BLIND SUFFERING: RIBERA’S NON-VISUAL EPISTEMOLOGY OF MARTYRDOM
Itay Sapir

Abstract
One of the oft-neglected aspects of early Baroque painting is its critical stance vis-à-vis renaissance’s ideal of pure and perfect visibility. The origins of this standpoint can be traced to the art of Caravaggio, but it is the Hispano-Neapolitan painter Jusepe de Ribera who brings it to a culmination of sorts, in a sustained pictorial quest for a novel sensorial pragmatics. Ribera’s representations of martyrdom, in particular, create a fascinating play between saints’ tactile experience of their suffering, their complex, often-deficient visual perception, and the viewer’s limited access to visual information when reconstructing the narrative on the basis of pictorial evidence. In this article, I analyse Ribera’s creation of mock-tactile textures through purely visual techniques, and the implications of such an artistic method for the hierarchy of the senses in the devotional context of Neapolitan culture in the first half of the seventeenth century. Gilles Deleuze’s analysis of Francis Bacon in The Logic of Sensation and Steven Connor’s observations on skin’s place in modern culture are brought also to bear on Ribera’s epidermal painting and its subversion of ocularcentrism.

Keywords: Ribera, Caravaggio, haptic, sensorial hierarchies, martyrdom, Deleuze, Bacon, Connor.
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.5456/issn.2050-3679/2015w02

Biographical note
Itay Sapir is assistant professor of art history at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM), Montreal, Canada. Among his publications on sixteenth and seventeenth-century Italian painting is his study Ténèbres sans leçons: esthétique et épistémologie de la peinture ténébriste romaine 1595–1610 (Peter Lang, 2012), analysing the work of Adam Elsheimer and Caravaggio as reflecting a contemporaneous epistemological crisis. More recently, Sapir has published the article ‘The Birth of Mediterranean Culture: Claude Lorrain’s Port Scenes Between the Apollonian and the Dionysian’, in the Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz (LVI:1, 2014). He currently works on Ribera’s sensorial epistemology (a project supported by a grant from the Québec Fonds de recherche société et culture) and on representations of the moment of death in early modern painting (funded by a Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council grant).
BLIND SUFFERING: RIBERA’S NON-VISUAL EPISTEMOLOGY OF MARTYRDOM

Itay Sapir,
Université du Québec à Montréal

The imperialism of sight in modernity, and its subsequent denigration in post-modern culture, are old news by now. Martin Jay’s phrase, ‘The Denigration of Vision’ (1993), has become almost a cliché, and with it the idea that before twentieth-century (French, but read ‘dominant’) thought dethroned it, sight was reigning, sovereign and uncontested, over the sensorial realm. It is generally assumed by historians that in Western culture, from its origins in ancient Greece to the early modern period at least, sight was the ideal, most immediate avenue to the acquisition of knowledge, the most efficient mnemonic sense (hence the classical art of memory, turning words and concepts into images), and the one that is most susceptible to provoke direct emotional response. The renaissance, in particular, theorized sight as the foremost vehicle for beauty, piety and truth; Leonardo da Vinci’s writings are perhaps the most eloquent expressions of that relatively mainstream intellectual position.

A few important attempts have nonetheless been made to develop and historicize the idea that there were, already in early modern Europe, alternatives to sight and to its dominance. In the field of medieval and renaissance studies, Constance Classen’s Color of Angels from 1998 is a worthy account, though sometimes limited in its scope, of the lost variety of sensorial perception present in Western Culture’s not-so-distant past; Classen puts at the centre of her discussion the history of gendered sensorialities, in particular the association of sight with men and the concurrent feminization of touch. While sensorial variety is thus evident, such a gendered vision, needless to say, both substantiates and proves sight’s solid historical supremacy. François Quiviger’s recent Sensory World of Italian Renaissance Art (2010) is a more specific study of the multiplicity of sensorial realities and their representations.

However, beyond the well-demonstrated existence of alternative sensorial experiences and hierarchies in early modern culture, I would like to concentrate here on a rather intriguing paradox: the denigration of sight and the search for alternatives to its prevalence, practised by painters, of all people. After all, painting, long before Clement Greenberg, has been considered the visual art par excellence, intent on showing us that aspect of the world that caters to our eyes only; once again, the renaissance is a case in point, as it emphasised painting’s mandate of representing the visual richness that surrounds us, faithfully fulfilling Leon Battista Alberti’s well-known precept that the painter should be concerned with nothing else but that which can be seen (in Alberti’s 1436 Italian version, ‘Delle cose quali non possiamo vedere, neuno nega nulla apartenersene al pitore. Solo studio il pitore fingere quello si vede’).

The ideal of visual adequacy and transparency that such an approach entails remained dominant for more than a century, and the gradual process of its undermining is a complex story, yet to be fully told by art historians. For the moment, suffice it to say that after decades of mannerist playful, though ultimately lethal, questioning of Alberti’s doctrine, the latter’s agonising corpse was unceremoniously and definitively slaughtered and buried by the artist who dared to make paintings in which visibility was severely impaired and visual information seriously impoverished: it was Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio who greeted the new century with the pictorial announcement that sight is limited, misleading and suspect, and the fact that he did so as a painter, and not as an image-hating iconoclast, added much poignancy to that statement.

Caravaggio’s sacred paintings, in particular, have much to say about the metaphysical poverty of sight – The Conversion of Saint Paul (Rome, Santa Maria del Popolo, 1600–1), which suggests that spiritual enlightenment goes hand in hand with concrete blinding, being a typical example. Nevertheless, Caravaggio’s art was too concentrated on lofty questions of revelation, incarnation and vocation to find some time for the more pragmatic issues of perception, such as the ‘division of labour’ among the five senses or the hierarchial order that should, or should not, distinguish between their respective values. And so, while Paul’s groping of the void above him does suggest a haptic aspiration substituting for lost physical sight, and while the Doubting Thomas’ gesture famously opens the space for a fascinating discussion of sight, touch, faith and knowledge (see Most, 2005, and Benay, 2014), these rare episodes remained a rather marginal sub-current of Caravaggio’s art, the main concern of which lay elsewhere.

The relative merits of the five senses, and in particular the unrelenting search for alternatives to sight’s supremacy, were, on the other hand, at the centre of a slightly later artistic enterprise, that of Jusepe/José de Ribera (1591–1652). Indeed, the
Hispano-Neapolitan painter supplemented a profound treatment of sensorial pragmatics to the more general spiritual questions of faith and revelation. Ribera’s *Saint John the Baptist* now on display in Houston (1614–6; Figure 2.1), for instance, reveals a subtle but significant divergence from Caravaggio’s art, precisely because its theme is a typical and frequent caravagesque one. Ribera’s Baptist is shown with a gesture Caravaggio never depicted in this context, rubbing his fingers on each other, thus highlighting the tactile eloquence of skin itself. This seemingly trivial detail is in fact important as it shows us a person auto-reflexively producing an effect of presence to himself not by looking at his reflection in a mirror, but exclusively by touching. The latter oft–denigrated sense is thus suggested as a possible, even necessary alternative to the now-beleaguered sight, taking into account vision’s well-known epistemological merits but also its notorious inadequacies. The protagonist’s lost, unfocused gaze, that the wide-open mouth hyperbolically replicates, underlines, by contrast, the concreteness of the touching-and-touched finger and
its simple-but-precious reliability: the cluster of hands is dense, focused and solid – or at least so it seems to the spectator’s eyes, the only organ directly addressed by the art of painting, a fact that brings to the fore immediately the paradox at the heart of Ribera’s painterly enterprise of contesting sight’s prominence.

Probably a more conventional starting point for a discussion of Ribera and the sensorial is the famous series of the five senses personified. The young Ribera created several versions of some of the senses, and the interest these paintings show for the very concrete aspects of human perceptual interaction with the world is literal and obvious. The two allegories of Touch, in particular, (Pasadena, Norton Simon Foundation and Madrid, Museo del Prado) are fascinating visual treatments of sight and touch as rival epistemological alternatives: both show an apparently blind person neglecting a painting lying next to him while holding and actively touching a sculpted, classical-looking head. The aporetic character of these images is forcefully enhanced when one remembers that they are themselves nothing more than two-dimensional paintings, offering no tactile gratification to their spectator and hardly any interest to the unsighted. The paragone reference, though evidently present, is equally ambiguous: while sculpture is shown as the richer and more satisfying medium, it is only so because of the man’s handicap; one could argue that, according to Ribera, sculpture’s only use is as ‘painting for the blind’.

Some of Ribera’s works, while not treating the five senses as their iconographical fulcrum, do directly – iconographically – engage with the limits of sight. A few depict concrete ocular deficiencies: blindness in the Blessing of Jacob (Madrid, Museo del Prado, 1637), with the old Isaac relying on touch and being misled by it – a classic biblical locus of the sensorial paragone; the tired, worn eyes of numerous elderly men like the Prado Saint Simon (c.1630), or Montreal’s Saint Joseph (Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, c.1635), their eyelids red and their sight visibly dysfunctional; and, perhaps in a more anecdotic mode, the knight of the Order of Saint James, today in Dallas (Portrait of a Knight of Santiago, Meadows Museum, c.1635), with his spectacles, interestingly using the correction of poor sight as a marker of identity, a proudly exhibited attribute. None of these themes was in itself unprecedented, but their frequent appearance in Ribera’s oeuvre signals a cluster of interests that can hardly be ignored.

Things become less obvious, and thus more intriguing, when we realize that, even when avoiding the iconographic, direct treatment of sensorial issues, Ribera rarely lost interest in the conundrums of the senses. On the contrary, the entire trajectory of the artist’s career can be plausibly interpreted as a continuous commentary on the shortcomings of sight and on sensorial alternatives, most remarkably the immense potential of touch for our access to everything around us.

Once again, it cannot be stressed enough to what extent this otherwise trivial point about the deficiencies of sight becomes audacious, even auto-subversive, when it is made by a painter, and repeatedly so. In choosing to professionally address our eyes and to use the visual medium as a sole means of expression, Ribera seemed to endorse the authority and importance of sight, while his actual practice did much to undermine those very same principles. Michel Serres detects the same phenomenon much later in the paintings of Pierre Bonnard, where ‘the eye loses its pre-eminence in the very domain of its domination, painting’ (Serres, 1985, p.40). An even more closely analogous twentieth-century case is the art of Francis Bacon, whose interest in the haptic and in textures – painterly and corporeal, or rather painterly-as-corporeal – is made evident in Deleuze’s study of the artist’s ‘close vision’ and non-representative figures-without-figuration ([1981] 2005). Deleuze’s ‘logic of sensation’ – for the latter word ‘affects’ or ‘instincts’ are used as synonyms – is, as we will see, a phrase singularly adequate to describe the novelty of Ribera’s art. Strangely enough, Deleuze mentions the seventeenth-century antecedents of Rembrandt and Velazquez, but ignores Ribera altogether in his study of Bacon.

The current scholarship on Ribera, for its part, concentrates either on knowledge and the senses or on faith and religion, each aspect ostensibly excluding the other. A rather virulent debate has been raging. On the one hand, we have what one might call the traditional or philological school, led by Nicola Spinosa, author of an authoritative Ribera monograph (Spinosa, 2003), who considers the painter a faithful promoter of Catholic orthodoxy, while generally being content with the painstaking labour of attribution and chronology. On the other hand, there are those rather rare scholars who depict a transgressive, modern Ribera open to intellectual novelties and ready to explore them in paint. While the former camp refuses to consider as relevant anything outside of the paintings themselves and the immediate archival documentation, the latter raises, as does Paola Santucci (1999), the fundamental epistemological question, but too quickly (and in perfect agreement with Spinosa, on this point only) describes Ribera’s painting as ‘naturalist’ and
ignores both its subtle divergences from Caravaggism and the complex treatment of sensorial information that makes Ribera’s work so ambiguous.\(^1\)

Indeed, epistemological and sensorial issues are rarely far from Ribera’s attention. A relatively indirect, but striking reference to sight’s vanity is in the version of *Saint Andrew* now in Houston (c.1637; Figure 2.2).

The detail of the fish is in itself iconographically banal: Andrew was a fisherman, and this is his traditional pictorial attribute, also hinting to his new vocation as fisher of men and their souls. But the dead—or dying—fish’s eye here is haunting: ostensibly no more than a ‘vile jelly’, in the famous words of Shakespeare’s Cornwall in *King Lear* just a few decades earlier; and yet in humans an organ aspiring for nobleness, the supposedly acute observer of things close and far, the window of the soul. If the depiction of eyes can often be considered as a metonymic statement on sight, this one is decidedly caustic: can a glazed, witless surface really sustain all the symbolic and intellectual weight that western culture has often ascribed to the sense of sight?

\(^1\) The attribution of the term ‘naturalism’ to Caravaggio’s art is problematic in itself; see my discussion (2012, pp.187–227).
The representation of Saint Andrew himself is also relevant to the topic of alternative sensorialities. Like many other saints and martyrs, his gaze is directed upwards, to a place invisible to us, spectators and mortals; his sense of sight relinquishes the physical interaction with concrete reality in favour of a spiritual visual experience — visual, but not simply and clearly visible, to follow a distinction made by Georges Didi-Huberman (2005; for the complexities of ‘vision’ in the Spanish Baroque context, see Stoichita 1995). The saint’s right hand is haptically absorbed, reaffirming his own physical existence, and reminds us that, while spiritually floating in ethereal spheres, he is also present here and now, his body feeling itself and his surroundings — all that he does not see anymore. The physical concreteness of the saint, teasingly appealing to our hypothetical touching hand in this artefact made for the eye only, is further enhanced by the painstaking representation of skin texture, typical of Ribera. The artist’s fondness of older protagonists can indeed be explained by the more varied, articulated surface of their faces, hands and other body parts — human skin, after all, notoriously bears the marks of time, and ‘the unmarked skin’ is perhaps merely ‘the not-yet-marked skin’ (Connor, 2004, p.73). Most painters — but not, or not as often, Ribera — strived to represent the glowing immaculateness of young skin, as if ‘untouched by human hand, and therefore illuminated by its own light and by radiant, rather than pigmented, colour’ (Connor, 2004, p.160). Ribera, instead, frequently opted for emphatically painted skins, substituting shades of yellow — ‘the colour of ageing’ (p.164) and of ‘the skin corrupted; or of ideal whiteness corrupted into the condition of skin’ (p.170) — for the pinkness of healthy Venetian Virgins and saints, or for the greenish hue of Caravaggio’s Bacchino malato (Rome, Galleria Borghese, 1593–4). The disintegration of facial features is, once again, akin to Deleuze’s Bacon (2005), intent on effacing the face (visage) and making the head (tête) emerge, seeking the flesh, and even the meat (viande), that make up the body’s seemingly evident visibility and abstract form. Deleuze’s term of ‘catastrophe’ taking place on Bacon’s canvases also comes to mind when thinking of Ribera’s zones of emphatic painterly materiality.

Indeed, Ribera’s fascination with skin textures, and the corollary identification between paint and bodily envelope, beyond their solid historical origins in Venetian painting and specifically in Titian’s famously apt rendition of human flesh, partly indebted to the adoption of oil paint, are also a forward-looking sign of modernity, or even modernism. Compare, for instance, the fact that there is very little specific attention to the skin in early medical conceptions of the body, that it often appears in anatomical treatises ‘only as that which is to be breached in order to gain access to the hidden innards of the human body’, a simple ‘screen’ (Connor, 2004, pp.10–26), with the statement, by no other than James Joyce, that ‘modern man has an epidermis rather than a soul’ (quoted in Connor, p.9).

Although the skin ‘provides the medium in which the other sense organs are located’ (Connor, 2004, p.34), it is in its totality sensitive to touch; it is, in a sense, touch’s own ‘sense organ’. The modern, or rather post-modern skin, claims Connor, has even become ‘unvisualizable’ (p.68), perhaps because of sight’s traditional high standards. ‘Sight is not sight unless it is lucid’ (Connor, 2004, p.260), whereas touch is more receptive to epistemological modesty and more accepting of zones of uncertainty. However, vision itself can become a surrogate or close relative of touch, as in Bacon’s (or Deleuze’s Bacon’s) ‘haptic eye’ or ‘haptic vision”; closer to Ribera, in the second quarter of the seventeenth century, writers such as Claude Quillet (1602–61) and the natural philosopher Pierre Gassendi (1592–1655, almost an exact contemporary of Ribera) supported atomist ideas insisting on the proximity, via the concept of skin, between sight and touch. Their sensorial theory, originating in Epicurus and Lucretius, ‘not only emphasises the closeness of sight to touch, it also speculates that the objects of sight are themselves subtle skins, scoured or scaled away from the surface of visible objects’ (Connor, 2004, p.109). Instead of distinguishing matter and form — that is, separating what the skin can touch and what the eyes can see — Gassendi and his followers admitted only different states of matter, dense and dark or fine and subtle (p.268). Nicolas Malebranche, in 1674, also conflated vision and touch in attributing to the former the corporeality and proximity usually associated with the latter (p.115). These ideas, representing an alternative, marginalised philosophical tradition in the seventeenth century, as opposed to the hegemonic Cartesian views, anticipate Merleau-Ponty’s comprehension of sight as dependent on contact and, indeed, touch (1968), and Deleuze’s concept of sensation as ordered in different levels corresponding to the various sense organs, all communicating in the moment of ‘sensation’ (2005).

The structural pattern of Ribera’s aforementioned Saint Andrew, which we can now characterise as following a ‘logic of sensation’ — an elderly saint, an upwards gaze, active tactility, spiritual vision invisible to the spectator — is repeated again and again in Ribera’s works. This pattern is used for other single ‘portraits’ like Saint Joseph’s (in both versions, in Brooklyn and Montreal), and also, in a more complex and intriguing way, in the narrative depictions of the Passion and of
martyrdom for which the painter has always been famous – or perhaps notorious. It is in these scenes that ideas about faith, knowledge and sensorial perception pictorially coalesce into a complex, original whole.

The Louvre Deposition of Christ (Figure 2.3) is a particularly striking example. The Louvre dates this painting to the late 1620s, while Spinosa’s verdict places its creation around 1626. Be that as it may, it is quite obvious that the basic scopic regime that is organizing the composition is still, at this stage of Ribera’s career, comparable to the highest point of Caravaggio’s tenebrism: a large part of the painted surface is reserved not to a painstaking observation of the visual richness of the world, but to non-articulated, empty darkness whose ‘representation’ does not require any ocular proficiency.

Ribera’s choice, then, is to reduce to a minimum the visual information transmitted to the spectator. Moreover, he further develops the pattern of internal sight relations that Caravaggio more timidly used in paintings such as The Death of the Virgin (Paris, Musée du Louvre, 1601–1605/1606). Not only is the viewer excluded from the hostile visual environment that the composition creates; the five figures in the painting are hyperbolical representations of the same scopic impoverishment. Of the four living protagonists, three have eyes that are completely invisible under thick shadows, not perceptibly directed anywhere and seemingly not functional. The Virgin Mary is reduced to no more than a silhouette floating in the black space. The figures’ clear interest in the supernatural phenomenon in front of them, the lifeless son of God, is expressed in strikingly non-visual ways, not only because their eyes are darkened, but also because their distance from Jesus’ corpse is not the potentially totalising, objective distance favoured by Renaissance perspectival norms, but one that is too close for comfort, and that involves the risk of disturbing synaesthetic conflation: both touch and smell are called upon and, given the situation, they could be much more invasive than what sight would involve. Our own

2 The term ‘impoverishment’ is borrowed from Bersani and Dutoit (1993) who, although using it for a wholly different period (the twentieth century of Beckett, Rothko and Resnais), did go on to write a book on Caravaggio, thus linking the latter’s modernity precisely to his informational ‘poverty’.
spectatorial position, in fact, is similar, in that Jesus’
body is almost thrown towards us, invading our space,
and hardly allows us the convenient external position
that spectatorship would have been supposed to confer.

The Madrid Pietà (Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum,
Figure 2.4; see Finaldi, 2003) goes one step further, with
Mary Magdalene actually touching Christ’s feet with her
lips (originally, she was almost as close in the London
Lamentation over the Dead Christ, National Gallery, early
1620s; later on, though, her position was modified
and she is now further from Christ’s feet. See Finaldi,
2003, p.91). In this work, sightlines are particularly
destabilised and, in turn, destabilising for the spectator:
the Virgin, like Ribera’s aforementioned martyrs, is
looking upwards, towards the invisible heavenly non-
space outside of the picture’s frame; the old man on
the right (Nicodemus?) is also staring at a void, but
this time it is the monochrome greyish-brown surface
within the frame that strangely draws his attention;
and the young Saint John is gazing at Mary Magdalene’s
own act of defiance to sight. Admittedly, these
sightlines are presumed rather than evident: Ribera’s
habit of shading his figures’ eyes, thus rendering them
ambiguously directed, is here used for all four of the
living protagonists, whereas the only pair of eyes fully
illuminated belongs to the dead body they all take great
care not to look at.

To go back to the Louvre painting, the man on the
right, again probably Nicodemus, is seen in profile and
one of his eyes is shown without any shadowy covering,
but it is visibly the tired eye of an old man – Ribera,
as we have seen, excelled in the depiction of physical
decrepitude – and it is not focused on anything clear
either. If anything, he seems to stare at the blank gaze
of the man in front of him, or at the limited, darker-
than-dark space between the latter man’s eyes and
Jesus’ cheek, striving to see a failed act of seeing, the
incompetence of the eye.

Thus, the sensorial interaction depicted in the
Deposition and in the Pietà is proposing a new,
alternative reading of the hierarchies of the senses,
derunning both the norms of Renaissance
painting and those of the New Science. It is a strong
epistemological statement, though in an opposite
sense than the scientific, empiric mindset that scholars
like Paola Santucci wish to detect in Ribera’s art.
And here, as elsewhere in the seventeenth century, epistemology is never too far away from theology. To be sure, for Santucci (1999) the scientific stance of Ribera sets him apart from Spinoza’s hypotheses on the painter’s religious and doctrinal affiliations; and Spinoza, conversely, offhandedly rejects Santucci’s attribution of epistemological interests to Ribera as wholly irrelevant to the painter’s presumed milieu and context (2003, pp.7–8). What they both ignore is the strong link between some aspects of sacred teachings and contemporary debates on what is knowable and how. Joseph Imorde (2008) offers us some interesting hints in this direction, even though his relevant study does not discuss paintings, let alone Ribera. Reading some late sixteenth-century and early seventeenth-century thinkers from all over Europe, such as Cesare Ripa (c.1560–c.1645), Maximilian Sandaeus (1578–1656), Roberto Bellarmino (1542–1621), Cornelius a Lapide (1567–1637) and Jean Dubreuil (1602–70), Imorde shows us the broad circulation of ideas about divinity that is by definition dissimulated, and approachable, if at all, only via traces, images and simulacra – various symbols of the divine being. Imorde’s example of an artistic concretisation of this idea comes not from the field of painting, but from what he calls ‘sacramental theatre’, specifically a complex ecclesiastical installation that was visible in 1646 in the principal Jesuit church in Rome, the Gesù, not too far from Ribera’s arena of activity. Four thousand candles, hidden behind a curtain of clouds, created a metaphor for celestial presence: light that was both brilliant and concealed, blindingly strong and wholly indeterminate.

One of Ribera’s versions of the Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew (Figure 2.5), probably painted between 1628 and 1630, reveals how these theological and the epistemological concepts come concretely together in a painted image. In this work, today at the Galleria Palatina in the Pitti Palace, Florence, Ribera’s treatment of both aspects is producing a painting that is, in Hubert Damisch’s term, ‘a theoretical object’ (cf. Damisch, [1972] 2002).

The general structure of the composition can be described as somewhat banal: the martyr is enjoying a supernatural glow coming from above, originating in an invisible divine source to which Bartholomew’s gaze is directed; the rest of the world, torturers, witnesses, nature itself, is excluded from that visual glory. The two grinning evil men on both extremes of the painting have the typical riberesque eyes, covered in thick shadows. Just like the background figures, they hardly emerge from the dark mass occupying large portions of the painting.

Figure 2.5: Jusepe de Ribera, Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew, 1628–30, oil on canvas, 145cm x 216cm. Florence, Galleria Palatina, Palazzo Pitti. (Photo: Finsiel/Alinari/Art Resource, NY)
The sculpted head beneath the martyr hints, of course, at an easily deciphered iconographical meaning: the paganism of classical culture, rejected by the new faith. However, its prominence, its location and its modelling, exploiting the light otherwise exclusively reserved to the meriting Saint, recalls to our mind Ribera’s interest in the subtleties of sensorial perception, in questioning the status of sight as the privileged vehicle for interaction with the world. Beyond a simple reference to a *paragone* thematic, a corporatist viewpoint that the abandoned, humiliated sculpture could seem to refer to, Ribera here reiterates his paradoxical interest, as a painter, in the sense of touch. This is further emphasised by the fact that Bartholomew’s martyrdom is a particularly adequate subject matter for the corporeal, carnal art of Ribera, always fascinated by the textures of the skin and the irregularities of the aging body: although we are spared here the gruesome scene, tradition tells us that Bartholomew was flayed alive.

Ultimately, the impoverishment of sight concurrent with spiritual enlightenment is the most important aspect through which this work unites epistemology and religious spirituality: the light seen by the martyr signifies his final, hoped-for redemption, but its very supernatural character reminds us that physical sight is of no relevance for the following events, where whatever the martyr will see will be overwhelmed by the intensity of that which he is going to feel.

Ribera is sometimes considered a sadistic amateur of terrifying scenes, and while this painting only hints at the pain to come, no such inhibition holds back the painter in a profane ‘martyr’ scene, *Apollo and Marsyas*, with two somewhat different versions today in Naples and Brussels (respectively Museo di Capodimonte and Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, both 1637; Figure 2.6). Damian Dombrowski’s interpretation of this painting (2009) suggests that it exemplifies Ribera’s epistemological and self-reflexive interest, giving us a glimpse of the intellectual depth beyond the painter’s common image as an orthodox instrument of clerical, counter-reformation submission. For Dombrowski, the difference in style between the depictions of the two protagonists makes this work an account of

![Figure 2.6: Jusepe de Ribera, Apollo and Marsyas, 1637, oil on canvas, 182cm x 232cm. Naples, Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte. (Photo: Scala/ Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali/Art Resource, NY)](image)
aesthetic rebirth: looking backwards from 1637, Ribera recognizes the ‘crime’ of his early career, the choice of a ‘lowly’ — namely Caravaggist or ‘naturalist’ — painting manner, replaced, or at least supplemented later by a lighter, ‘neo-Venetian’ style.

Ribera’s epistemological interest here, however, goes well beyond a retrospective consideration of his own artistic career. Here, in fact, the separation, even dissonance between the senses — touch directly solicited through terrible pain, sight wholly irrelevant for the experience — is not, as opposed to the Christian martyr scenes, alleviated by a spiritual vision and the promise of salvation. Physical sight is again shown to be helpless when the body is martyred, with Marsyas looking in vain for an exchange of gazes, his own visual perception turned upside down just like Caravaggio’s Saint Paul. This display of unrequited visuality is supplemented by a scream — after all, it is the sense of hearing that Marsyas offended in the episode preceding what we see. Even more eloquently, the irrelevance of sight to the drama is ironically contrasted with a vain and spectacular artefact of pure visual pleasure, the improbable red cloth enveloping Apollo: anything but realistic object, it is a colourful patch reminding us how seductive, and how fictitious, the object of our visual perception can be. Confronted with the harrowing truth of the lacerated body, sight is no more than a play with colours, a light capriccio of no consequence whatsoever.

Bibliography