H-France Review Vol. 10 (October 2010), No. 166

Erika Naginski, *Sculpture and Enlightenment*, Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2009. 336 pp. $45.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN-10: 0892369590.

Review by Harold Mah, Queen's University, Canada.

Erika Naginski's *Sculpture and the Enlightenment* brings art historical erudition, a broad knowledge of cultural history and historiography, and an acute critical intelligence to these reconstructions of how French artists and the state, before and during the Revolution, translated Enlightenment principles into public art. Like other important intellectual and cultural histories of the period, the book seeks to show how those principles triumphed in later eighteenth-century cultural forms and institutions, but the book also offers a sophisticated deconstruction of the same view. Contrary to many studies that end up assuming a direct and uniform process of ideology at work in culture (a conclusion evident, for example, in Lynn Hunt's work on cultural history), Naginski also demonstrates that the cultural and political messages that artists and officials sought to promulgate turned out in highly significant instances to be complicated by ambiguity and contradiction, undone by historical developments, and resisted by the objects themselves..

The book opens with an examination of how Enlightenment principles came to dominate the late-eighteenth-century monarchy's cultural administration. Rejecting traditional Gothic religious symbolism and idolization of the monarchy as "'barbaric'," Enlightenment-inspired artists, art writers, and state officials proposed architecture and monuments that were meant to be secular, rational, and pedagogical--an art that would inculcate in the population a new civic culture of public virtue. From the later eighteenth century into the Revolution, these artists and officials turned to neoclassicism. Naginski shows all this at work in the plans of a 1770s royal commission to secularize and neoclassicze the royal tombs located at the abbey of Saint-Denis, a process that would remove any cultish association of the monarchy and religion and, for some, destroy the tomb altogether. The tomb's ultimate destruction by a mob of Revolutionary vandals in 1793 was entirely consistent with the secularizing and political impulses of the Enlightenment in the preceding decades. Naginski's desire to reexamine Revolutionary vandalism in fresh terms and in connection to the aims of the Enlightenment reappears later in the book.

Other chapters demonstrate the triumph of Enlightenment principles in other areas of public art and architecture. The baroque representation of death in public memorials as a "sumptuous theatre of cruelty," with suffering bodies and omnipresent skeletons and skulls, gave way by the later eighteenth century to moderate, humane, and rational representations of mortality, which often took the symbolic form of an innocuous winged boy. Enlightenment views, with the direct suggestions of Diderot, also shaped the only major royal funerary monument of the period, the 1766-77 memorial to the Dauphin and Dauphine (who died respectively in 1765 and 1767). Here public memory was directed to see not the majesty of position but a gentle, reassuring

sentimentality, the memorial showing the royal couple illustrating a favorite public virtue of the Enlightenment, "conjugal love," as the monument was entitled.

Enlightenment attempts to cultivate in the public an admiration of civic virtues by erecting statues to great men of culture and learning led to the 1780s revival and heroicization of the Baroque classicist Poussin and culminated in the Revolution's decision to turn the Church of Saint Geneviève (built beginning in 1764 to the patron saint of Paris) into a secular-pagan memorial for the heroes of the nation, the Pantheon. For its neoclassical architect Quatremère de Quincy, this building, with tombs of Enlightenment predecessors and the great men of the Revolution and statuary illustrating general virtues, constituted a materialization of the Enlightenment and the Revolution (amusingly Mirabeau was among the first to arrive in 1791 only to be later replaced by Marat). The building told a philosophical and civic story, designed to interpellate in the viewer a sense of collective, enlightened, and Revolutionary personhood: the Pantheon's "vertical thrust--linking tombs to dome, particular bodies to general personifications, the flesh and blood of the multitudes to the single, exterior colossus of Renown--rehearsed for every citizen ushered into 'the temple of the motherland' the allegorical shift from a material world of particularities to a universal personification" (p. 265).

Showing Enlightenment principles at work in sculpture and buildings, Naginski is also concerned with demonstrating that attempts to implement those principles kept running into self-generated issues--problems of how to manifest those principles in material form. The traditional communicative form of inspiring a people--high-minded oratory, with its complex rhetoric and narrative--could not be easily turned into sculpture (how, for example, to represent the "greatness" of Poussin in a frozen moment?). In its attempts to represent a universal reason and virtue, the symbolism of the new public art tended towards generalized abstract allegory that few people intuitively understood. Quatremère's Pantheon sculpture represented broad categories of accomplishment (e.g. architecture and music) and civic concepts disengaged from discernible markers of specific place, person, or event, so that, for example, "the commemoration of revolutionary heroes had nothing at all to do with the contemplation of their [actual] image" (p. 243). Sculpture, Naginski insightfully points out, was turned into "hieroglyphs" incomprehensible to the ordinary citizen.

Artists, architects and officials wanted to affix certain Enlightenment meanings to specific things, buildings, and places, while the whole time showing an anxiety about the constant slide of representation into deviant meaning, such as the endorsement of democracy morphing into the fear of the mob or the easy revision of public art into pre- or anti-Revolutionary meanings given by post-Revolutionary regimes. Naginski shows that in the midst of Revolution the repressed would return in sculpture that revived monarchical symbolism (Hercules she reminds us was a monarchical sign, long before it was a republican one), and she demonstrates that the Enlightenment's views of matter could undercut its political aims.

On this last issue, Naginski provides some of the book's most compelling discussion, which returns to the issue of Revolutionary vandalism. Here she perceptively links the destruction of old regime art and buildings to the Enlightenment's vitalist materialism, according to which matter possesses an inherent urge to develop by destroying itself. This recognition of the "alterity of matter," as she aptly puts it, seems to justify Revolutionary intentions but then opens itself as well to subsequent regimes' destruction of Revolutionary meanings attributed to public art. In other words, although she does not call it this, something like an open and constantly changing circuit of signification seems to have been started by Enlightenment materialism.

In the "Coda" of the book, nicely subtitled "The Object of Contempt," Naginski then adds a final twist. Looking again at how Enlightenment materialism defined Revolutionary hatred of the objects of the old regime, she tells us that the former's principles of "propulsion" and "dispersion" served the Revolution's intention to "obliterate the masterpiece" and "[n]eutralize culture." But she then discusses a telling anonymous print celebrating Revolutionary vandalism: looking through windows of an aristocratic building that forms background panels, we see ordinary people lifting up to throw out the house's contents, with the resulting debris piled in foreground. But here, as Naginski cogently point out, the ostensible destruction is punctuated by images in the panels of aesthetic arrest, in which the vandals holding art objects before them seem raptly appreciative of what they are about to destroy. Naginski calls this an example of Enlightenment matter's principle of "reassembly," but we might in fact think of something more conventional in art history going on: there is a suggestion here of the work of art resisting for a moment the pressures of history and ideology, which seem to freeze in the presence of aesthetic objects and to acknowledge in them an uninstrumental autonomy.

Naginski's work adds much nuance and depth to the analysis of Enlightenment and Revolutionary culture, showing both dominant tendencies at work in the public sculpture and architecture and the impediments and complications that often frustrated those tendencies or turned them into aesthetic and architectural puzzles open to other meanings. What is missing are some general overarching assessment that puts together these diverse cases and indicates what they imply for historical and cultural interpretation; did those contradictions, ambiguities, and resistances fatally undermine a political and philosophical program, for example, or were they simply ignored? Did it matter politically and culturally if architecture and art failed to be consistent to their originating aesthetic and philosophical intentions? These kinds of questions are suggested but left unanswered.

Harold Mah
Queen's University, Canada
hem@post.queensu.ca

Copyright © 2010 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172