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Lela Graybill, *The Visual Culture of Violence After the French Revolution*. Abingdon, U.K. and New York: Routledge, 2016. 197 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$160.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-4724-5019-7.

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“Visual culture” serves as an umbrella term to replace the narrower focus that art historians once had when they studied provenance, technique, style, and form. The more expansive approach not only includes many forms of visual representation that were previously ignored, it leads art historians to make larger claims about the social impact of various forms of visual representation. However, such claims often pay scant attention to social context in which the supposed impact takes place. In that sense, Lela Graybill fits within an ever-expanding field that is still finding its historical footing. Her fairly short book makes a big claim, namely that “spectatorial violence,” by which she means visual representations of violence rather than the spectacular staging of violence, was central to the emergence of modern liberal selfhood in the wake of the French Revolution (p. 5). Graybill builds her argument on the basis of four radically disparate forms of visual representation: depictions of executions by guillotine during the French Revolution, Philippe-Auguste Hennequin’s large “history” painting *The Remorse of Orestes* of 1800, popular prints about the famous Fualdès Affair (a mysterious murder in Rodez and the trials that followed) of 1817-1818, and Madame Tussaud’s waxworks displays that toured Britain from 1803 to 1832. Each of these forms the basis of a separate chapter.

A fairly substantial introduction refers to a modest but eclectic set of depictions of capital punishment in early modern Europe. Graybill’s interpretation of these images, and indeed, her larger argument in the book, depends heavily on Michel Foucault’s claims in *Discipline and Punish* about the purposes of brutal exemplary punishment. In revisiting the execution of Damiens for attempted regicide in 1757, she rephrases Foucault’s argument as describing a rejection of “atrocious” (p. 17, repeated without italics on pp. 25 and 28) in modern forms of repression. However, foregoing bodily mutilation as the putatively principal form of punishment also undercut the power of such violent spectacle to maintain the bonds of society, leaving largely visual representations of violent spectacle that now fostered individualism and the modern liberal self. As she puts it, “the Enlightenment’s construction of the violated body as a therapeutic site of socialization gives way to the violated body as pure attraction” (p. 20). (“The Enlightenment” here confusingly stands for the French penal regime of the eighteenth-century, rather than its philosophical opponents). Graybill would have crafted a more nuanced argument had she taken into account the withering critiques of the historical basis of Foucault’s arguments. For example, Richard M. Andrews has highlighted the individualistic and

disciplining qualities of eighteenth-century penal incarceration, especially in the galleys, while Pascal Bastien has revealed the religious and cultural complexity of public punishments, the vast majority of which did not involve bodily mutilation.[1]

In her chapter on the introduction of the guillotine during the French Revolution, Graybill notes that the National Assembly rejected hanging for capital crimes and instead chose decapitation “both for its restraint *and* its spectacle” (p. 28). This leads to a discussion of the novelty of what spectators would see at an execution. (Beheading had been reserved for nobles and the last one, which was badly botched, had taken place a full quarter century earlier in 1766). Graybill argues that artistic techniques for showing perspective developed in the Renaissance enabled the authors of various pictorial images of execution by guillotine to make the experience of spectators, rather than that of the person being executed, central to their depictions. On this basis, she proceeds to analyze the experience of spectators. Weaving together the work of Daniel Arasse on death by guillotine, Vivian Sobchack on film viewing, and Marie-Hélène Huet on revolutionary theatricality, Graybill concludes that delivering death in the blink of an eye forced spectators into a more intense engagement with their own corporeality. The spectator’s own body became “the primary ground of experience and comprehension” (p. 56) thereby creating a “phenomenology of sensation and shock that served to intensify the embodied and hence vulnerable nature of the act of looking” (p. 57). One is left wondering, however, whether spectators came to see the bloody severing of heads as much as they came to see how the condemned (i.e. individuals judged to be threats to the social and political order) conducted themselves in the face of an imminent and highly public death. If the latter is the case, then much remained the same as during pre-revolutionary hangings.

The following chapter makes a sudden shift to Hennequin’s neo-classical history painting *The Remorse of Orestes*. Graybill, having claimed a novel vulnerability for spectators of public executions by guillotine, transfers this vulnerability to viewers of high art. Despite winning the Grand Prize at the Salon of 1800, Hennequin’s painting was criticized for not distinguishing clearly enough between the real scene—Orestes being seized by a group of Furies—and the source of his remorse—a vision (or imagined scene) that he had of himself having just killed his mother by plunging a knife into her left breast. Such observations lead Graybill to a perceptive and arresting claim about the painting, namely, that it “articulated a fantasy of trauma appropriate to the paradoxes of modern liberal selfhood” (p. 65). That Hennequin’s painting captured the idea of psychic trauma a century before Sigmund Freud is an idea that Graybill may want to develop further elsewhere. Hennequin’s blending of the real and the imaginary not only annoyed critics, according to Graybill it intensified the viewing experience, making it akin to being present for the original violence. In a generalizing statement, Graybill takes the “impassioned responses of spectators” to depictions of violence as evidence that “reality and representation are readily blurred at its sight” (p. 65). Whether the violence depicted in *The Remorse of Orestes* is more sensationalist and shocking than in previous paintings, however, would be hotly disputed by experts in early modern art. A clever turn to Adam Smith and Sophie de Grouchy for contemporary ideas about sympathy and “fellow-feeling” leads Graybill to an even stronger claim: “the sight of violence itself—for the spectator in the painting and for the spectator of the painting—” gives Hennequin’s work of art the “full function and significance of what it symbolizes” (p. 86), i.e. psychic trauma is both subject and reaction. Moreover, Graybill asserts, without further elaboration, that modern liberal selfhood is founded on the real violence of the French Revolution and “perhaps more deeply on a violence that is psychosomatic in nature” (p. 86).

In the following chapter on the Fualdès Affair of 1817-1818, Graybill shifts her analysis from spectators to witnesses. The Fualdès Affair received so much publicity that it has been deemed a breakthrough to a modern obsession with *fait divers*.^[2] What is often lost, as it is here, is that the astonishing level of publicity arose not simply from the gruesome nature of the murder and the lack of persuasive eyewitnesses, but also because the motive also remained a mystery. Without sound eyewitness testimony and a convincing motive, the identity of the victim (a member of the revolutionary tribunal in 1793-1794 and a Bonapartist prosecutor before the Restoration in 1814) provoked widespread speculation that his slaying, bleeding, and disposal in the Aveyron River was the fruit of high politics rather than base greed.^[3] Such speculation is not relevant to Graybill's analysis, however. Using a passage from Roland Barthes about historical discourse as a narrated collection of details that is merely a signifier of what actually happened, Graybill finds that the true meaning of the Fualdès Affair lies in representations of it in the form of prints, sketches, and plays. Collectively dubbed "the witnessing gaze" (p. 96), these sensational and shocking representations became anchored "in the body and the mind of the spectator-cum-witness" (p. 120). Contemporary publicity supposedly directed viewers less toward the horror of the original murder and more toward the "trauma of witnessing itself" (p. 106). The greater realism achieved through the new technology of lithography intensified "the embodied and hence vulnerable nature of the act of looking" (p. 120). Taken literally, this suggests that viewers of representations suffered in much the same way as actual witnesses to the original murder, which is extremely dubious: Fualdès had supposedly been stretched out on a table and his throat slashed.^[4] As Graybill presents it, the "phenomenological immediacy" (p. 117), i.e. intense realism, as achieved by Géricault in his contemporaneous painting *The Raft of the Medusa*, enhanced both the horrors and the pleasures of viewing violence.

This sort of "scopophilic fascination with violence" (p. 96) becomes even more intense in the chapter on Madame Tussaud's waxworks displays, especially the Chamber of Horrors.^[5] Here the emphasis is on an even greater individualization of experiences of violence. These are partly attributed to the French Revolution because the guillotine executes only one person at a time (although such a claim ignores the numerous large-scale massacres that also took place during the Revolution). Visitors to a waxworks exhibition took particular note of differentiation, both between the costumes and faces of the various figures on display, and amongst themselves, thereby highlighting "the artifice of identity itself" (p. 133). The striking verisimilitude achieved by waxworks displays was less about historical authenticity, and more about "the shocking immediacy of the witnessing experience itself" (p. 137). Revolutionary violence in the form of several famous severed heads, especially that of Robespierre, which had been taken from a death mask, offered one of the main attractions. Visitors became "witness[es] to history" (p. 140), sated their "scopophilic desire" (p. 143), and were disconcertingly reminded of their personal vulnerability as corporeal beings, all at the same time. "Robespierre's head may have also presented the viewer with a threatening double of herself," Graybill writes rather implausibly (p. 144). "Horror grew out of a disturbing, unresolved reversibility between victim and viewer" (p. 147). The result was a commodification of trauma, visceral, individualized, and pleasurable. In Graybill's words, "[t]he suffering body [à la Foucault] is no longer the focus of violent display; it is now the sensate spectator who has moved to center stage" (p. 153).

Graybill's conclusion does not really elaborate or clarify her larger argument. Rather, it is an epilogue focused on Francisco Goya's series of 85 prints known as the *Disasters of War*. These famously graphic depictions of the violence that ensued from French efforts to subjugate Spain

in 1808-1814 are interpreted by Graybill as Goya making “violated bodies easy to look at, but impossible to see” (p. 165). “Sustained looking does not allow a deeper contemplation of the violence depicted” (p. 165), she writes, because Goya has usurped the role of witness and mediated the reality. The original violence is “seen, but non-locatable, ubiquitous and invisible” (p. 174). That this is a radical interpretation is nowhere suggested. One needs to read Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* to balance the scales.[6]

It has been necessary to employ numerous quotations here in order to capture Graybill’s interpretations because they are often presented in ways that combine strength of conviction with an opaque abstractness. The result can be sophisticated and insightful, but it can also be confusing and overstated. It is reasonable to argue that visual depictions of violence contributed to the emergence of modern liberal selfhood in the wake of the French Revolution. Such a claim should not depend, however, on collapsing, erasing, or otherwise minimizing the distinction between the potential psychic trauma that can result from personally witnessing violence and the physical and emotional responses experienced by individuals who view visual representations of violence. Moreover, when the latter are the subject of speculative claims that lack any corroboration from contemporary viewers, or even efforts to reconstruct contemporary mentalities, then a study of visual culture becomes excessively detached from its historical context. What rescues such a study from easy dismissal is the deployment of art historical viewing techniques as part of a provocative juxtaposition of highly varied forms of representation. It is too bad that the reader of Graybill’s book has to trust her eye so often (or to turn—when possible—to a Google Image search), because Routledge has chosen to publish a book of visual culture in which the images are all in black and white and many are so small or fuzzy as to be illegible, no matter how intense the reader’s gaze. This is the supreme irony of a book devoted to the experience of viewing representations of violence.

NOTES

[1] Richard Mowery Andrews, *Law, Magistracy, and Crime in Old Regime Paris 1735-1789* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Pascal Bastien, *L’exécution publique à Paris au XVIII^e siècle. Une histoire des rituels judiciaires*. (Paris: Champs Vallon, 2006). Bastien notes that by 1785, only 4.7 % of punishments were executions (p. 28).

[2] Scholars of the nineteenth century have repeatedly made this assertion, but without much knowledge of the remarkable proliferation of printed images and news stories devoted to the mysterious “bête du Gévaudan” in 1764-67. Jay Smith, *Monsters of the Gévaudan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

[3] Most likely, the Chevaliers de la Foi, a conspiratorial ultra-royalist group, murdered Fualdès, who had been both a member of the revolutionary tribunal in 1793-1794 and a Bonapartist prosecutor who had evidence of royalist involvement in a local highway robbery on 1 April 1814. These particular Chevaliers de la Foi had close ties to the Restoration government of the day. The Prefect of the Aveyron believed this at the time, and recent investigations concluded similarly. See Pierre Darmon, *La Rumeur de Rodez: Histoire d’un procès truqué* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1991) and Jean-Noel Tardy, “Sociétés secrètes, complots politiques et terreur: Les contextes politiques de l’assassinat de Fualdès” in *L’Affaire Fualdès: le sang et la rumeur*, ed. Jacques Miquel et Aurélien Pierre (Rodez: Musée Fenaille/Éditions du Rouergue, 2017), pp. 33-36. This richly and beautifully illustrated book is much more than a catalogue to

the exhibition mounted at the Musée Fenaille in Rodez on the bicentennial of the affair. Unfortunately for Lela Greybill, the exhibition took place after the publication of her book.

[4] The Fualdès case became an extreme example of judicial error perpetrated deliberately by judges engaged in covering up the criminal activities of local extreme royalists. It certainly did not take place in the supposed house of ill repute or as a conspiracy between two of Fualdès's associates and local ruffians, which provided the basis of the case as far as the public knew. See especially Frédéric Chauvaud, "Fualdès et la fabrique de l'erreur judiciaire" in *L'Affaire Fualdès*, pp. 93-97.

[5] Graybill could have made an even stronger connection between these two chapters by investigating the production and display at Toulouse of wax likenesses of the men convicted and executed in the Fualdès Affair. See Darmon, *La Rumeur de Rodez*, pp. 143-44.

[6] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2003).

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