile, but there was nothing “still” about this kind of image in the first decades of its existence. In photography’s early years, it often took a long time for the image traced by the pencil of nature to develop. It was also hard to keep this image from vanishing and to keep the surrounding area from blackening. Daguerre’s system produced only a “latent image” that had to be developed before it could be seen, and when Henry Fox Talbot realized that his photographic negatives could be used to make positive prints, he introduced another kind of development into photography. And as I realized while I was working on Coleman’s *IN I T I A L S* [1993–94], photography is still a dynamic medium. Photographs are constantly developing into other things: paintings, novels, computational images.

GB: Your whole notion of the author as a receiver is implicitly photographic. But conversely, you seem to be asserting that photography itself is a model of subjectivity, that it is a mode of being. These two things are indistinguishable.

KS: For the first two decades of its existence, photography was an ontological calling card; it showed its viewers that Being is a gift from

elsewhere and that resemblance is its enabling condition. Maybe photography’s obsolescence as an industrial medium will permit it to function this way again. Then we will hear a few of the rhymes that make up the great poem of Being—and perhaps even add some of our own. □