

H-France Forum
Volume 18 (2023), Issue 6, #5

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.

Author's Response by Stephanie O'Rourke, University of St. Andrews

What kinds of knowledge can the body furnish in a given context? This is not necessarily an art historical question, although art history is exceptionally well placed to answer it. It has certainly been the guiding question of my book. And how is art historical knowledge itself produced? In many ways, of course, but perhaps above all through engaging with the insights and research of other scholars. It is an enormous pleasure to have this book read by such rigorous and generous thinkers, whose scholarship has played a meaningful role in my own work. They have offered a series of vital insights addressing both the historically specific material discussed as well as broader methodological concerns.

As Muriel Adrien observes, the protagonists of my book (Anne-Louis Girodet, Henry Fuseli, and Philippe de Loutherbourg) were decidedly not representative of mainstream artistic currents, at least within Europe's art academies. On the other hand, several of the formal effects they employed—especially effects of obscurity, indeterminacy, intense psychic and physical states, and corporeal distortion—are recurrent in the history of art. This raises larger questions for our discipline about exemplarity and its limits. As Nina Amstutz points out, my case studies are deeply invested in the biographical specificities of each artist. In the case of the Fuseli, Girodet, and de Loutherbourg, I make much of the fact that each artist enjoyed considerable popular success, at least for a time: clearly there was something about their art that tapped into collectively experienced phenomena. But their artworks also did things that were regarded as unacceptable by their respective art academies and occasionally also by their publics. Here, the limit-case can be valuable on its own terms. It enables us to trace the shifting boundary between what counts as legitimate or illegitimate within a historical formation. Sarah Gould notes that William Blake might have been a consequential actor in the epistemological transformation I explore in the book; a noted critic of Newtonian physics, Blake bore no allegiance to the protocols of Enlightenment empiricism. Gould's comment is an instructive one, especially because the field tends to treat Blake as a singular figure. Integrating Blake in larger histories can do much to reveal the extent to which radicalism and heterodoxy permeated Europe's art worlds during a period in which we occasionally overestimate the regulatory authority of academic institutions.[1] In pursuit of historical rigor, my book hews closely to the particularities of a handful of protagonists. Ultimately, though, I would assert that any artwork from this period can be understood to have epistemological stakes to the extent that it employed pictorial effects which queried or ran against the grain of self evidence.

Self evidence (the book's original, intended title) names the evidentiary authority of the human body, its ability to produce and authenticate knowledge according to the parameters of eighteenth-century empiricism.[2] Although paintings of actual human bodies supply the most

compressed exploration of self evidence, the concept requires us to think expansively about the epistemological stakes of picturing more generally.[3] Amstutz comments extensively on the status of landscape within this historical configuration. Her own scholarship on Caspar David Friedrich has modelled how we might think about landscape as and in relation to the human body.[4] Sarah Gould's work on pollution in the landscapes of J.M.W. Turner likewise points towards the importance of thinking about landscape and the body in climatological terms.[5] While I have focused on large-scale oil paintings of landscape, there is a much larger corpus of watercolors that deserves close attention. Watercolor is a medium that would also enable us to contend more comprehensively with the role of women artists within this history. Although the parameters of self evidence designated the white male body as the ultimate source of authority, we know that in private women routinely participated in the production of scientific knowledge at the turn of the nineteenth century.[6] The field is likewise coming to terms with the sheer profusion of professional women artists during the same period.[7] Who would have been better equipped to diagnose the limitations and shortcomings of self evidence than a group whose bodies were overwhelmingly excluded from that category? The question deserves sustained scholarly attention going forward.

Scientific knowledge was often regarded as contiguous with Christian belief yet, as Kevin Chua insightfully remarks, religion and religious knowledge do not have a significant place in the book. In part, this discloses my participation in the discipline's larger marginalization of religion within influential traditions of modernist art history and art criticism as diagnosed by, among others, Thomas Crow and despite prominent attempts since the early 2000s to bring the return of religion into art history.[8] Whether or not it is possible to treat religion and science as separable today, it certainly was not possible to do so at the turn of the nineteenth century.[9] As I mention (albeit briefly), mesmerism was intensely enmeshed with a number of spiritualist movements. More to the point, Girodet and de Louthembourg were both practicing Free Masons and Fuseli was an ordained minister in the reformist Zwinglian church in Switzerland. De Louthembourg, Blake, John Flaxman, and the important engraver William Sharp were among the founding members of the original Theosophical Society in London, which was dedicated to translating the writings of the Christian theologian and mystic Emmanuel Swedenborg.[10] The turn of the nineteenth century also witnessed the ascent of millenarianism, in which Blake was likewise an enthusiastic participant.

While there is much that could be said about the interrelation of science and religion in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Europe, I will limit my observations to one particularly interesting source of controversy: enthusiasm. Since at least the seventeenth century, religious revivalism was the foremost subject of critiques of "enthusiasm," defined as a disproportionate and uncontrolled form of responsiveness.[11] In his 1755 *A Dissertation on Enthusiasm*, Thomas Green described Methodists experiencing "frightful screamings, yellings, tremblings, swoonings, convulsions" and other physically extreme states.[12] It was a form of responsiveness that was not only decidedly at odds with the procedures of empirical knowledge production but also one that resembled in no small measure the experiences of the body when subjected to experiments in electricity and mesmerism. As Michael Heyd has argued, enthusiasm was explicitly linked with experimental science at the time. Some alleged that scientific demonstrations triggered enthusiasm due to their sensational effects whereas others believed that demonstrations served to discourage enthusiasm through rational exposition. Enthusiasm was a form of embodied responsiveness that was understood to transit between religious and scientific settings and in

each case it was regarded as a potential threat to existing power structures. It seems likely that enthusiasm would have surfaced in discussions of art exhibitions during the same period, although research into this remains to be done.

Any project that interrogates the history of perception summons questions about the status of perception in the narration of that history. As Adrien shrewdly observes, my own use of formal analysis presumes that a perceptual encounter with an artwork can reveal historical truths, or at least furnish workable data points along the way. The end of self evidence did not bring about a total collapse in the evidentiary power of sensory experience; instead, it signalled the termination of sensory experience as the ultimate authenticator of universal truths. What remained was functional but intensely constrained and provisional, requiring verification through quantification, instruments, and other externalized protocols associated with what Lorraine Daston and Peter Gallison famously defined as “objectivity.”[13] Within the discipline of art history, visual analysis is most effective when constellated with other kinds of information: published reviews, artists’ writings, literature, and so on. Amstutz’s comments about “storytelling” are productive in this regard. To the extent that my visual analysis persuades, this is a product of its embeddedness within a larger set of stories that can be told.

Several of the reviewers commented on the present-day status of truth. When this book was initially drafted, it was already uncontroversial to remark that many Western democracies were experiencing a crisis in the collective production of knowledge—a fracturing of social consensus about what is “true” and how such truths are arrived at. Examples of this might include the erosion of trust in conventional news sources, online misinformation campaigns, the mainstream prominence of conspiracy theories, and politicized debates about the legitimacy of certain forms of embodied experience and identity. It is a trend that, just a few years later, seems to be colonizing ever greater portions of life. In our algorithmically personalized online ecosystems, we encounter a decidedly twenty-first-century challenge to the evidentiary authority of sensory experience. Even so, some phenomena break through the isolating effects of life-by-algorithm: among them, the pervasive humidity of an unseasonable weather system, the collective shock of a summer hailstorm, and any number of other life imperilling climate irregularities. To the extent that our online world has accelerated the ecocide whose pervasive effects we are beginning to feel acutely, weather remains something we still experience physically rather than virtually.[14] The pursuit of new repositories for collective perceptual experience is a task shared between our current moment and the early nineteenth century and about which art history has much more to say.

NOTES

[1] An exciting example of this is Esther Chadwick’s forthcoming *The Radical Print: Art and Politics in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain* (London: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2024).

[2] I have borrowed and expanded this term from Simon Schaffer, “Self Evidence,” *Critical Inquiry* 18/2 (1992): 327-362.

- [3] On “picturing” as both a form of representation and an epistemic structure, see Rachel DeLue, ed., *Picturing* (Chicago: Terra Foundation for American Art, 2016).
- [4] Nina Amstutz, *Caspar David Friedrich: Nature and the Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020).
- [5] Sarah Gould, “The Polluted Textures of J.M.W. Turner’s Late Works,” *Victorian Network* 10 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.5283/vn.117>. See also Nicholas Robbins, “John Constable, Luke Howard, and the Aesthetics of Climate,” *The Art Bulletin* 103/2 (2021): 50-76.
- [6] See, for example, Patricia Fara, *Pandora’s Breeches: Women, Science and Power in the Enlightenment* (London: Pimlico, 2004).
- [7] Two major recent books on this are Paris Spies-Gans, *A Revolution on Canvas: The Rise of Women Artists in Britain and France, 1760-1830* (London: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art) and Séverine Sofio, *Artistes femmes: La parenthèse enchantée, XVIIIe-XIXe siècles* (Paris: CNRS, 2016).
- [8] Thomas Crow, *No Idols: The Missing Theology of Art* (Sydney: Power Publications, 2017). Sally Promey, “The ‘Return’ of Religion in the Scholarship of American Art,” *The Art Bulletin* 85/3 (2003): 581-603. Hannah Williams is especially alert to this in her recent work, “Staging Belief: Immersive Encounters and the Agency of Religious Art in Eighteenth-Century Paris,” in *The Agency of Display: Objects, Framings and Parerga*, ed. Johannes Grave, Christiane Holm, Valérie Kobi, and Caroline Van Eck, 62-78 (Dresden: Sandstein Verlag, 2018).
- [9] I recommend John Fleming, *The Dark Side of the Enlightenment: Wizards, Alchemists, and Spiritual Seekers in the Age of Reason* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2013) and Alfred Gabay, *The Covert Enlightenment: Eighteenth-Century Counterculture and Its Aftermath* (West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation Publishers, 2004).
- [10] Joscelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).
- [11] Michael Heyd, *Be Sober and Reasonable: The Critique of Enthusiasm in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries* (New York: Brill, 1995).
- [12] Thomas Green, *A Dissertation on Enthusiasm; shewing The Danger of its late Increase* (London: J. Oliver, [1755]), vi.
- [13] Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 1997).
- [14] For a bracing diagnosis of this dynamic see Jonathan Crary, *Scorched Earth: Beyond the Digital Age to a Post-Capitalist World* (New York: Verso, 2022).

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