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H-France Review Vol. 18 (May 2018), No. 100

Antoine de Baecque, *La Révolution terrorisée*. Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2017. 238 pp. Bibliography. €23.00 (pb). ISBN 978-2-2711-1606-2.

Review by Lynn Hunt, UCLA.

Antoine de Baecque is a phenomenon. He has published books in a dizzying number of fields: the eighteenth century and the French Revolution, the history of cinema, the history of friendship, the history of pain, the history of hiking, and as if that were not enough, he recently published a vampire novel set during the French Revolution entitled *Les Talons rouges* (Paris: Stock, 2017). While researching and writing at a breakneck pace, he has taught in multiple universities, served as editor-in-chief of the world-famous film magazine, *Cahiers du cinéma*, directed the cultural pages for the newspaper *Libération*, and wrote the script of a documentary film about the friendship between François Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard. Need I add that he wrote the authoritative biographies of Truffaut and Godard as well as the definitive two-volume history of *Cahiers du cinéma*? Yet, for all his much-deserved acclaim and his increasingly personal style of writing (about his struggles with an inflammatory joint disease and his nonetheless persistent love of hiking), he has not lost interest in the French Revolution, which serves for him as a kind of primal scene of suffering and the hard-won ability to laugh it off. His abiding interest is on view in this collection of essays originally published between 1987 and 2012.

In this digital age do we really need collections of already published essays? We do, for two reasons. Although two of these essays appear in journals that are accessible in most research libraries, others were published in collections that would be much harder to find. Moreover, their appearance together allows common themes to emerge, not so much about the Terror itself, as about the terror of revolutionary violence more generally, whether that violence is symbolic, as in representations of politically inflected bodies (the *sans-culotte*, the revolutionary martyr, the *muscadin*), or actual, as in the killing of Princess de Lamballe during the September massacres of 1792. In his all too brief introduction of seven pages, De Baecque claims that the cadaver is the key element: “la forme de ce moment si singulier, qui porte sa physionomie et dit sa politique” (p. 8). His concern is this “*moment politique saisi par la terreur*” (his emphasis, p. 9), which he relates to gothic fiction rather than to the usual arguments about the role of circumstances versus ideology: “La Terreur est l’expérimentation politique des récits macabres qui habitent les fictions de la fin des Lumières” (p. 12). The title of the collection reinforces the point. The Revolution is itself terrorized; “la Révolution a peur et transforme cet effroi en le projetant à son tour vers ses ennemis” (p. 9).

It would have been interesting to hear more about the effects of these “macabre tales,” especially since the gothic novel in Europe had its most influential expression in British fiction, where it first appeared in the mid-eighteenth century, long before 1789. The genre took on a new shape in the late 1790s, precisely in reaction to the French Revolution. The British version had great resonance in France, especially with the translation of Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk*, published in English in 1796 and in French in 1797. With its emphasis on sexual obsession, rape, murder, satanic clerics, specters dressed in white, and bloodthirsty mobs, Lewis’s novel left almost no stone of horror unturned. But it did so, like many of its British, French and German equivalents, in order to make sense of the Terror in its aftermath. To call the Terror the “political testing” of the “macabre tales” of gothic fiction would seem to be a case of putting the cart before the horse.

The author is not all that interested in causation, however, or in attributing agency. He brings a cinematic sensibility to his historical analysis, and in feature films, especially horror films, the emphasis is rarely on cause and effect. Is Norman Bates or Freddy Krueger an agent in any usual sense? Is the guillotine or the executioner a perpetrator? What matters is the way the plot unfolds, and De Baecque is a master at decoding a sequence of events focused on a body, whether living or dead. The two most compelling essays in the collection are those focused on the fate of two individual bodies, one living and one dead. “Vie et mort de la dignité royale” traces the battle over the protocol governing the king’s appearance in the National Assembly and shows how it unconsciously prepared the way for a republic. Should the king come on foot or in a carriage? Should he stand, should the deputies sit, did the deputies have the right to respond? Should they thank him and express deference? By September 14, 1791, the ceremonial standards had broken down; the king entered the chamber, and the deputies on the left immediately sat down, effectively forcing the others to follow. Surprised to find himself alone on his feet, the king promptly seated himself to give the rest of his speech, secretly trembling with humiliation. His supporters managed to get a new protocol installed that included precise instructions on when the deputies should sit and when they should take off their hats, but the controversy over this “décret ignoble rendu par de vils esclaves” (p. 73), as *Les Révolutions de Paris* described it, effectively rekindled republican sentiment in the press and eventually in the streets. In this way, the author demonstrates the power exercised by the staging of ritual and the subtle and not so subtle attempts to transform it.

The second essay, this one on a cadaver, “La Mort de la princesse de Lamballe ou le sexe massacré,” will be known to readers of De Baecque’s marvelous study of 1997, translated into English in 2001 as *Glory and Terror: Seven Deaths under the French Revolution*. It is an essay well worth revisiting because it goes to the heart of gender issues that remain very pertinent. Although it appears unlikely that the corpse suffered the horrific mutilations that were initially reported and subsequently exaggerated, the very imagination of them is revealing of the hatreds stirred up by accounts of Lamballe’s suspiciously close relationship with the queen, her supposed lesbianism, her presumed complicity in court conspiracies against the Revolution, and her rumored life of dissipation, not to mention her “féminité affichée” (p. 123).

Robespierre takes a starring role in three of the other essays in this collection, one on the historiography of the Terror, one on the conflict between him and Danton, and one on representations of the Incorruptible in plays and movies. Yet the author displays less fascination with the lawyer from Arras than with the relatively unknown anti-Jacobin propagandizer, Alphonse de Martainville, who comes to the fore in the longest single essay of

the collection, “Rire après la Terreur.” Many readers might think that Robespierre would have more appeal, given his obsessive qualities, and given that he knew how to fuse the language of principles with the language of emotions, the latter being central to De Baecque’s view of the Terror. Reviewing various works on the Terror, the author clearly prefers the approach suggested by Alain Corbin, and in a different way by Sophie Wahnich: the Terror as a “système d’émotions” (p. 97).<sup>[1]</sup> It is not enough to see it as a political mechanism or legal deformation: “La Terreur eut cette ambition d’être un gouvernement des émotions des hommes et, tout à la fois, des hommes par les émotions” (p. 98). Even if Robespierre took over this “fonction émotionnelle du gouvernement” (p. 105), he was hardly the sole actor. De Baecque does not prefer Danton to Robespierre, but in his review of plays and films, he concludes that cinema has chosen Danton. He incarnates the “photogénie de la Révolution” while Robespierre remains “infilable” (p. 233).

Martainville gets the last word in a sense (he appears in the penultimate chapter) and not only because he survives Robespierre. He provokes the belly laugh, which resists all that suffering and pain that went before. He spewed out facetiousness, parody, sarcasm, and iconoclasm in an extensive vaudevillian repertoire. Convoked by the revolutionary tribunal in March 1794, the presiding officer reportedly asked, “Alphonse-Louis Dieudonné de Martainville?” Martainville responded, “Pardon, citoyen président, Martainville tout court. Je suis ici pour être raccourci and non pour être allongé” (p. 192). Martainville was seventeen and already working for a journal. He and the others working at the journal were denounced for criticizing the law of the maximum. De Baecque does not endorse all of Martainville’s later positions (from supporting the Thermidorian republic to opposing Bonapartism and ending as an ultra-royalist), but it is difficult to resist seeing a certain identification taking place. One of the precocious journalist’s enduring traits, according to De Baecque, was “une plume douée, faisant feu de tout bois, qui s’adapte avec une facilité déconcertante à toutes les besognes” (p. 189). The same might have been said about De Baecque himself.

## NOTES

[1] Alain Corbin, *Historien du sensible* (Paris: La Découverte, 2000) and Sophie Wahnich, *Les Émotions, la Révolution française et le présent: Exercices pratiques de conscience historique* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2009).

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ISSN 1553-9172