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Stephanie O'Rourke, *Art, Science, and the Body in Early Romanticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. xi + 205 pp. Notes, figures, bibliography, index. \$99.00 U.S./£75.00 (cl). ISBN 9781316519028. \$29.99 U.S./£22.99 (eb). ISBN 9781009004510.

Review essay by Kevin Chua, Texas Tech University

Newcomers can be forgiven for thinking that art and science have always been two disconnected academic disciplines. For C. P. Snow, art (in his case literature) and science were locked in a war of mutual incomprehension.[1] Snow's lament can be said to underlie the field of "art and science," one rooted in the separate disciplinary categories of "art" and "science." While there have been scholars who have traversed that founding gap [2], to my mind, it was Bruno Latour's "thick description" of what transpired in the laboratory that changed the para-disciplinary gambit.[3] Art historians began to find analogies of the dynamic continuum between artistic intention and artwork reception in scientific practice. The ground was laid for not art-and-science but what I call "art-science" studies—writing that took, as one of its tasks, the dissolution of the very boundary that cleaved art from science.[4]

Stephanie O'Rourke's *Art, Science, and the Body in Early Romanticism* falls squarely within this new brand of art-science scholarship. For this reader, the book's greatest achievement lies in its robust integration of these two seemingly disconnected fields. For the first time, the book brings Social (or New Formalist) Art History—with its attendant rigors of looking and thinking of the formal properties of works of art as emerging out of their social contexts—into serious conversation with Science Studies, represented, for her, by the work of Steven Shapin, Simon Schaffer, and Lorraine Daston.[5] In O'Rourke's capacious definition, encompassing what was in the early-nineteenth century considered "natural history" and "natural philosophy," science is "the general theoretical and academic pursuit of knowledge rather than the empirical study of natural phenomena" (p. 11).

But what exactly counted as knowledge wasn't so clear in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[6] What makes her three artists—Louthembourg, Fuseli, and Girodet—potent case studies is that all of them had a foot in popular science, and such science problematized knowledge as a category. Louthembourg more than dabbled in mesmerism, Fuseli plumbed the depths of physiognomy, while Girodet was fascinated by electricity. Each of these phenomena wavered between science and pseudo-science, "[straddling] the boundaries of earnest academic study and pure recreation, boundaries that were not yet fully established or enforced" (p. 4). Taking these fugitive social phenomena seriously allows O'Rourke not to read the science (or art) from the point of view of the legitimizing academy, scientific or artistic. Central to such popular science was the way the body, that crucial medium of knowledge, moved within—at times accommodating, at times resisting—such public spaces. Yet in opening her investigation to popular science, O'Rourke is not simply pluralizing. Rather, it is in these para- or pseudo-sciences that we can best see the pressures put on empiricism, on fact production as such. In O'Rourke's brand of art-science scholarship, science needs its uptake by culture in order to gain

traction, to even appear as science. She's thus less interested in what truth was, than in the conditions of knowledge, and the variegated ways in which knowledge was produced and circulated. Moving beyond a simple determination of true/false with regard to mesmerism, physiognomy, or electricity, she considers these phenomena as posing problems for the definition of science from the get go.[7]

One flank that she leaves relatively exposed, however, is that of religion, especially esoteric religion, superstition, and the occult. This mostly applies to Louthembourg and Fuseli.[8] Although she cites scholarship that pays attention to the “the spread of occultist heterodoxy,”[9] there remains the nagging assumption in her book that religion or the spiritual does not count as knowledge.[10] O'Rourke could have pointed out that the emergence of various heterodoxies and spiritualisms was part of a revival of religion in the eighteenth century, as part of secularism.[11] Within anthropology, new studies have shown the efficacy of esotericism, spiritualism, or magic.[12] Some of her images (e.g., the Mesmer print on p. 28) tap into an older vein of iconoclastic, anti-Catholic imagery, which itself attempted to replace false beliefs with true ones, but risked constant reversal. Does such reversal undermine, or shore up, knowledge?

Insofar as her book involves spectacles and artworks that push the limits of credulity, it could have benefited from an engagement with belief. Belief may explain, for example, why people continued their interest in mesmerism long after it had been discredited (p. 24). We often think of belief as occurring after a process of looking and experimentation. Here it functions like conviction—a confirmation of prior, inductive knowing. But what if belief is at the beginning of the process—what if perception *requires* belief?[13] Though her discussions of scientific spectacles are generally probing, she tends to demystify (pp. 27-29, pp. 130-33). Her stronger discussions, in contrast, show an awareness that illusion, trickery, and magic had diverse effects. The decades-long shift she tracks from the fall of empirical, bodily knowledge to the rise of mechanical objectivity may have been concurrent with an uptick of belief across art and science. Another way of saying this is that truth and belief should have been entwined, rather than oppositional, in her book.

One can find the book's strengths—and limitations—in her reading of a 1794 print by Helman after Monnet of the execution of Louis XVI, which O'Rourke uses to demonstrate that the scene is “a moment not of action but of belated display” (p. 168), and the “non-synchronicity of the guillotine with the perceptual capacities of the human body” (p. 166). In the print, an executioner holds up the king's severed head to the crowd below, and O'Rourke rightly notes the strange paralleling of the gestures of the audience with the executioner/guillotine, which she argues is evidence of a form of virtual, spectatorial participation. With its almost scientific display of the king's head, the print wants to finalize the execution, by showing its assent by the crowd. But what is truth or knowledge in a situation like this? The participants' raised arms curiously recall idol worship, and raises the iconoclastic paradox whereby the thing being destroyed is simultaneously the thing venerated. Is the king still being idolized? And what about the fact that the executioner's pose resembles Perseus, triumphantly holding up Medusa's severed head? As Neil Hertz has famously argued, the Medusa fantasy was called up by hysterical men like Victor Hugo and Maxime du Camp, in moments of extreme pressure.[14] But the Medusa image held contradictory psycho-sexual associations, alternating between threat (by castration) and comfort (as fetish or substitute). Was this print, then, simply affirming the power of the Revolutionaries, against the political order they had just overthrown? Or were they trying—desperately, but also

brilliantly—to figure or appropriate, via symbols, the absent center and origin of politics? When the Jacobins mistakenly appropriated the historically-incorrect, drooping Phrygian cap, it allowed them to all-the-more potently perform a psychosexual magic trick on its viewers, convincing enemies of their own phallic detumescence. Rather than simply furthering their cause with science, the Revolutionaries deployed belief *as* epistemology, as much as they traded in the irrational. Demolishing the foundations of the political order required finding suitable replacements—fetishes—for it. Better to anticipate (control) one’s reversals.

Since the 1960s, we’ve been exiting a period in which we harbored thoughts of reason’s dominance in the human mind. Reason and vision had always been correlated, at least since the seventeenth century (call this empiricism). But what is this new landscape we are entering by which rational vision takes its place beside other modes of being—various, diverse ways of inhabiting the world? O’Rourke’s beautifully written, crisply argued book begins to ask this question.

NOTES

[1] C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959).

[2] In my view, Barbara Maria Stafford’s scholarship, though pioneering and wide-ranging, tends toward intellectual history, and largely does not consider the material conditions of scientific production. See, for e.g., Barbara Maria Stafford, *Body Criticism: Imaging the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1991).

[3] Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, trans. Alan Sheridan and John Law (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988). “Thick description” I borrow from Clifford Geertz; see Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3-30.

[4] An older art and science scholarship saw art as illustrating scientific ideas, and typically posited a one-way relationship from science to art. E.g. E. H. Gombrich and Didier Eribon, *Looking for Answers: Conversations on Art and Science* (New York: Abrams, 1993). Such “science of art” writing has been dominated by optical theory, e.g. Martin Kemp, *The Science of Art: Optical Themes in Western Art from Brunelleschi to Seurat* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

[5] I prefer “New Formalism” to “Post-Formalism” to describe the method of tracking formal properties of works of art in relation to social context (or the two-way relationship between art and social context), as Post-Formalism implies that we are somehow beyond formalism. Science Studies may be characterized as a field that takes the material conditions of the production of scientific knowledge seriously. See for example, *The Science Studies Reader*, ed. Mario Biagioli (New York: Routledge, 1999).

[6] I would say that art-science studies is interested in the epistemological conditions and limits of art and science, whereas art-and-science studies is not. Art-and-science studies tend to see knowledge as only belonging to, or produced by, science.

[7] O'Rourke expansively defines empiricism as “a framework that informed a diverse array of scientific practices rather than with the rhetorical or theoretical elaboration of empiricism within philosophical texts” (p. 13). The Royal Society of London’s motto—*Nullius in verba*, “on the word of no one”—placed emphasis on direct observation and experimentation over received authority, crucially launching science as an investigatory practice. Her approach thus links up with art histories that not only tackle the plural range of artistic practices that fall outside of academic theory and instruction, but that rethinks *practice* as such. See for example, Joseph Leo Koerner, “The Extensionless Point of Practice,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 24 (Autumn 1993): 5-6; Charlotte Guichard, *Les Amateurs d'art à Paris aux XVIIIe siècle* (Seysssel: Champ Vallon, 2008); David Pullins, “Techniques of the Body: Viewing the Arts and Métiers of France from the Workshop of Nicolas I and Nicolas II de Larmessin,” *Oxford Art Journal* 37/2 (2014): 135-55; and, Rachael Z. DeLue, ed., *Picturing*, vol. 1 Terra Foundation Essays (Chicago: Terra Foundation for American Art, 2016). For contemporary art, see Marcus Boon and Gabriel Levine, eds., *Practice* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2018).

[8] For example, she points out the language of occultism in responses to Louthembourg’s work (p. 36).

[9] “In recent decades, scholars have written important counter-histories of the Enlightenment that foreground its ‘darker side,’ drawing attention to [...] the spread of occultist heterodoxy and the persistent cultural authority of extreme physical and affective states that are in seeming opposition to the dispassionate authority of reason” (19n p. 185).

[10] With regard to esoteric religion, for instance, what from reason’s point of view appears irrational or esoteric, may have a logic all of its own. For esotericism, see Antoine Faivre, *Esotericism: A Concise History*, trans. Christine Rhone (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010); and, Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[11] The task of much recent scholarship on Enlightenment secularism has been to deconstruct the religious/secular opposition. See, for instance, Jonathan Sheehan, “Enlightenment, Religion, and the Enigma of Secularization: A Review Essay,” *The American Historical Review* 108/4 (October 2003): 1061-1080; and, David Sorkin, *The Religious Enlightenment: Protestants, Jews, and Catholics from London to Vienna* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). To my mind, there are no good examples of secularism in eighteenth- and early nineteenth- century art history.

[12] For example, Graham M. Jones, *Magic’s Reason: An Anthropology of Analogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); Gustavo Benavides, “Magic, Religion, Materiality,” *Historical Reflections/Réflexions historiques* 23/3 (Fall 1997): 301-330; and, Michael Taussig, “Viscerality, Faith, and Skepticism: Another Theory of Magic,” in *In Near Ruins: Cultural Theory at the End of the Century*, ed. Nicholas B. Dirks (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

[13] As Pascal Boyer has written, “*belief*, far from being a simple matter of receiving and accepting information, requires complex cognitive processes, some of which can be illuminated by meticulous ethnographic investigation” (p. 349). Pascal Boyer, “Why ‘Belief’ is Hard Work:

Implications of Tanya Luhrmann's *When God Talks Back*," *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3 (2013): 349-57.

[14] The following discussion draws from Neil Hertz, "Medusa's Head: Male Hysteria Under Political Pressure," *Representations* 4 (Autumn 1983): 27-54.

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