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Richard Thomson, *The Troubled Republic: Visual Culture and Social Debate in France, 1889-1900*. London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004. 255 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, footnotes, index. \$60.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-300-10456-0.

Review by Venita Datta, Wellesley College.

In his recent work, *The Troubled Republic: Visual Culture and Social Debate in France, 1889-1900*, well-known art historian Richard Thomson examines a series of debates in French society and culture through the lens of visual culture. His book covers the period separating two World's Fairs--the Exposition Universelle of 1889, which marked the centennial of the Revolution, and that of 1900, which ushered in the twentieth century. Eschewing such historical labels as *fin de siècle* and *belle époque*, Thomson argues that they are "terms of mood, not historical analysis." As he notes, however, "they hint at real historical issues below the surface of the glib encapsulation. *Fin de siècle*, one might say, carries the implications of weariness at the end of a century's long haul as well as some anxiety about what the next century might bring. *La belle époque* resonates with a self-satisfied *bonhomie* and nostalgia, neither of which one can believe were universally shared" (p. 5).^[1] This observation is certainly true, and having myself struggled with these terms, I sympathize with his attempt to reject such labels, even if I believe they are necessary tools which allow historians to delineate the period to be studied and the issues and approach to be emphasized.

According to Thomson, visual culture was central to various discussions about national identity, not only by promoting values of the Republic, but also by opposing these same republican values. He argues, then, very persuasively, that the political, social, and cultural battles of the period were fought out in the visual arts. As he observes, most art historians ignore the connections between art and the historical conditions that produced it; there are, however, notable exceptions, among them T. J. Clark, Patricia Mainardi and Hollis Clayson.^[2] Similarly, historians of this era "scarcely bring pictorial evidence into play in their cultural analyses" (p. 12). This criticism of historians is probably fair, although I would add that such scholars as Vanessa Schwartz and Debora Silverman address the role of the visual in their work.^[3] Thomson's book, however, fills an important gap in the field by linking the visual and the historical. The debates he explores are ones with which historians working on the period are familiar, but Thomson brings to them a fresh perspective by viewing them through visual culture.

Thomson has chosen a series of four contemporary debates to be examined in successive chapters: chapter one is devoted to the body, both individual bodies and the national body. Chapter two examines visual representations of the crowd while chapter three centers on the religious question, concentrating in particular but not exclusively on the relationship between the Catholic Church and the Third Republic. Finally, chapter four focuses on nationalism and militarism, especially the notion of *revanche* against Germany and the desire to recover Alsace and Lorraine, lost to the Germans in the Franco-Prussian War.

In chapter one, "Public Health and Private Desire: Exploring Modernity and the Erotic," Thomson explores how contemporary concerns about the body played themselves out in the visual culture of the period. By depicting the human body, artists "touched on, even engaged in, debates about degeneration, sexuality or public health" (p. 13). Thus, their representations were not made in isolation of the public debates of the time but were shaped and formed by contemporary concerns for public health. Artists

were fascinated by virile military bodies--the soldier, after all, was an important role model in an era that experienced a "crisis of masculinity." [4] They were also obsessed with the female body, on which they projected both their hopes and fears--hopes for a regenerated France through female fecundity, and fears of "deviant" sexuality, whether represented by the male homosexual or the female prostitute.

In chapter two, "Picturing and Policing the Crowd," Thomson provides ample pictorial evidence to confirm the research of historians who have worked on the topic, among them Robert Nye and Susanna Barrows. [5] As Thomson demonstrates, there was a plethora of images during the period representing the crowd, from Jean Béraud's orderly assemblage at the entrance of the Exposition of 1889 (*L'Entrée à l'Exposition Universelle de 1889*) to the same Béraud's *La Salle Graffard*, which represented the type of crowd that such theorists as Gustave Le Bon wanted to control, to anarchist artist Camille Pissarro's "Insurrection" (from his album of sketches *Turpitudes sociales*), seen as a warning to the bourgeoisie of what they might expect from an insurrectionary crowd. Even when these images reflected differing political beliefs, they converged. Anarchist sympathizer Félix Vallotton's woodcut *La Manifestation*, which denigrated police brutality, nevertheless represented an image "in regretful concurrence with such theories [those of the conservative Le Bon], exposing the practicalities of controlling the crowd by command or violence" (p.110).

In perhaps the richest and most fascinating chapter of the book, chapter three, "The Religious Debate: Representing Faith, Defining Modernity," Thomson does ample justice to the religious question in France in the 1890s, illustrating how important religion was in public discussions of the time. As he rightly notes, although the *Ralliement* failed, the debates it aroused touched widely on French life. One of the greatest strengths of this chapter is Thomson's recognition of the diversity of religious art and his refusal to categorically oppose the religious to the secular, or the religious to the modern. As he observes: "In this strange cultural environment, where an ancient ideological tradition struggled for survival while a newer one strove to take root there was, it seems, a process of cross-fertilization, of unusual graftings and hybrids. For where the religious ended and the Republican began was by no means always clear..." (p. 134).

Such blending of the religious and the secular are to be found, for example, in the art of Puvis de Chavannes, or in the use of the Naturalist style, generally associated with science and the Republic, by Catholic painter James Tissot in a series of paintings representing Jesus Christ. Thomson's work, alongside that of Raymond Jonas, Suzanne Kaufman, and Ruth Harris, illustrates the complex relationship between the religious and the secular as well as the religious and the modern. [6]

In chapter four "Always Think About It; Never Discuss It: Imagery and the Idea of *Revanche*," Thomson presents an argument at odds with conventional historical scholarship on the question, contending that *revanche*, rather than a marginal concern, played a greater role in public debate and was more popular with the French public than has been thought. His evidence from visual culture, including painting, caricature, and sculpture, as well as children's illustrations and decorative objects is persuasive. As he argues, "The proliferation of this imagery, its accessibility to all ages and classes, gave it a universality that should not be downplayed" (p. 223). While acknowledging that fierce nationalists constituted a minority, he demonstrates that the mass of citizens too were painfully aware of *revanche*, which he likens to "a low-grade contagion," which "might lie dormant in the body politic, but once infected... could, in certain conditions, swiftly be inflamed." (p. 223)

Thomson's chapters stand alone as discrete pieces but they also add up to a fascinating discussion of the relationship between public and private issues during the 1890s. As he himself notes, he could have selected other debates, among them the role of women in society, labor conditions, anti-Semitism, and colonialism, but he believes the ones he has chosen to be both crucial to and symptomatic of the period.

It was undoubtedly necessary to limit the discussion of topics, but I would have liked more attention devoted to the role of women in the construction of national identity. To be fair, Thomson does address this issue indirectly in his chapters on the body and religion, but the woman question during this time reigned supreme and a greater focus on it would have enriched an already excellent book.

Thomson is an art historian who is clearly at ease with historical sources, both secondary and primary. The bibliography and notes are rich sources of information. Above all, the beautifully reproduced illustrations support Thomson's case that visual imagery played an important role in the making of modernity. Well-written and accessible, *The Troubled Republic: Visual Culture and Social Debate in France, 1889-1900* should be of interest not only to students but also to specialists, art historians, and historians alike.

NOTES

[1] Of course, historians, chief among them Eugen Weber and Roger Shattuck, have expounded on these terms: Eugen Weber, *France, Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1986); Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years: The Origins of the Avant-Garde in France, 1885 to World War I* (New York: Vintage, 1968).

[2] T. J. Clark, *The Absolute Bourgeois: Artists and Politics in France, 1848-1851* (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1973) and *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (New York: Knopf, 1985); Patricia Mainardi, *Art and the Politics of the Second Empire: The Universal Expositions of 1855 and 1867* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987) and *The End of the Salon: Art and the State in the Early Third Republic* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Hollis Clayson, *Painted Love: Prostitution in French Art of the Impressionist Era* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991) and *Paris in Despair: Art and Everyday Life under Siege (1870-1871)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

[3] Vanessa Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Debora L. Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France: Politics, Psychology, and Style* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989). For an earlier period, see Joan B. Landes, *Visualizing the Nation: Gender, Representation, and the Revolution in Eighteenth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

[4] Annelise Maugue, *L'Identité masculine en crise au tournant du siècle, 1871-1914* (Paris: Éditions Rivages, 1987). See also the recent book by Christopher E. Forth, *The Dreyfus Affair and the Crisis of French Manhood* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).

[5] Robert Nye, *The Origins of Crowd Psychology: Gustave Le Bon and the Crisis of Mass Democracy in the Third Republic* (London: Sage, 1975); Susanna Barrows, *Distorting Mirrors: Visions of the Crowd in Late-Nineteenth Century France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981).

[6] Raymond Jonas, *France and the Cult of the Sacred Heart: An Epic Tale for Modern Times* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Ruth Harris, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age* (New York: Viking, 1999); Suzanne K. Kaufman, *Consuming Visions: Mass Culture and the Lourdes Shrine* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

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