

4

MIRROR

Mary Magdalene through the Looking Glass

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Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew,
'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher).

John 20:16¹

The scene in the Gospel of John, verse 20:16, where Mary Magdalene recognizes the resurrected Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, is one of the most poignant, and vividly visually rendered, in the New Testament. An aspect of this scene is represented in a sixteenth-century painting by Giovanni Savoldo, one version of which hangs in the National Gallery, London (4.1). In the painting, the saint, her bowed head, body and arm veiled behind a brightly reflective silver cloak, turns towards the viewer and gazes directly out of the picture frame. In front of the empty tomb, she is turning, about to see the risen Christ. The Magdalene's gaze is at once frank and mysterious, calm and intense; the remarkable cloak fills the rest of the composition.

Despite hardly being mentioned in the authorized texts, Mary Magdalene remains one of the most iconic and controversial figures of the New Testament. A saint characterized more by 'myth and metaphor' than by historical fact,² she has been represented not in one consistent gu but rather by multiple avatars in visual art and popular culture across the centuries.³ One of the most common characterizations of the Magdalene, despite no such mention appearing in the Gospels, is that of the repentant prostitute.⁴ Erotic interpretations of Savoldo's painting across the centuries naturally drew inspiration from this sensual image. Descriptions ranged from the 'young, warm and impulsive woman', to 'a romantically veiled beauty' to straightforward readings of the painting as a courtesan portrait.⁵ It was not until the intervention of Mary Pardo, writing in 1989 in *The Art Bulletin*, that the haunting figure and her extraordinary reflective cloak received deeper consideration.



4.1 Giacomo Savoldo, *Mary Magdalene*, c.1535–40, oil on canvas, 89.1 × 82.4 cm, National Gallery, London.

Pardo presents Savoldo's *Magdalene* as a masterpiece of painterly artifice, intended to showcase the talent of the artist for creating ironic *invenzione*, artistic sleight-of-hand. She reveals how the light reflecting in the saint's extraordinary garment is the reflection of the risen Christ, whom Mary Magdalene turns to meet on Easter morning in the Garden of Gethsemane. Although the Magdalene could be posited in some contexts as being privileged to see and speak bodily with Jesus, here, for Pardo, the *Magdalene* is nothing more than a device, a screen upon which to project the artist's inventiveness:

it does not pretend to 'contain' truth, only to reflect it; its ostensible content is wholly exterior to it. Yet the resultant 'emptiness' is also a kind of limitless potentiality (since it holds the viewer in thrall) and guarantees the painter's essential autonomy in spinning out his fiction.⁶



4.2 Ludovicus Finson, copy of Caravaggio's lost *Magdalene in Ecstasy* of 1606 (c.1612), Musée des Beaux-Arts, Marseilles.

The figure of the Magdalene herself, for Pardo, is a cipher—a 'code'—enabling the artist to endow his composition with meanings ranging from the theological to the iconographic.

While recognizing the importance of Pardo's work on this painting, in this paper I wish to take issue with the view of the Magdalene as an empty mediator, void of independent 'truth'. In investigating the notion of 'Magdalene as mirror' via a case study of Savoldo's *Magdalene* (4.1) but also a *Magdalene* originally painted by Caravaggio (4.2), I hope to show, on the contrary, that rather than being a 'passive ... projection screen',⁷ a certain kind of early seventeenth-century *Magdalene* actively appropriates the mirror. Somewhere in the play of body and light, paint and canvas, the painted body becomes the agent, the instigator of the interaction between self and other. It is therefore a 'knowing' Magdalene assuming both erotic bodiliness and sacredness⁸ who engages and challenges the viewer's gaze: the Magdalene of the Gnostic gospels, the

knower of 'truth' who said to the disciples, 'What is hidden from you, I will proclaim to you.'⁹

Mary Magdalene above all other saints transgressed the visual boundary between sensuality and spirituality; and not only in the limited sense of the depictions of her semi-naked penitence, in her guise as the repentant prostitute. In the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, long before popular legend attributed a historical significance to their relationship,¹⁰ the privilege of the Magdalene's role was her sensual relationship with Jesus. Carmen Robertson, referring to the iconography of the 'Noli me Tangere' scene from the Gospel of John,¹¹ notes that,

the scene shifts from a wholly didactic and religious intent in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries to an emphasis upon the physical relationship between Christ and the Magdalene in the sixteenth century. Little in the sacred scripture suggests the sexual interpretations that become commonplace in portrayals of the pair in fifteenth and sixteenth-century Italy.¹²

Robertson's suggested sixteenth-century turning point is corroborated by the wealth of *Lamentations* or *Pietàs* from the period, where the Magdalene's touch is usually more dramatic or imbued with desperate passion than that of the Virgin, or where she even replaces the Virgin as the primary site of interaction with Jesus's body.¹³ The Magdalene enables the figuration of a dark sexuality which is, nevertheless, firmly contextualized in the veneration of Jesus's earthly body; of course, also here a dead body, which itself carries additional multiple connotations of body and spirit, death and life. It is clear that the Renaissance Magdalene is the agent of a deeply ambiguous and paradoxical interaction with Jesus's body, the most undecidable body in the imagery of Western art.¹⁴

This access to the paradoxical touch of Jesus, having given the saint a strange and evocative status among other popular female saints popular, altered in the seventeenth century. The principal powerful guise of the Magdalene shifted from the interaction with Jesus to the moment in which she is herself between the human and the divine, where the boundaries of body and spirit, self and other, are transgressed within her own body—the experience of ecstasy.¹⁵ Going beyond previous Christian imagery of sacred experience, it is in the tension, abandon and contortion of these bodies that intense experiences such as pain, pleasure, death, sexual ecstasy, even the experience of subjectivity, could be visually encoded in Western culture. Unlike other ecstasies, like Teresa, Agnes, or Agatha, the Magdalene was a gospel figure and not a mystic in the traditionally understood sense. It is precisely because of the Magdalene's paradoxical status as the site of the interaction between

body and spirit in relation to the body of Jesus, that the interrogation of the saint's own female gendered body on similar terms raises more specifically nuanced questions about this ultimate site of undecidability between body and spirit.

In 1606 Caravaggio is known to have painted a *Magdalene in Ecstasy*. Most scholars agree that the original is now lost. The best-known version, in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Marseilles (4.2), is attributed to one of Caravaggio's copyists, Ludovicus Finson. In this painting, or at least in the best-known copy as we know it today, a visual rhetoric of ecstasy has been created which changes the visual status of the body of the saint. In previous *Magdalenes*, such as the seminal examples by Donatello or Titian,¹⁶ the body was either a document of the saint's self-denial for the sake of asceticism and penitence, or a site of temptation and of the conflict between fleshly and spiritual desire. In the Marseilles *Magdalene*, however, the visual mode has shifted, and the movements, shapes or spasms of the body become exterior codes, or indicators of a profoundly interior experience. The power of this rhetoric is in the multivalence of the body's abandon; it invites readings on many different levels and it produces many different meanings; as a result, it both fascinates and disturbs viewers. The play of intense emotions written on the surface of the Magdalene's body, like the surface of a mirror, is activated and attributed meaning when it becomes subject to the gaze.

The origins of Mary Magdalene's ecstasy are left open to interpretation in Caravaggio's vision of the scene (4.2). In the painting, the absence of visual attributes to justify her experience makes this one of the most ascetic images of ecstasy of the seventeenth century, and one where the viewer is obliged to realize the intensity of the experience from the movement of her body alone. The blackness around her encloses her in privacy, and the striking realism, in particular of her eyelids and slightly visible teeth, breaks the conventions of the ideal—we could call these elements 'Caravaggesque'. There is a strong sense of intrusion, heightened by the shadows of the chiaroscuro from which the saint's skin emerges almost shockingly pale, but also by the sense that, through her half-open eyes, the saint may or may not be aware of the viewer's presence. We recall Aldous Huxley's response to Bernini's sculpture *Beata Ludovica Albertoni* (1671–74, marble, Altieri Chapel, San Francesco a Ripa, Rome): 'the spectator feels a shock of embarrassment ... one has the impression of having opened a bedroom door at the most inopportune of moments.'¹⁷ In the paradoxical visual experience the image produces, carnal yet spiritual, intimate yet distanced, performed yet bodily, it disrupts the subject-object operation of the gaze—it must be re-framed in order to encompass these effects.

Savoldo's *Magdalene* (4.1) was described as the ultimate in artistic artifice; seen in these terms it would seem to have very little in common with the tactile bodiliness of the lost Caravaggio painting. However, I propose that the term 'Caravaggesque', often understood in a general sense to refer to the specific form of chiaroscuro and realism for which Caravaggio is particularly known, could be expanded to encompass a specific quality within visuality which is encapsulated both by the painting of the artist 'Caravaggio' and by the figurative phenomenon of Mary Magdalene. I use the expression here, beyond ideas of the specific artist and his oeuvre, in terms of a specific rhetoric of paradoxical bodily 'real' performance, a quality of fictive bodily 'truth', found in representations of the ecstatic saints, which involves a body suspended between opposing states such as life and death, or pleasure and pain.

A viewer confronted with these two contrasting *Magdalenes*, in different ways paradoxically situated at the cusp of a Baroque visuality, encounters a complicated mirroring network. A commentary referring to Bernini's *Ecstasy of St. Teresa* (c.1645–52, marble, Cornaro Chapel, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome), completely out of the context of traditional academic responses, may here provide a portrayal of the functioning of visual memory; it inadvertently broaches a complex system of mirror, empathy and role model responses to the figure of the ecstatic saint, which I have brought to the foreground. Andrew Greeley, an American priest and sociologist who among other causes champions erotic (rather than pornographic) art as the route to a healthy intra-marital erotic life, offers the following fantasy scenario in a modest sexual advice article for his parishioners:

Thus a woman who views Bernini's St. Teresa and understands what the artist is doing will surely recall her own orgasmic experiences and note with interest what the metaphor implies. Moreover she may find herself in the beginnings of sexual arousal and yearn for another orgasmic experience. Whether her husband will be sensitive enough to the artist's designs to recognize the similarity between the Saint's expression and his memory of his wife's expression may be less certain, because men are less perceptive in these matters than women. If he does, it is possible that he too will feel the beginnings of sexual arousal.¹⁸

The *mise en scène* inspired by the *Teresa* and fantasized by Greeley produces a rather patronizing idea of sexual arousal couched in clichéd terms; however, the mechanisms of viewing imagined in the extract provide an interesting counterpoint to academic responses to the sculpture, for the most part locked in unproductive debate about the sexual

suggestiveness of the pose. Greeley not only explicitly imagines the ambiguous sculpture arousing its viewers, but the way in which this arousal is operated is seen as being specifically through recognition. The wife in the scenario is assumed visually to recognize an image which she could not possibly have actually seen—that of her own pleasure. This *mise en scène* of gaze and desire could be seen to establish the “‘masculinisation’ of the spectator position’ when the woman observes her own pleasure from the viewpoint of a lover.¹⁹ For Laura Mulvey in her essay ‘Afterthoughts on Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, Freud’s portrayal of women’s oscillating identity between active and passive, and the conventions of masculinity and femininity, influence the modes of identification operating in a woman’s gaze upon a female protagonist—ultimately that ‘the female spectator’s fantasy of masculinisation [is] at cross-purposes with itself, restless in its transvestite clothes.’²⁰ I feel however that Greeley’s fantasy scenario leaves the female spectator’s means of recognition more tantalizingly complex. Beyond Mulvey’s conclusion of a troubled and oscillating identity to account for the logic of identification operating here, I look to Kaja Silverman who brings the metaphor of the mirror into play. Drawing on Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage, Silverman emphasizes that the ego itself is a representation of a representation.²¹ Identity itself, in this view, being constructed as both other and same, the mirror can work as a metaphor for the construction of a self-image which is both visual and knowingly fictive. In this way, an ‘exteriorizing’ identification (the ‘recognition’ of the fantasized self in the *Teresa*, for instance), is accessible to a female viewer because of the monolithic nature of the masculine ego, according to the Freudian model: she has greater freedom of identification than her male counterpart,²² and can suspend her identification on the brink between the passivity of the love object and the active nature of the gaze’s subject.

Greeley reads the *Teresa* as a paradigm of the visual codification of women’s pleasure, and assumes that women’s visualization of their own sexual behaviour itself will inevitably conform to the trope. At the same time, while attributing to Bernini the ‘design’ to represent female pleasure (‘what the artist is doing’), Greeley perceives that the husband will simply not make the connection. The implication of Greeley’s scenario is that, for the formation of the visual discourse of pleasure, the fantasy identification performed in the ‘mirror’ by the female viewer is paradoxically stronger than the man’s real visual experience. A gaze upon the body of the ecstatic saint does not function as a gaze into a mirror at one’s own body in pleasure, but participates in the construction of a complex play of identification: an inner gaze at an interior experience,

which cannot have been experienced visually except by a fictive, fantasized gaze from outside the self.

The seventeenth-century Caravaggio *Magdalene* (4.2), like Bernini's *Teresa*, also transgressed contemporary limits of reflection and empathy. It appears to have been seen as threatening even at the time of its creation because of its potential for excessive empathetic fantasy. Here, it is to the asceticism of the image that the blame is attributed. Jean Habert summarizes the controversy surrounding the painting:

This revolutionary creation caused a considerable stir—it was the most copied of all Caravaggio's paintings, in particular amongst the Northern artists working in Italy, less inhibited than their counterparts. Among them, the Flemish painter Louis Finson (Bruges before 1580 – Amsterdam 1617) saw himself as the primary copyist of the painting. However, the painting did not in fact enjoy any real posterity: copies and subsequent adaptations no longer dared to portray the saint alone and without attributes. Instead they conformed to the 1582 recommendations of the Bishop of Bologna, the cardinal Gabriele Paleotti (1522–1597), principal advocate of the Counter-Reformation as far as iconography was concerned. He endorsed the representation of saints in ecstasy ... with their attributes and lifted up by angels, in order to clearly indicate the nature of their mystical experience as being inaccessible to ordinary mortals.²³

Indeed, the ecstasy of the *Magdalene* as envisioned by Caravaggio and as interpreted by his copyist Finson was so intimate and bodily—so 'Caravaggesque', as it were—as to be seen as being threatening to the Catholic church in the context of sixteenth-century religious politics. According to Bishop Paleotti, therefore, it was the threat of excessive empathy which frightened artists away from making straightforward copies of the painting and which led to the 'supernaturalization' of ecstasy. It was vital that religious experiences should be seen as being unequivocally divinely inspired—in a very Baroque spirit, however, many paintings managed to achieve the representation of an experience both bodily and divine. For instance, Giovanni Lanfranco painted a *Magdalene in Ecstasy* (1606, Galleria Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples) where the saint is being physically carried up to heaven by angels for her daily spiritual sustenance while a penitent in the desert, just as the *Golden Legend* relates:

our Redeemer did show it openly, that he had ordained for her refection celestial, and no bodily meats. And every day at every hour

canonical she was lifted up in the air of angels, and heard the glorious song of the heavenly companies with her bodily ears. Of which she was fed and filled with right sweet meats, and then was brought again by the angels unto her proper place, in such wise as she had no need of corporal nourishing.²⁴

Interestingly, even this text, upon which many images like Lanfranco's were based, is itself ambiguous about the Magdalene's physical status—although she is to have 'no bodily meats' she hears the angels' song 'with her bodily ears'—hence perhaps the temptation in the Baroque to emphasize the physical, bodily nature of the Magdalene's ecstasy despite its apparent divine origin and purely 'ec-static' conditions.²⁵

The threat posed by the *Magdalene* is that of excessive empathy with an emphatically corporeal body, experiencing an ecstasy which is ambiguous in its physical and spiritual pleasure or pain, of mysterious and ineffable origin and which may be too 'real' to be safely viewed. An autonomous pleasure, activated visually, inevitably introduces questions of the concept of the mirror. The sight of an ecstatic body, suspended both present and absent, both physical and spiritual, sets in motion a fantasized interplay of the gaze, where the viewer's own body is itself the product of the gaze network. An infinity of mirrors, where the body is simultaneously both subject and object of the gaze; gazing at another body, it constructs itself as *seen*. In this way, the body's status as a subjective *site* of the gaze is paradoxically enabled by the body's fictive identification as an *object* of a fantasized gaze.

In the lore surrounding the Magdalene, on the moment of her conversion and penitence she rejected worldly goods. Caravaggio took up this theme in his *Conversion of the Magdalene* in Detroit (4.3), where the saint touches, but does not look into, a dark convex mirror while listening to the theological persuasion of her companion Martha.²⁶ Mieke Bal puts this image in counterpoint with a slightly earlier *Magdalene* by Caravaggio (c.1594–97), in the Galleria Doria Pamphilj in Rome, in a chapter on the myth of Narcissus in *Quoting Caravaggio*. In the Rome *Magdalene*, the saint has abandoned worldly goods (she has let gold and pearl jewellery fall to the ground beside her) and sits, her arms in her lap forming a frame continued by her auburn hair and drooping head in melancholy. For Bal, this frame forms a metaphorical mirror where this Magdalene, having rejected the actual mirror, turns her melancholy in towards herself. Unlike Caravaggio's *Narcissus* (c.1600, oil on canvas, Galleria Barberini, Rome), whose ego becomes fragmented in his hopeless pursuit of his own image,²⁷ this *Magdalene* 'is able to sustain the wholeness that the primary narcissism of the mirror experience extends to the subject....'²⁸



4.3 Michelangelo da Caravaggio, *The Conversion of the Magdalene*, c.1597–1598, oil on canvas, 99.7 × 134.6 cm, The Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit.

Bal explains, citing Kaja Silverman's *The Threshold of the Visible World*, that when the Magdalene becomes the mirror, she does not enter the long-established binary of lack versus plenitude into which women are traditionally coerced to fit: 'lack, so that the male subject's phallic attributes can be oppositionally articulated; plenitude, so that she can become adequate to his desire.'²⁹ Bal writes, 'This sadistic, because impossible, model is culturally embodied on the one hand by Venus, and on the other by the Virgin-Mother.'³⁰

Bal continues, however, that 'the price to pay for wholeness is the absence of consciousness...'³¹ While the Rome *Magdalene* remains 'a figure of transgression and conversion,' she nevertheless remains unconscious, 'she does not 'know herself''.³² In remaining passive, '[the *Magdalene*] represents the passive receptivity of the mirror as a gender-specific projection screen for the production of an illusory, exterior wholeness.'³³

This is reminiscent of Mary Pardo's characterization of Savoldo's *Magdalene* (4.1) as an empty device: 'it does not pretend to 'contain' truth, only to reflect it; its ostensible content is wholly exterior to it.'³⁴ While I follow Bal's analysis that the *Magdalene's* bodily wholeness is fictive in the sense that she is no longer slave to the 'lack versus plenitude' model of femininity, I feel that it is reductive to state that Caravaggio's

Rome *Magdalene* remains trapped within the unstable equilibrium which her passivity provides in the face of her rejection of the mirror, or that she can only be a mirror within herself at the price of 'knowing herself'. This conclusion reminded me of Lacan's famous comment on Bernini's *Teresa*:

you only have to go and look at Bernini's statue in Rome to understand immediately that she's coming [*qu'elle jouit*], there is no doubt about it. And what is her *jouissance*, her *coming* from? It is clear that the essential testimony of the mystics is that they are experiencing it but know nothing about it.³⁵

It is on this question of knowing or not knowing the self, that the whole issue turns: whether the experience of ecstasy, or indeed the bodily experience of touching and recognizing the resurrected Christ, can be an embodied, as well as bodily, experience. I argue that when Caravaggio's *Magdalenes* become mirrors, it is not a passive, unknowing unconsciousness but rather an active one. This moment is captured by the artist's *Conversion of the Magdalene* in Detroit (4.3)—the dark mirror which the Magdalene is rejecting, reflects nothing but a square window—its liquid blackness seeming to absorb all light. The saint's face is misleadingly passive: a poised emptiness suspended between listening to Martha's argument and meditating her own sins, it takes the place of the empty mirror. Her downcast eyes reflect both her sister's intellectual earnestness and the light from the window being shed upon her own dissolute life.

To assume that apparent unconsciousness is passive, is to overlook the body of imagery surrounding the figure of Mary Magdalene, and the extraordinary symbolic allusions which enfold her image, in terms of her transgression of body and spirit as the one who touches the risen Christ. It is her action of rejecting the physical mirror, enabling her to transgress all that it represents in terms of Narcissistic worldliness, which enables her to internalize and absorb its power to destabilize the play of focalizers in visuality.³⁶ The Caravaggesque Magdalene gains wholeness at the price of the 'real'. Instead the 'real' becomes an '*air de vérité*',³⁷ and the 'Caravaggesque' becomes a cipher at many levels, signifying a performance of fictive bodiliness in which the Magdalene is complicit.

The unconsciousness of both *Magdalenes* transgresses mere 'sleep'³⁸ to become, instead, an altered state where the exterior appearance of the body becomes undecidable, controversial, and multivalent, combining in one the visual discourses of pain, death, pleasure, sleep, melancholy, ecstasy, precisely because it is no longer attempting to sig-

nify a 'real' body, but 'Caravaggesque' suspension of bodily reality. Instead the exterior unconsciousness is a metaphor for an interior experience which is too intense to otherwise conceive of visually. This is also what happens when the woman in Andrew Greeley's fantasy looks into the mirror of Bernini's *Teresa* and sees her memory of pleasure, whereas the man may not recognize at all a physical body he has surely seen. Pleasure is written onto the body of the ecstatic saint and also beyond that body in a fictive, symbolic layering.

Savoldo's *Magdalene* (4.1) was painted too early to interact with Caravaggio's *Magdalenes* in the discourse of ecstasy they set up. Nevertheless, the term *Caravaggesque* traverses the before and after of the Caravaggio 'moment' just as the visual discourse of ecstasy, in the Foucauldian sense, is a network of relations and connections.³⁹ Savoldo certainly combines these *Caravaggesque* elements in his exploration of Magdalene visuality, in the great symbolic depth of the London painting. This *Magdalene* is a mirror—but neither reflecting the viewer nor herself. Instead the viewer is implicated, via the commanding gaze of the saint, in a three-way interaction where the missing third party, the resurrected Christ, is depicted as light—incomprehensible to us, unless it is mirrored, reflected, and translated by the Magdalene.

It is, in fact, back in the dense prose of the Gospel of John that the seeds of the Magdalene's unique role lie. It is in verse 20 that the meeting between the saint and the resurrected Jesus takes place, starting with the Magdalene's failure to recognize him: 'she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know it was Jesus.'⁴⁰ Jesus himself, this time, then seems to feign ignorance: 'Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?"' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away".'⁴¹ Their meeting then proceeds by each verbally recognizing the other; 'Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father".'⁴²

This verbal recognition between them, preceded by a visual misrecognition, is then very shortly followed by the scene of the doubting of St Thomas, this time a tactile recognition of a Jesus who is still very bodily in his state between death and life, as Jesus invites the apostle to touch his wounds. Here, however, it is Jesus himself who then denigrates the visual, saying to Thomas, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'⁴³

These repeated reflections, recognitions and misrecognitions surrounding the death and resurrection of Jesus as depicted in the Gospel

of John disrupt the whole mechanism of vision. The Magdalene becomes a holder of a knowing gaze through becoming the *object* of a knowing gaze, which is itself enabled by her own recognizing gaze. It is thanks to the Magdalene's recognition that the message of Jesus's resurrection is passed on to the other disciples; in the Gnostic gospels the Magdalene says to the disciples, 'What is hidden from you, I will proclaim to you.'⁴⁴

The paradoxical simultaneity of gazes in the Garden of Gethsemane encapsulates the meaning of the Magdalene. Rather than being an empty screen, guilelessly failing to know Jesus, the *Caravaggesque* Magdalene of Savoldo's painting is an embodied site of knowledge who, while turning *about* to meet Jesus's gaze, on the brink of seeing him, meets the viewer's gaze and *already knows*; and 'proclaims' her understanding to the viewer of Savoldo's painting as that paradoxical, powerful gaze smiles knowingly out of the picture frame. '*Those who have not seen*'.

The 'Caravaggesque' *Magdalene*, whether the *Magdalene* of Savoldo, with her reflective cloak, or the dark *Magdalene* in Marseilles in the throes of ecstasy (4.2), transgresses the conventional opposition of the knowing artist and submissive subject. Here the subject of the painting has gained an effect of agency: she is complicit in the fiction of her own painted space and her paradoxical bodily existence. The position she assumes in the mythology of Jesus's resurrection, while her own body in ecstasy interrogates the nature of embodied experience, is the nucleus of knowledge at the crux of a gaze network—an embodied knowledge which, through the trope of the mirror, conveys through reflection the indescribable experience of the transgression of body and spirit.

In the last paragraph of 'Through the Looking Glass', Alice wonders who it was who dreamed her adventures: herself or the Red King, since 'He was part of my dream, of course—but then I was part of his dream, too!'⁴⁵ Magdalene through the looking glass enables just such a bodily cross-subjectivity. Thanks to Savoldo and the *Caravaggesque*, she, like Alice, can step between the two worlds; 'And certainly the glass WAS beginning to melt away, just like a bright silvery mist.'⁴⁶

NOTES

Chapter four

- 1 All biblical references in this chapter are drawn from the anglicized edition of the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) Bible.
- 2 A characterization borrowed from Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor* (London: HarperCollins, 1993). In 2005, this book was republished 1 under the title of *Mary Magdalen: The Essential History*.
- 3 In the history of art, representations before Savoldo had ranged from Donatello's emaciated *The Penitent Magdalene* (1457, wood with polychromy and gold, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence), to the fleshy and provocative interpretation by Titian, *Penitent Magdalene* (c.1530–35, oil on wood, Palazzo Pitti, Florence); and in modern day popular culture, the saint's representations have ranged from Martin Scorsese's film 'The Last Temptation of Christ' (1988) to the saint's recent notoriety in her mystical secret identity as the Holy Grail in Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (London: Corgi, 2004). These examples, of course, refer to representations referring to the Magdalene of the Gospels, not taking into account the whole culture of the redeemed fallen woman, or virgin prostitute with flaming red hair, which form part of the saint's wider visual and cultural legacy. For one of the most comprehensive serious accounts of the history of the Magdalene's representation in culture, see Haskins: *Mary Magdalen*.
- 4 The Magdalene was initially portrayed as a redeemed prostitute due to confusion with other biblical women, and this image was imposed upon her by a Catholicism determined to portray the Magdalene as the lesser counterpoint to the perfection of the Virgin (see Marina Warner, *Alone of All her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976)) and to neutralize some of the traces of influence she retained from her important role in Gnosticism.
- 5 References are from Mary Pardo, 'The Subject of Savoldo's Magdalene', *Art Bulletin* 71/1 (1989), pp. 70–71. These comments all refer to the Berlin version of the painting, which lacks the ointment jar present in the London versions that might have increased the secularity of these interpretations.
- 6 Pardo: 'Subject of Savoldo's Magdalene', p. 90
- 7 Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 260.

- 8 Pardo dismisses, on formal grounds, the more erotically charged interpretations of the painting. Specifically, she argues that a combination of portrait and religious narrative leads to a confusion of genres.
- 9 James M. Robinson (ed), *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, trans. Coptic Gnostic Library Project of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990).
- 10 The Magdalene has recently been portrayed as Jesus's wife and the mother of his child in popular non-fiction and fiction, from M. Baigent, R. Leigh and H. Lincoln, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* (London: Arrow, 1996), to Brown: *The Da Vinci Code*.
- 11 'Noli me Tangere' refers to the scene in the John: 20, where the Magdalene meets Jesus in the garden, in the early morning when he has risen from the dead. It is traditionally translated as 'Do not touch me' although a more literal translation would be 'Do not hold on to me'.
- 12 Carmen L. Robertson, *Gender Relations and the Noli me Tangere Scene in Renaissance Italy* (Unpublished MA thesis, University of Victoria, 1993), p. 2.
- 13 Examples include Fra Bartolommeo, *Lamentation* (Palazzo Pitti, Florence); at Jesus's feet in Moretto da Brescia (c.1498–1554), *Pietà* (National Gallery of Art, Kress Collection, Washington D.C.); at the foot of the cross embracing Jesus' feet in Bramantino's *Crucifixion* (c. 1520, Brera, Milan); and alone at the foot of the cross in Giulio Clovio (1498–1578), *Crucifixion with Mary Magdalene* (Uffizi, Florence). Also see Moshe Arkin, "'One of the Marys...': An Interdisciplinary Analysis of Michelangelo's Florentine Pietà", *Art Bulletin* 79/3 (1997), for a fascinating reinterpretation of Michelangelo's *Pietà* (c.1550, marble, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence), along these lines, which identifies the Magdalene in a privileged position in the composition, basing its argument on the influence of Vittoria Colonna.
- 14 Towards the end of the fifteenth century, in a painting in the Vatican collection by Giovanni Bellini (c.1430–1516)—*Pietà or Lamentation* (oil, Vatican, Pinacotheca, Rome)—which depicts Jesus's anointing, as is noted in Rona Goffen, *Giovanni Bellini* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), the anointing, the site of touch between the Magdalene and Jesus, receives particular emphasis as the saint, flushed and in a state of extreme emotion, sensuously rubs ointment into the wounds on Jesus's hands. The painting evokes an almost disturbing emotional and erotic power.
- 15 The Magdalene's ecstasy is contextualized largely in terms of her time in the desert, as recounted in Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend, or Lives of the Saints* (1275). By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, while the fifteenth century themes were still prevalent, (for example, Francesco Trevisani (1656–1746), *The Magdalene at the foot of the Cross* (oil, Florence, Palazzo Pitti)) the focus had shifted in line with Counter-Reformation emphasis on the Sacraments, in particular penitence, hence the popularity of this strain of Magdalene imagery. The intercessory power of the saints was also strongly promoted, which necessitated, in particular, the dramatization of the suffering and torture undergone for their faith, as Emile

Mâle summarizes; 'After the Council of Trent, the martyrs struggle beneath our gaze; we must see their blood flowing, and bear witness to their painful agony.' Emile Mâle, *L'art religieux après le Concile de Trente: Etude sur l'iconographie de la fin du XVI^e siècle, du XVII^e, du XVIII^e siècle, Italie, France, Espagne, Flandres* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1932), p. 147. This new emphasis on making visible every aspect of the saints' experience, combined with the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius of Loyola, published in 1548, and the popularity of the writings of the mystics such as St Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross, led to mystical ecstasy being more and more in demand as a subject for works of art.

16 See n. 3.

17 Quoted in Frank Sommer, 'The Iconography of Action: Bernini's Ludovica Albertone', *Art Quarterly* 33 (1970), p. 31.

18 Andrew Greeley, 'Erotic Desire in Art: A Catholic Perspective' (1995). [3]

19 Laura Mulvey, 'Afterthoughts on Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), p. 29.

20 Mulvey: 'Afterthoughts'. [4]

21 Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (London: Routledge, 1996), chapter 1, 'The Bodily Ego'.

22 Silverman: *Threshold of the Visible World*, chapter 3, 'Political Ecstasy'.

23 Jean Habert, *Bordeaux, Musée des beaux-arts* (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1991), pp. 53–4. Translation mine. Original French: 'Le retentissement de cette création révolutionnaire fut considérable, puisqu'il s'agit de l'oeuvre de Caravage la plus copiée, surtout dans le milieu moins inhibé des artistes du Nord travaillant en Italie, et dont le peintre flamand Louis Finson (Bruges av. 1580–Amsterdam 1617) se voulait l'interprète privilégié; mais le tableau n'eut en fait aucun postérité véritable: les copistes, et après eux les adaptateurs, n'osèrent plus présenter la sainte seule et sans attributs, et se conformèrent aux recommandations formulées en 1582 par l'évêque de Bologne, le cardinal Gabriele Paleotti (1522–97), principal avocat de la Contre-Réforme en matière iconographique, qui préconisait la représentation des saints en extase accompagnés ... de leurs attributs et soutenus par des anges pour bien marquer la qualité inaccessible au commun de leur expérience mystique.'

24 de Voragine: *Golden Legend*, vol. 4.

25 The term 'ecstasy' comes from a Greek word, meaning outside of the body; to remove oneself from a place, or the alienation of the self. For clear definitions of the different meanings of 'ecstasy' see N. G. Holm, 'Ecstasy Research in the 20th century—an Introduction', in *Religious Ecstasy: Based on papers read at the Symposium on Religious Ecstasy held at Åbo, Finland, on the 26th–28th August 1981* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1982), pp. 7–26.

26 The theme of the Magdalene rejecting or turning away from a mirror is very common in the iconography of the saint. See Caravaggio's *The Conversion of the Magdalene* (c.1597–98, oil on canvas, The Detroit Institute of Arts Detroit), and Artemisia Gentileschi, *Penitent Magdalene* (1617–20, Florence). The Magdalene's

- female companion in the Detroit painting is Martha, traditionally cast as the Magdalene's 'sister' thanks to confusion between Mary Magdalene and Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus.
- 27 In the myth according to Ovid, Narcissus wastes away staring at his reflection. In the Caravaggio painting, the body of Narcissus is broken up and fragmented by the contrasts of light and shade, suggesting the fragmentation of his identity in the mirror's mortal trap.
- 28 Bal: *Quoting Caravaggio*, p. 259
- 29 Silverman: *Threshold of the Visible World*, p. 33.
- 30 Bal: *Quoting Caravaggio*, p. 260.
- 31 Bal: *Quoting Caravaggio*, p. 259.
- 32 Bal: *Quoting Caravaggio*, p. 260.
- 33 Bal: *Quoting Caravaggio*, p. 260.
- 34 Pardo: 'Subject of Savoldo's Magdalene', p. 90.
- 35 Jacques Lacan, 'God and the *Jouissance* of The Woman', in Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (eds), *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the École Freudienne* (London: W. W. Norton, 1983), p. 147.
- 36 A famous seventeenth-century example of a mirror being at the heart of a play of gazes between painter, depicted subject, and viewers both within and outside of the painted surface occurs in Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, (c.1656, oil on canvas, Prado Museum, Madrid).
- 37 This phrase is taken from the Marquis de Sade's description of Bernini's *St Teresa in Ecstasy*; 'It is a masterpiece by Bernini. This piece is sublime because of the air of truth which characterises it, but it is only necessary to remind oneself deeply, when seeing it, that it is a saint, because from the ecstatic appearance of Teresa, from the fire which embraces her features, it would be easy to be mistaken.' Jean-Noël Vuarnet, *Extases féminines* (Paris: Hatier, 1991), p. 122.
- 38 Bal describes Caravaggio's Rome *Magdalene* as 'sleeping'. Bal: *Quoting Caravaggio*, p. 260.
- 39 Looking more deeply into the network, Savoldo's remarkable and innovative symbolic use of drapery throughout his oeuvre, as well as his metaphorical exploration of the mirror in other works (such as Savoldo's *Portrait of a Man in Armour* (so-called *Gaston de Foix*), (c.1530, oil, Paris, Louvre)) may have been an actual influence on the young Caravaggio during his training in Lombardy.
- 40 John 20: 14.
- 41 John 20: 15.
- 42 John 20: 16–17.
- 43 John 20: 29.
- 44 Robinson (ed): *Nag Hammadi*, Gospel of Mary, p. 525.
- 45 Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass* (London: Macmillan, 1984).
- 46 Carroll: *Through the Looking Glass*.

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