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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 Nina Amstutz, University of Oregon

Stephanie O'Rourke's *Art, Science, and the Body in Early Romanticism* orbits around a crisis in the Enlightenment construction of knowledge, which had privileged empirical observation for almost two centuries. With the rise of the Romantic movement, scientists became increasingly preoccupied with phenomena beyond human perception, which brought the limitations of the body as a sensing apparatus into focus and raised questions regarding the reliability of direct observation. What scholars in earlier decades interpreted as a retreat from Enlightenment methods of scientific inquiry, or a descent into the esoteric and mystical, were in fact serious efforts to grapple with phenomena that could no longer be explained by the tools championed by empiricists. Romantic science, in other words, sought to augment direct observation with subjective and speculative methods, not as a straightforward rejection of empiricism but rather as a means of accounting for the most mysterious dimensions of experience and the world. In her book, O'Rourke identifies an attendant crisis of representation in the visual arts, particularly surrounding the male nude, which likewise cannot be fully accounted for by traditional paradigms of Romanticism that foreground interiority, imagination, and the irrational, or by more recent approaches that focus on sociopolitical and psychosexual transformations, above all the collapse of a heroic ideal of masculinity in the face of revolutionary trauma. O'Rourke's working definition of Romanticism builds on the scholarship of recent literary historians, who suggest that what binds the movement is "a fundamental realignment in the relationship between representation, sensory experience, and a stable, externally verifiable reality" (p. 10). She extends this approach to the visual arts, and herein lies her contribution to the scholarship on early Romantic painting in Europe.

In the first three chapters, O'Rourke builds her argument around three artists from different national contexts—de Louthembourg, Fuseli, and Girodet—who all maintained a deeply personal and quasi-professional engagement with contemporary scientific discourses, namely animal magnetism, physiognomy, and electricity. The last chapter brings together works from all three artists that indirectly engage with the guillotine and the questions it raised about the stability of the mind/body continuum. The connections O'Rourke draws between works of art and scientific discourses are not premised on these artists deliberately illustrating a particular scientific principle, i.e., influence is not what is at stake in her project. Collectively, the artists' collaborations with prominent scientists demonstrate that art and science were "deeply intertwined cultural practices" in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (p. 2), with inherently shared concerns, such as the nature of vision and sensation, and their relationship to truth. The coherence O'Rourke discovers within Fuseli, Girodet, and de Louthembourg's work is not stylistic, thematic, or geographic, moreover, but rather lies in larger conditions of representation, which are not limited to the visual arts. Following a variety of scholars working

on representation in the history of science, O'Rourke suggests that the observational practices of artists and scientists often intersect, and in the early Romantic moment, that intersection was characterized by "a crisis over the evidentiary status of human experience itself" (p. 5).

This moment of crisis in the authority of direct observation, O'Rourke suggests, coincides with what Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison have described as the emergence of a new understanding of scientific objectivity. Central to this concept of objectivity was the idea that the scientist must practice "self-discipline, self-restraint, self-abnegation, self-annihilation, and a multitude of other techniques of self-imposed selflessness," in order to mitigate the contaminating influence of subjective experience.[1] In other words, as the sensing body was deemed insufficient to produce accurate and comprehensive accounts of existing phenomena, so too was it deemed increasingly important to distance the body of the scientist from the experiment as much as possible.

Noteworthy in O'Rourke's approach is how the biography of each artist and scientist, namely their experience, is so tightly woven through the text that it cannot be disentangled from the epistemic problems she explores in their work. O'Rourke does not shy away from interpreting de Louthembourg's, Fuseli's, and Girodet's paintings against their life stories, making a significant departure from the social history of art that characterized much of the study of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century art, especially British art, for decades, and which decentered the artist in favor of larger systems of power, such as class, gender, and race, as the basis of interpretation. But biography does more than offer an interpretive lens through which to understand the pivotal shifts in the artist-scientists' careers. Methodologically, O'Rourke implicitly models what literary historians have identified as a fluidity among autobiographical, creative, and scientific writing in the late eighteenth century, where the knowing and perceiving subject was self-consciously positioned at the center of the work.[2] In other words, O'Rourke's prose captures the extent to which subjectivity was at the heart of these artists' heterodox practices, even as the self was increasingly viewed as at odds with the pursuit of knowledge. This tension is beautifully expressed through the often anecdotal and at times outright gossipy stories that O'Rourke narrates to build up to her provocative visual analyses. In chapter two, for instance, O'Rourke narrates Fuseli's struggle with the central premise of physiognomy, namely that "the body can present visible, reliable information about itself" (p. 63), through the artist's fraught friendship with Lavater. The two were in many ways kindred spirits, growing up together in Switzerland and collaborating on Lavater's decades-long investigation into physiognomy. Fuseli's deeply expressive illustrations for Lavater's publications on the subject (along with his paintings of the human body more broadly), document a personal struggle as much as they speak to the epistemic status of images, belying the suppression of the perceiving subject that would come to be expected of "objective" scientific illustrations.

The book's contributions to the scholarship on the featured artists are many, perhaps none greater than to Girodet, whose characteristic sfumato O'Rourke reimagines as less a reaction against David's linear neoclassicism and more as an expression of the porousness of bodies, supported by the discovery of electricity and the spectacular public demonstrations of its transmission. As a historian of landscape painting, though, I found the chapter on de Louthembourg particularly engaging. The scholarship on de Louthembourg has foremost focused on his sensational and illusory entertainments, most famously the Eidophusikon, which in turn has led scholars to locate the artist's legacy outside the serious sphere of academic art and in relation to popular visual

spectacles. O'Rourke builds on this work, in that the comradery she charts between Mesmer's and de Louthenberg's life trajectories of exile, showmanship, and disrepute, serves as a means for exploring the shared lineage between spectacles of art and science, suspended between truth and fiction. But she also goes further, arguing that it is precisely in the tension between illusion and reality that the wider significance of de Louthenberg's work resides for the history of art. Rather than "simply invigorat[ing] the conventions of landscape painting," his formal devices "dramatized several of the problems motivating the popular controversies animal magnetism had aroused across Western Europe" (p. 24). These problems relate to the immaterial forces at work in the world and our limited ability to perceive them. In *The Falls of the Rhine at Schaffhausen* (1788), for example, O'Rourke suggests that de Louthenberg set aside the illusory stage effects for which his landscapes had become known. In response to the criticism of his work as all smoke and mirrors, he instead sought to base his composition on the direct observation of nature. Yet aspects of de Louthenberg's immaterial atmospheric effects were so difficult to decipher that his attempt at naturalism was compromised by the demands of viewership, exceeding the sensory capabilities of the human observer.

O'Rourke aligns de Louthenberg's approach to landscape painting with science by characterizing these effects as "mesmeric," but she does not suggest that they directly illustrate mesmerism. Rather, it is through the landscape's "permeable boundaries between the material and immaterial" that they speak to the crisis of knowledge of their day (p. 40). O'Rourke supports this insight through critical responses to de Louthenberg's landscapes and through her own visual analysis, which attempts to discern the fluid formal details of the work. Her descriptive language surrounding *The Falls*, along with *Defeat of the Spanish Armada* (1796) recuperates the tension in the artist's landscapes between form and formlessness, between the materiality of paint and the pursuit of immaterial effects. O'Rourke's analysis expands our understanding of de Louthenberg's work beyond what might be explained through the technical possibilities opened up by watercolor and plein air sketching in the late eighteenth century, or by the popular aesthetic category of the sublime, and situates his experimentation with landscape at the center of a broader epistemological crisis.

My last reflection is pedagogic. As an educator, I am impressed with how teachable O'Rourke's book is, in its scope, its interdisciplinarity, its writing style, as a portrait of an age, and through its sustained relevance to today. Each chapter focuses on a different scientific discourse and a different artist's engagement with that discourse, which collectively map out a variety of historical approaches to the mind, the body, and their intersection with issues of representation. Her case studies also illuminate the transnational networks of exchange that characterized scientific and artistic experimentation at the turn of the nineteenth century. O'Rourke ventures relatively deep into the weeds in her discussion of the history of science, but not in a way that is inaccessible and always with enough intrigue and curiosity to engage students from diverse majors and at different levels. Her scientific explanations are interwoven with engaging life stories that foreground the embeddedness of all discourses, scientific or otherwise, in human relationships. And while the science itself feels remote and there is a strangeness to the public's continued receptiveness to discredited theories, it is through these episodes that the lessons of history speak most eloquently to the present. Just as "direct experience" was no longer "giving people unambiguous access to scientific knowledge," and "something appeared to be faltering or shifting in the mechanisms by which people determined and agreed upon 'real truth'" (p. 30), we are faced with a similar crisis in the authority of knowledge today, one in which misinformation

is rampant and so called alternative facts have gained widespread traction. In *Art, Science, and the Body*, O'Rourke debuts as equal parts erudite scholar and exceptional storyteller, which is an all-too-rare gift in academic prose.

NOTES

[1] Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), 203.

[2] See Bernhard Helmut Kuhn, *Autobiography and Natural Science in the Age of Romanticism: Rousseau, Goethe, Thoreau* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009); Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives: Reading Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

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