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Emma Barker, *Greuze and the Painting of Sentiment*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2005. xii + 335 pp. Illustrations, bibliography and index. \$120.00 (cl). ISBN 0-521-55508-6.

Review by Michael Wolfe, Pennsylvania State University, Altoona.

Emma Barker's beautifully produced and intelligently argued new book on Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725-1805) reclaims the significance of an artist often dismissed during his own life for work considered overly contrived and artificial. Barker instead proposes to analyze how Greuze's large-scale tableaux helped to produce and promote what she calls "a new moralized, fundamentally paternal(istic) sense of identity for citizens in a regenerated social order" (p. 3). In her reading of Greuze's "sermons on canvas," Barker offers a fascinating exploration of "family values" eighteenth-century style (p. 167). Not that this type of genre painting was so unique in its use of pathos. Indeed, it represented a secularized version of late medieval religious and Renaissance art, which also encouraged meditative *Bildung*, just as it foreshadowed the didactic soap opera melodramas found today on daytime television.[1] Each of these visual forms expressed a common desire shared by Franciscans, bourgeois prudes, and cunning corporate advertisers alike to hold the attention of their viewers just long enough to sell them something, be it the virtues of Christian repentance, middle-class paternalism, or the latest laundry detergent.



Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *L'Innocence tenant deux pigeons* c. 1800.
http://www.wallacecollection.org/c/w_a/p_w_d/f/jpg/p428.jpg

In her introduction, Barker sets the theoretical parameters of her study. She first tackles Greuze's critical detractors in the nineteenth century, such as the Goncourt brothers, who derided the artist for his nauseating sentimentality and tendency to titillate, particularly in the notorious "Greuze girls" (see illustration) composed during his later years. Such views still pervade modern assessments of Greuze's work by Anita Brookner and Norman Bryson, for example.[2] However, since the early 1980s studies of eighteenth-century art by scholars such as Michael Fried and Thomas Crow have sought to situate Greuze's compositional innovations into the social and cultural milieu in which he worked.[3] In moving beyond a stifling preoccupation with the cult of *sensibilité*, Barker proposes instead to focus on what she calls the "ethics and aesthetics of sentiment," applying (though not explicitly acknowledging it) the approach of ethical criticism to analyzing a form of narrative art that could not escape its own theatricality.[4] Seen in this post-modernist light, she argues that Greuze's work served as a "technology for the formation of new models of subjectivity...not...reflecting some pre-existing middle-class identity so much as itself constituting such an identity in terms of new concepts of 'family', 'nation', and so on" (pp. 12-13). As a result, Barker sees Greuze as a moral reformer who strove to achieve in the aesthetic domain developments more broadly discernible in eighteenth-century French literature and the law.[5]

Part one, "Greuze and the Salon, 1755-1769," examines Greuze's works during his rise to popularity. In her first chapter, Barker analyzes the large tableau entitled *Un Père de famille qui lit la Bible*, a sentimentalized genre painting that brought the young artist great acclaim when he debuted at the Salon in Paris in 1755. Inspired by the Flemish school, this domestic scene of paternalistic tutelage in the bosom of a modestly well-off rural family evinced a vision of virtuous human nature in accord with contemporary moral theories about "sentiment intérieur" (p. 28). As such, its depiction of religion and family in a romanticized countryside offered a chiding critique of *mondain* high society, motifs found in both pastoral poetry and other artistic works of the time, most notably those of Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin. This ideological program became even more explicit in Greuze's 1761 painting of a marriage agreement, *L'Accordée de village*, which forms the subject of chapter two. Commissioned by the powerful marquis de Marigny, this immensely popular painting at the time offered, Barker argues, a utopian vision of a distinctly Rousseauian enlightened social order that echoed both Physiocratic ideas as well as reclaimed France's moral superiority following the military setbacks to the English during the Seven Years War.

The next two chapters round out Greuze's treatment of the virtuous peasant family in idealized images of the father and mother. His 1763 *La Piété filiale* was an ambitious if heavily criticized tableau that addressed, according to Barker, widely expressed concerns about the decline of respect and lack of care for the aged in Old Regime society. His *La Mère bien-aimée*, painted for but not displayed at the Salon of 1769, harked back to a time when Greuze's commissions began to dry up. Indeed, as his popularity faded, so Greuze brought in erotic elements in works such as *La Mère bien-aimée*, steeped as it is in fecund sexuality. Yet while acknowledging this shift, Barker continues to emphasize the themes of natural virtue and domestic bliss in this depiction of the beloved (if frequently with-child) mother. Indeed, this vision of essentialized femininity became further reinforced through association with Greuze's paintings of cherubic children and sketches of wet-nurses and mothers who failed to do their breast-feeding duty.[6] Yet the taste-makers of the Salons and the moneyed public that bought works displayed there soon repudiated the cloying moralizing of Greuze's domestic *mises-en-scène*, though this sort of conventional prudery underwent a revival of sorts in the early 1790s during the Jacobin ascendancy.[7]

Part two examines Greuze's oeuvre as it rose and then fell in popularity during the 1770s in relation to visual creations by his contemporaries. It might have helped if Barker went more into the reasons for Greuze's rejection as a history painter, a genre that critics considered nobler if not more manly. Did Greuze's reputation in depicting domestic, feminized melodramas run afoul of the gender differences

that informed these aesthetic hierarchies? Indeed, Fragonard, a painter who might be called the “anti-Greuze,” achieved his acclaim precisely in transforming these domestic melodramas into naughty soft-porn not dissimilar to today’s scandalous riff on the soaps, “Desperate Housewives.” In chapter five, Barker explores Fragonard’s parodies of Greuze’s domestic scenes, such as *L’Heureuse fécondité* which became popularized in a series of prints by Nicolas Delaunay (1739-92), arguing that they represented a reassertion of aristocratic courtly values. Yet a case could be made that Greuze himself later also subverted the ideal of the harmonious patriarchal family in the portraits of naughty nymphettes that he painted late in his career.[8] The brief rise after 1775 of a school of Greuze imitators, such as Étienne Aubry (1745-81) and Nicolas-Bernard Lépicier (1735-84), wrung every last drop of sentimentality they could from a genre of painting that critics at the time likened to a form of comedy.

While acknowledging this shift, Barker argues that these works continued to resonate in a positive fashion with the broader viewing public. Indeed, Greuzian moral painting reached its height in the Salon of 1777 when it took up themes of social injustice and economic inequality in pictures depicting acts of civic-minded charity or *bienfaisance*. Barker surveys a number of works depicting the poor and what people of means could do to alleviate the plight of the worthy ones and not encourage the immoral tendencies of the reprobate ones. This was art that sought to slake the consciences of the rich as they dispensed charity that affirmed their own social and moral superiority. Rather than encourage in viewers new forms of truly reformist thinking, these paintings stoked a shallow self-congratulatory complacency. So much for new forms of inner subjectivity, it seems. A kind of moral exhaustion set in by the Salon of 1779 signaled by both the revival of history painting and the lurid sensationalism found in scenes of domestic conflict found, for example, in Greuze’s *Le Fils puni* and *La Malédiction paternelle*. It appeared as if sentimental painting could only survive by subverting its very own norms through its depictions of cruel parents, ungrateful children and pregnant young girls. The painting of sentiment reached its last gasp in a series of tableaux by Pierre-Alexandre Wille (1748-1821) in the early to mid-1780s, equally noteworthy for their utter banality and the near lack of attention critics paid to them as they gushed instead over the new heroic neo-classical history paintings, such as David’s *The Oath of the Horatii*. [9]

In her close, sensitive reading of all these visual works, Barker relies primarily on the writings of critics at the time. These writers ranged from the hack Abbé de La Porte and the agronomist Duhamel du Monceau to the celebrated philosophe Denis Diderot, among others. Whether these views vouchsafe what less outspoken viewers in the public thought about these art works remains an open question, however. Barker often seeks to discern a higher level of public consensus over what such art meant at a given moment than is perhaps warranted; indeed, it was just as likely that widely different views actually co-existed. What some commentators saw as idealized views of humanity untainted by the corruptions of the royal court and incipient capitalism, others scorned as cheap, melodramatic sentimentality, much as opinions today diverge sharply on the works of Thomas Kincade, the “Painter of Light.” More sustained discussion of the politics and patronage dynamics of the Salon in particular and the Paris art market in general might better situate both the initial appeal of Greuze’s work beyond its obvious moralizing messages as well as account for its eventual fall from favor in the eyes of French taste-makers. Just who were these people? What motivated their collecting and critiquing of art from professional painters such as Greuze? Where did they display this art? What other kinds of works could be found at these exhibits? How do Greuze’s paintings fit into this evolving ensemble over time? Could contemporary theories about the psychology and science of sentiment tell us more about how such works of art were supposed to operate on the viewer? [10] With its sumptuous plates and many illustrations, Barker’s excellent book encourages these and other questions because it joins art history with a smart study of Enlightenment culture and intellectual trends. [11] In short, it amply rewards its readers by taking Rococo art seriously and on its own terms.

NOTES

[1] Michael Baxandall's *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) provided a theoretical framework for bridging the divide between image and viewer for art of this period, which inspired, among others, Anne Derbes, *Picturing the Passion in Late Medieval Italy: Narrative Painting, Franciscan Ideologies, and the Levant* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1996) and Mitchell B. Merback, *The Thief, the Cross, and the Wheel: Pain and the Spectacle of Punishment in Medieval and Renaissance Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). For a recent analysis of the ideological intents of the soaps, see Louise Spence, *Watching Daytime Soap Operas: The Power of Pleasure* (Wesleyan, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2005).

[2] Anita Brookner, *Greuze: The Rise and Fall of an Eighteenth-Century Phenomenon* (London: Elek, 1972) and Norman Bryson, *Word and Image: French Painting of the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), especially chapter five.

[3] Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholding in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) and Thomas E. Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985).

[4] See, for example, the selection of essays in Jerrold Levinson, ed., *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Not that ethical criticism lacks its own critics; for this debate, see the exchange over charges of "autonomism, cognitive triviality, and anti-consequentialism" between Richard A. Posner, "Against Ethical Criticism," *Philosophy and Literature* 21 (1997):1-27 and Noël Carroll "Art and Ethical Criticism: An Overview of Recent Directions of Research," *Ethics* 110 (2000):350-86.

[5] Sarah Maza, *The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie: An Essay on the Social Imaginary, 1750-1850* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003) and Sarah Hanley, "Social Sites of Political Practice in France: Lawsuits, Civil Rights, and the Separation of Powers in Domestic and State Government, 1500-1800," *The American Historical Review* 102.1 (1997):27-52.

[6] On the business of wet nursing, see George Sussman, *Selling Mother's Milk: The Wet-Nursing Business in France, 1715-1814* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1982).

[7] See Sara E. Melzer and Leslie W. Rabine, eds., *Rebel Daughters: Women and the French Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) and the works discussed in Karen Offen, "The New Sexual Politics of French Revolutionary Historiography," *French Historical Studies* 16.4 (1990):909-22 for more on this general subject.

[8] See, for example, Erica Rand, "Diderot and Girl-Group Erotics," *Eighteenth-Century Studies, Special Issue: New Voices/New Visions* 25.4 (1992):495-516.

[9] See Philippe Bourdin and Gérard Loubinoux, eds., *La Scène Bâtarde: entre Lumières et romantisme* (Clermont-Ferrand: Presses Universitaires Blaise-Pascal, 2004) for recent views on this important transition.

[10] Late Enlightenment thinkers linked sentiment with reason to forge a distinctive new epistemology and scientific methodology in the late Old Regime. See Jessica Riskin, *Science in the Age of Sensibility: The Sentimental Empiricists of the French Enlightenment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

[11] For a broader application of this approach, see Richard Helgerson, *Adulterous Alliances: Home, State, and History in Early Modern European Drama and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

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