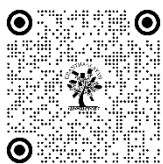


PERFORMING IDENTITIES, SEXUALITIES AND PLEASURES: A TRIBUTE TO LEO BERSANI (1931-2022)

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ABSTRACT

On 20 February 2022, Leo Bersani, who has been one of the leading philosophers, literary critics and intellectuals in gender and sexuality studies, passed away at the age of 90. In this essay, I shall draw attention to Leo Bersani's theoretical oeuvre and attempt to offer a critical assessment of his major contributions to the field of LGBTIQ+ studies. The essay reveals that Bersani's ideas concerning sexual identities, gender relations and somatic pleasures, and their relations with psyche, society, politics, families, and laws not only broaden the scope of understanding the complex phenomenon of human sexualities, but also underline the incomprehensibility of this phenomenon. This essay is divided into three small parts: Bersani's life, works and death, his career as a literary critic, and his queer activism in literary and political circle. The essay also details Bersani's intellectual journey, critical insights, and political engagements, defending human inclination towards pleasure and sexual freedom against the backdrop of socio-political tensions which emerged during the height of AIDS epidemic in America.

Keywords: Leo Bersani, Gender, Sexualities, Corporeal Pleasures, Psyche, Queer-Studies, Performing Identities

“There is a big secret about sex: most people don't like it”.
(Bersani 1987, p. 197)

Leo Bersani: Life, Works, and Death

1. INTRODUCTION

In an interview, Jacqueline Rose, a British academic and a Professor of Humanities at the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities, once remarked that Leo Bersani “was one of our most scandalous thinkers” because of the latter's radical stance that being a homosexual subject one should disrupt “the experience of possession, ownership, fidelity, consistency, safety” allowing one's sexuality “to be what it is, which is disruptive, disorienting, shattering, limit-violating and boundary-breaking” (Risen 2022). Spanning over 60 years of his academic life, Leo Bersani (1931-2022) has been one of the most influential thinkers towards the second half of the twentieth century and the first two decades of the twenty first century. His intellectual understanding is formed and developed by the Freudian Lacanian

psychoanalysis as well as by the contemporary poststructuralist thinkers like Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. During the rise of academic interdisciplinary investigation into the gender and sexuality studies and the increasing socio-political conflicts within the LGBTIQ+ community, Bersani, being himself a gay in the American academia, felt the need to reframe the debatable issues concerning sexual identity and human desires.



Leo Bersani (1931-2022)

Photo Credit <https://www.ici-berlin.org/events/leo-bersani/>

Leo Bersani was born on April 16, 1931, in the Bronx, where his father, Guido Bersani, owned a restaurant, and his mother, Hattie (Wischer) Bersani, was a bartender (Risen 2022). In 1952, Bersani graduated from Harvard University with a bachelor's degree in Romance languages. While Bersani was doing doctoral research in comparative literature at Harvard, he began teaching at Wellesley College in Massachusetts, and then at Rutgers University after completing his Ph. D. in 1958. In 1972, Bersani joined the University of California, Berkeley, with specialisation in 19th- and 20th-century literature, psychoanalysis, literature and the visual arts, and cultural criticism. Bersani remained at Berkeley for the rest of his academic career, becoming professor emeritus in 1996. Bersani's partner Sam Geraci, who he met in 1994 and married in 2014, was a constant support to him, and was beside him while he breathed his last on February 20, 2022, at 1:46 AM at the age of 90. Despite his tireless dedication and academic contributions in literary and cultural studies, Bersani's demise remained one of the unobserved events in the history of intellectual losses.

With the publication of 'Is the Rectum a Grave?' in 1987, a theoretical shift in his intellectual journey can be observed. Before writing this essay, Bersani's works like *Marcel Proust: The Fictions of Life and of Art* (1965), *Balzac to Beckett* (1970), *A Future for Astyanax* (1976), *Baudelaire and Freud* (1977), *The Death of Stéphane Mallarmé* (1982), *The Forms of Violence* (with Ulysses Dutoit, 1985) and *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (1986) reveal his critical engagements with psychoanalytic theory into the French fiction. Bersani was always interested in the function of body and its psycho-social dynamics which led him focus on aesthetic

representation of homoerotic pleasures. With “Is the Rectum a Grave?”, Bersani diversely broadens his focus, addressing the contemporary socio-political turmoil around the issue of LGBTIQ+ people and AIDS epidemic. His other major works include *The Culture of Redemption* (1990), *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko and Resnais* (with Ulysse Dutoit, 1993), *Homos* (1995) *Caravaggio's Secrets* (with Ulysse Dutoit, 1998), *Forming Couples: Godard's Contempt* (with Ulysse Dutoit, 2003), *Forms of Being: Cinema, Aesthetics, Subjectivity* (with Ulysse Dutoit, 2004), *Intimacies* (with Adam Phillips, 2008), *Is the Rectum a Grave and Other Essays?* (2010), *Thoughts and Things* (2015), and *Receptive Bodies* (2018).

2. BERSANI AS ACADEMICIAN AND LITERARY CRITIC

During the early phase of his career, Bersani used and also critiqued Freudian psychoanalytic theory, which left a greater impact on him in shaping much of his intellectual understanding of queer bodies and homosexual subjectivities during the height of AIDS crisis. It was his inclination to psychoanalytic theory that made Bersani criticise Judith Butler, the then much acclaimed academic and leading figure in the field of gender and sexuality studies. However, the influence of Freudian psychoanalysis also rendered Bersani much intellectual energy in his understanding of body-psyche function and in writing a number of critical works: *Marcel Proust: The Fictions of Life and of Art* (1965), *Baudelaire and Freud* (1977), *The Forms of Violence* (with Ulysses Dutoit, 1985), *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (1986) and so on.

As a literary critic, Bersani began his career with the publication of his book *Marcel Proust: The Fictions of Life and of Art*, in which he uses Freudian and Lacanian theories to analyse Proust's fiction, especially, *A la Recherche du temps perdu* (1913-1927), famously stating that “[P]roust might well be Freud reborn as a novelist” (Bersani 2013, p. xvi). In this book, Bersani also critically observes that “humans are motivated by a desire to fill a psychic lack by grasping, understanding and ultimately asserting power over the world” and “this desire was not innate, but rather was drilled into us by society” (Risen 2022). In *Balzac to Beckett* (1970), Bersani focuses on literary analysis in the works of French authors beginning with Balzac, then, Stendhal, Flaubert, Proust, Camus, Robbe Grillet and Beckett. By re-reading those French fictions, Bersani suggests and problematizes that “the very notion that phenomenon reflect or correspond to a reality behind them prejudices both our sense of what is possible and our reading of what we see” (Bersani 1970, p. 11-12).

The influence of contemporary developments of Lacanian psychoanalysis can also be found in Bersani's *A Future for Astyanax* (1976), in which, the dialectical views of the function of self – self as sublimated or tamed as in adult and as free floating as in fantasy – is deconstructed using the reference to the French realist fiction. Bersani explains that “the adult self requires a conflict with other adults: one needs others to know what is desirable, at the same time that one needs to eliminate others in order to possess the objects which they have designated” (Carrier 1977, p. 363).

In *Baudelaire and Freud* (Bersani 1977), Bersani uses Freudian notion of psyche in order to analyse Baudelaire's works, revealing in them “psychic fragmentation, self-dissemination, affective discontinuity and partial selves” (p. 4). Bersani's *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (1986) can be said to have evolved out of his first and extensive theoretical investigation into the study of sexuality and the desiring subject. The next year, Bersani would be publishing his enormously successful essay ‘Is the Rectum a Grave?’, which, (I shall take up in the next section),

can be considered as the beginning of a shift from a rather apolitical literary critic/analyst to turning into an active political and cultural theorist.

3. BERSANI AS QUEER ACTIVIST: WRITING IDENTITIES, GENDERS, AND SEXUALITIES

Bersani begins the essay 'Is the Rectum a Grave?' with a polemic observation by stating that "[T]here is a big secret about sex: most people do not like it" (Bersani 1987, p. 197). With the discovery of AIDS in 1981 and its disproportionate impact on men, women and children, the notions around sexual freedom began to be challenged and passed through a lot of critical cultural and political sieves. This raised many debatable issues and critical crisis among the intellectuals, leading to serious public health concerns for both homo and heterosexual people:

For homosexual men, AIDS was a historical trauma that shattered the experience of sexual freedom and disrupted new patterns of identity and community. In addition to the individual devastation caused by a mysterious and novel disease striking down hundreds of one's friends and fellow community members, critical personal, social, and clinical issues soon emerged: diminished erotic desire, increased sexual dysfunction, sexual addiction, and declining participation in community institutions. (Escoffier 2011, p. 129)

Escoffier's observation offers a hint at the socio-political scenario within which Bersani attempts to understand how the society is becoming more homophobic and how the television in both America and Europe constructs the discursive patterns of the general public regarding the debates around sexual identity and sexual behaviour. Bersani states, "the great power of media, and especially of television, is, as Watney writes, 'its capacity to manufacture subjectivity itself' and in so doing to dictate the shape of an identity" (Bersani 1987, p. 203). In this essay, Bersani also delves deeply into the psycho dynamics of gay, lesbian, and other sexually non-conforming individuals.

In *Homos* (1995), Bersani criticises the emerging thinkers like Butler by arguing that "their depiction of gay identity as socially constructed and of aspects of gay culture as performative and parodic of straight life, Dr. Butler and others threatened to remove those qualities that made male homosexuality salient and even potentially liberating" (Risen 2022). Bersani has discussed about such salient and potentially liberating qualities in *Homos*, arguing that "'Gay identity' led many of those invited as belonging to it (as well as those excluded) to protest that there are many ways of being gay, that sexual behaviour is never only a question of sex, that it is embedded in all the other, non-sexual ways in which we are socially and culturally positioned" (Bersani 1995, p. 3). When Bersani discusses the politics of "de-gaying gayness", which fortifies "homophobic oppression", and "the elimination of gays" (Bersani 1995, p. 5), his immediate intellectual influence was the renowned poststructuralist thinker Michel Foucault. Being one of the most influential French philosophers, Foucault was not only a close friend of Bersani, who also invited the former to give lectures at Berkeley, but also a life-long inspiration to him, and at the beginning of *Homos*, Bersani refers to the former's notion of panopticon in order to show how "sexuality now provides the principal categories for a strategic transformation of behaviour into manipulatable characterological types" (Bersani 1995, p. 3).

In *Caravaggio's Secrets* (1998), Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit offer an excellent study applying psychoanalytic theory to the baroque painter Michelangelo Caravaggio. Bersani and Dutoit emphasise on the impossibility of finding out the

apparently homoerotic message within those portraits. Bersani provides an exemplary analysis in *Intimacies* (2008), co-authored by Adam Phillips, using his critical insights about the psychic realm of intimacy into the film *Intimate Strangers* (2004) by Patrice Leconte, placing it against the claim made by Phillips that “[P]sychoanalysis is about what two people can say to each other if they agree not to have sex” (Bersani and Phillips 2008, p. 1).

During the later phase of his life, Bersani wrote *Thoughts and Things* (2015), in which he “treats the question of connectedness; of how the human subject connects or fails to connect to other human subjects and to the nonhuman world” (p. ix). In this book, Bersani focuses on the unfathomable depths of the world inside, the unconscious, and the immeasurable vastness of the world outside, the universe. Bersani finds connection that “our bodies are made up of the same matter as the stars expands the possibilities of relation” (Chaudhary and Cheng 2022). In *Receptive Bodies* (2018), Bersani returns, once again and for the last time, to the issue of gender, sexuality, and psyche. Drawing attention to Foucault’s theory of sexuality and his own long-time engagements with psychoanalysis, Bersani offers new insights into the nature of somatic pleasure and its immobilised reception in psyche.

4. CONCLUSION

Invoking an alternate view to what Bersani stated about sex in ‘Is the Rectum a Grave?’ and with which this discussion opens, Jane M. Gaines states that “[T]here is a big secret about sex; most people haven’t been having it” (Gaines 2004, p. 55). Gaines offers a different perspective by stating that Bersani’s polemic is “based on a nonexistent poll, and his audacity inspires those of us who theorize sexuality to make bolder pronouncements. But while Bersani wants to locate aversion, something in between needing and liking, my interest is in the pleasure gap between men and women”. There are many other theoretical developed in the field of gender and sexualities that present antagonistic critical stance against what Bersani observed. Even though Bersani has been criticised for favouring the male sexuality or his inclination towards understanding gay-ness of gays and for ignoring female sexualities, still it is undeniable that in his entire academic career, he always remains detached from any way of categorisation, identity fixation, genderisation, or stable socialisation of the subject. His profound understanding into the functions of body, gender, psyche, and society has paved the path for many scholars and thinkers in queer and sexuality studies.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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