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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.

Response by Lela Graybill, University of Utah.

When I set out to write a book on violence, visibility, and the French Revolution, I knew its premises would not go unquestioned. How does one even begin to define violence? Is it purely a matter of physical conflict? What about its emotional and psychological aspects? How does one best distinguish between, say, interpersonal and political violence? When must violence be considered criminal, and when might it be legitimate? The most cursory attempt to define violence—let alone to historicize it—will immediately signal its difficulties. Approaching such a subject as a historian of art and visual culture perhaps adds further layers of complication. I want to thank Professor Brown for taking the time to dissect a book that deliberately crosses interdisciplinary boundaries, and I am grateful to the editors of H-France for their willingness to further foster dialogue.

The Visual Culture of Violence After the French Revolution concerns four sites of violent display. Professor Brown categorizes these sites as either “real” or “representational.” In a corollary manner he separates “representation” from “context,” and consequently finds my claims grandiose, my evidence eclectic, and my insights speculative. Reading his characterization of both my objects of study and the arguments I make about them, I find this reaction understandable. I would like to take the opportunity here, however, to clarify both my objects of analysis and aims, which emerge from Professor Brown’s review in distorted form.

Professor Brown asserts a neat separation between “visual culture” and “social context.” The foundation of my study—arguably, of my disciplinary perspective—takes a wholly different approach to such questions. Visual culture both reflects and produces social context. Social context both reflects and produces visual culture. They are deeply imbricated in one another. Art historians have long understood this dynamic, and I don’t recognize more than a parody in Professor Brown’s description of an art history that was ever narrowly concerned with “provenance, technique, style, and form.” Likewise, visual culture studies is not merely about a “more expansive” catalog of objects for study. Instead, it fundamentally concerns the complex relationship between its two key terms: vision and culture. My study is concerned with representations of violence, to be sure, but also with spectatorship, display, and visual experience in general. All of these things are social, and all of these things have historical specificity.

The spectatorial violence with which my study is concerned does not reside, as Professor Brown asserts, in “visual representations of violence rather than the spectacular staging of violence.” Rather, spectatorial violence—that is, violence aimed at spectators—can be found in *both* representations *and* stagings (or displays). My book intentionally moves between diverse sites of display in order to develop this point. To take one example, in my first chapter I address the spectacle of the guillotine as it unfolded live on the scaffold; in visual representations; and in verbal debate. Like any historically situated object of study, the spectacle of the guillotine is only accessible through indirect sources. I work with multiple forms of representation (not only visual) to explore the symbolic and technological premises that framed the experience of spectators. As Professor Brown points out, I do show how certain depictions of the guillotine utilized perspectival devices to highlight the role of the spectator at the scene of an execution. Contrary to his assertion, however, I do not pretend that these representations provide any sort of independent basis for analyzing the experience of spectators. Rather, I show that the representations signal a contemporaneous concern with the experience of spectators at the foot of the scaffold. That experience was echoed in the many debates that unfolded around the adoption of the guillotine as the standard mode of execution in France. Analyzing these representations helps me to address some of the ways in which the symbolic context for viewing scenes of violence was altered under the conditions of political revolution.

A major premise of my work in art history and visual culture studies is the fact that in visual experience, individual intentions and expectations are always ever interacting with—and affected by—external circumstances (which are at once material, social, cultural, and historical). Professor Brown suggests that the expectations of spectators at the scene of an execution may remain largely unchanged in the pre- and post-revolutionary context, but I hardly see how that matters if we consider that the material grounds of their experience necessarily did change. That is, the speed and precision of the guillotine’s operations created a wholly different basis for the experience of viewing violence.

Such external circumstances—namely, a society grappling with the legacies of revolutionary violence—are integral to my second object of study, Philippe-Auguste Hennequin’s post-revolutionary history painting, *The Remorse of Orestes*. Here, I look at the singular ways in which the artist worked to blur the boundaries between the representational and the real in a painting about violence, as well as contemporaneous responses to that aesthetic move. As I argue in several places in my text, pre-Revolutionary representations of violence, while often depicting scenes of extreme violence that would be shocking to modern eyes—and probably to early modern ones as well—use compositional devices to guide their audiences to a limited range of “appropriate” responses. What was new about Hennequin was not what type of violence was represented, but rather, how he presented it, so as to amplify rather than temper any experience of shock that spectators might feel. In a rather perplexing move for a historian, Professor Brown seems to suggest that historical context and formal specificity matters little to my claims for this painting, pointing out that “whether the violence depicted in *The Remorse of Orestes* is more sensationalist and shocking than in previous paintings...would be hotly disputed by experts in early modern art.” Here he seems to propose a linear spectrum of sensation and shock, an experience that would be essentially the same for any historically situated subject but only differ in degree. From my perspective, however, early modern sensation and shock is

inherently *other* than post-Revolutionary sensation and shock, again, because circumstances matter not just to history, but to vision as well.

In discussing my third chapter on print culture and the *fait divers*, Professor Brown again confuses questions of representation and visibility, leading to a gross misrepresentation of my argument. Professor Brown has me saying that “The greater realism achieved through the new technology of lithography intensified ‘the embodied and hence vulnerable nature of the act of looking’.” Never did I (nor would I) make such a claim for lithography as a medium. Instead, what I pointed out was that “The witnessing gaze and the attendant phenomenology of sensation and shock that developed around the Fualdès Affair [in the multiplied reality effects of its anecdotal details, parade of trial witnesses, trial broadsheets, lithography, melodrama, even in an artist’s abandoned sketch sheets] served to intensify the embodied and hence vulnerable nature of the act of looking” (p.120). As with each site of violent display that I consider, with the Fualdès affair I am concerned with not only objects (such as lithographs) but with a larger terrain of visual culture that can be analyzed through a multitude of representational forms—verbal, textual, theatrical, and visual, to name a few.

Professor Brown concludes by suggesting that it was nigh impossible to “capture” my argument without resorting to numerous quotations. Though I might be flattered that Professor Brown found my writing compelling (or frustrating) enough to repeatedly quote, it does leave me in an unusual position to “respond” where re-contextualization has distorted original meaning. Rather than address each of these slippages point by point, I would like to conclude with one larger point of disagreement that may elucidate many subordinate ones that appear throughout the review. When Professor Brown suggests that I “collapse, erase, or otherwise minimize” distinctions between the experience of “personally witnessing violence” and viewing “visual representations of violence,” he assumes that these are the only two ways in which violence and vision might intersect. Either one sees “real” violence, or one sees a “representation” of violence. My study challenges this assumption, not in the interest of collapsing differences, but in the hopes of elucidating historical specificity. *The Visual Culture of Violence After the French Revolution* is not about violence *tout court* but about one particular form of violence: violent display. An execution on a scaffold by guillotine is of course real, but it is also a display of violence. A collection of severed heads rendered in wax are representational, but they too are displays of violence. To consider the specificities of how a revolutionary scaffold or a waxworks museum may have worked to position spectators in relation to the violence on display at each site is not to collapse or minimize differences between the representational and the real, it is to highlight the specificity involved in witnessing violence from a body that is always ever historically—and phenomenologically—situated. Professor Brown ironically accuses my study of being “excessively detached from its historical context” when it is in fact his assertions that overtly deny the fundamental imbrication of visual culture, spectatorship and history.

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