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Hubertus Kohle and Rolf Reichardt, *Visualizing the Revolution. Politics and Pictorial Arts in Late Eighteenth-Century France*. London : Reaktion Books Ltd (distributed by the University of Chicago Press), 2008. 294 pp. 187 figures, notes, bibliography, and index. £25.00 UK, \$45.00 US (cl). ISBN-13: 978-1-86189-312-3.

Review by Philippe Bordes, Institut national d'histoire de l'art, Paris and Université Lyon 2.

The authors of this volume have taken up the challenge of arguing that the multifaceted visualization of the French Revolution by artists and artisans was an active force producing the political upheavals that characterize the period. They rely on over two decades of historical research by art historians, cultural historians, *historiens des mentalités*, and museum curators who have overturned a series of received ideas: that stylistic innovations in the decade before 1789 were more decisive than subsequent developments, that the turmoil of the times quelled creativity, and that the artistic legacy of the period is pitifully poor. It is now widely admitted that circumstantial changes in the nature of artistic ambition, practice, and consumption during the Revolution, as in so many other domains, were crucial to the advent of the institutions, values, and aspirations that still define artistic modernity.

Unlike Ronald Paulson, who in his overview of *Representations of Revolution* (1983) largely discounted French artists for being too close to the event to understand it and presumed quite improperly that “in France there was nothing of the plebeian sort [or imagery] to draw upon, and it did not occur anyone to do so”[1], Kohle and Reichardt, except for a lively discussion of British caricatures and their impact across the Channel (pp. 190–200), deal only with French imagery and with just that kind that thrives on proximity to the Revolutionary scene. The exclusive focus on France, understandable given the aim to furnish a compact study, is somewhat surprising as both authors are working in Germany and have on other occasions shown their grasp of the international scope of their subject.[2] Even a brief reminder of the impact of scenes of contemporary history by English and American artists on the French, and of the intense circulation of political prints and motifs across Europe would have been welcome. Indeed, since the notion of *transferts culturels*, constructively played out in much recent historiography[3], emerged as a means of coming to terms with the unbounded spirit of the Revolutionary period, the choice to treat French imagery in isolation seems somewhat outdated. Furthermore, it can be argued that those works of art which keep politics at bay can be more revealing and evocative of the Revolutionary moment than topical imagery: this principle distinguishes the approach of the Musée de la Révolution française in Vizille, created in the 1980s on the occasion of the bicentennial, from that of the Musée Carnavalet in Paris, whose Third Republic agenda to evoke events and actors is still upheld today.[4]

The authors base their project on the claim that art historians have been mostly concerned with high art, whereas historians have used images to supplement their text. Although on both counts there is a need for nuance, the point is to clarify an ambition to deal with “an amorphous, hybrid, multifarious artistic production, as rich in material as it is diverse, hitherto only spasmodically examined by historians, and which, on the other hand, cannot be easily encompassed within the criteria of art history” (p. 10). They further claim, in somewhat fuzzy terms, that the change in the impact of the visual imagery—“the public role of pictorial art, its societal function and its emotional content were clarified”—was “more a case of intentional restructuring rather than of artistic innovation, which was initiated verbally rather than graphically.” They discard this principle of “verbal leadership” (presumably a reference to the abundant prescriptive literature of the period as to the direction the

arts should take) and foreground a reactive empirical development, visual imagery which “constituted a quintessential medium of political culture and mass education” (p. 10). This historical construction takes for granted that the masses were attentive to the images and that these were received at face value. The demonstration is fueled by the authors’ keen awareness of pictorial tradition and their irrepressible iconographic curiosity, but on occasion it seems a reiteration of well-established views. Is it still a “hypothesis” that Revolutionary iconography “presents an intersection and connection between historical and aesthetic approaches”? Is it still necessary to hammer in that the imagery of the period demonstrates “the interpenetration of ‘high’ and ‘low’ art that was to be such a significant agent of artistic innovation in modern times” (p. 11)?

Even though Kohle and Reichardt are focused on print culture as a political medium in the public sphere, one regrets that a number of vexed questions are not raised concerning the political agency and responsibility of the printmakers with regard to commercial imperatives, and the role of other agents that were involved in producing the image, such as the draughtsman who authored the composition and the entrepreneur who financed the print. The authors rightly condemn the often narrow scope of art historical research on the period, which tends to service the ideological and social domination of high art, but exploration of imagery produced beyond the limits of the academic system raises acute problems of definition and designation. What exactly is meant by “populist art” (p. 70) when categorizing a print that some observers will find to be highly refined (fig. 52): is this term determined by style, content, context or audience? On an even more basic level, one regrets that in order to cover an impressive quantity of works—no less than 187 illustrations are fitted into 239 pages—the authors largely fail to distinguish between art and imagery, aesthetic and social factors at play. Nor is the concept of representation put to work: “The image (the model) and the actual event hardly differed from one another, so closely entwined were graphic symbolism and symbolic politics at times during the Revolution” (p. 62). Revealingly, although the agenda of an open project like this one has much in common with visual studies, there is no reference to the recent methodological approaches to analyzing images.

Notwithstanding a number of problems with the documentary apparatus^[5], this volume immediately ranks as the best available introduction in English to the political stakes of image-making during the French Revolution. In seven brisk chapters, Kohle and Reichardt indeed cover a lot of ground. They begin by evoking the importance of public festivals and celebrations, which allows them to justify their historical premises: “During the Revolution the different arts were connected and treated collectively in a richly symbolic fashion. For this reason, the most important aspect was not aesthetic quality of the ‘work of art’; the primary element was the official role and (immense) public effect of the multi-media interaction in the service of political actuality” (p. 32). They offer chapters on the desecration of the royal image, on the pressure to represent contemporary history and more generally to break down the barriers separating the academic genres, on the celebration of “martyrs of liberty”, on institutional innovations and on the imaging of the Terror, all themes familiar to specialists of the period. The last chapter is a succession of extended descriptions of elaborate prints that furnish a total vision of the Revolutionary process. The authors bring to bear on their discussion a series of recent German publications, rarely found referenced in French and English studies.^[6] It is regrettable that gender and race, central themes in current scholarship, receive only the briefest of mention (pp. 130, 154-155).

The “pictorial arts” invoked in the book’s title refer most often to prints unrelated to paintings. It has long been acknowledged that prints were often better than academic paintings at depicting and keeping pace with Revolutionary events. Etched and sometimes hand-colored images of events, along with portraits of the political and military celebrities of the day were available almost as soon as the newspaper accounts, and even as illustrative accompaniments of the accounts. Their great number confirms that contemporaries found them attractive and the interaction between images and politics was intense.

However, while the authors capture the dynamic evolution of images and are well aware of the march of the political Revolution, the historical narrative remains curiously static. Precisely because they keep changing, the images of the Revolution are more elusive and unstable than the authors care to recognize; their social and political interpretation is not simply a question of iconographic

decoding.^[7] Whereas the images are individualized and their complexity confronted, the narrative of the “radicalization of the Revolution” (pp. 160, 219) is rarely more than an outline, unaffected by the historiographic pressures that have incited each generation of scholars to rewrite its history. It was manifestly a problem for the authors to reconcile their aim to provide a reliable synthesis and the fact that the political agency of the images effectively acted itself out in micro-political contexts to which historians have devoted whole volumes. Nonetheless, the daunting profusion of visual imagery available for comment and the explanatory demands made by the iconography are well negotiated. One should consider this book as an opportune and welcome digest of the wealth of studies that have been published since the 1980s, in which the engaged intensity and extreme diversity of the images produced during the most dramatic phases of the Revolution are perfectly conveyed.

NOTES

[1] Ronald Paulson, *Representations of Revolution (1789-1820)* (New Haven, Conn., and London: Yale University Press, 1983), pp. 10, 25 (quote).

[2] This perspective characterizes, for example, Rolf Reichardt’s collaboration with Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink on the political symbolism of the Bastille prison: *Die Bastille: Symbolik und Mythos in der Revolutionsgrafik*, exhibition catalogue, Mainz, Landesmuseum, 1989 ; *Die “Bastille” : Zur Symbolgeschichte von Herrschaft und Freiheit*, (Frankfurt am Main : Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1990) ; English edition, *The Bastille : A History of a Symbol of Despotism and Freedom* (Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 1997).

[3] One of the authors, Rolf Reichardt, in collaboration with Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink, has edited a volume of studies in this vein: *Kulturtransfer im Epochenbruch Frankreich-Deutschland 1770 bis 1815*, 2 vol. (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 1997).

[4] Philippe Bordes, “Sur l’histoire et l’avenir de la collection”, *Musée de la Révolution française. Catalogue des peintures, sculptures et dessins*, Ph. Bordes et Alain Chevalier ed. (Vizille : Réunion des Musées nationaux, 1996), pp. 9-38 ; Ph. Bordes, “Die Französische Revolution im Musée Carnavalet (1866-1903) : von der historischen Erinnerung zur Kunst”, *Frankreich 1871-1914*, Gudrun Gersmann et Hubertus Kohle ed. (Stuttgart : Franz Steiner, 2002), pp. 92-98.

[5] The occasional misinterpretation of details of the images, the discrepancies in dates given in the text and in the captions to the illustrations, minor errors and problematic affirmations (as in the information relative to fig. 35, 47, 50, 52, 70, 91, 99, 103, 106, 107, 108, 134, 135, 148, 154, 158, 170) suggest the complexity of the interaction between political circumstance, textual account, iconographic program, and image-making during the Revolutionary period. The text would have benefited from a thorough editorial reading, since certain phrases read as if roughly translated from the German and the descriptive terms suffer slippage : prints are referred to as drawings (pp. 79, 85, 94), engraved medallions as medals (pp. 80, 218), and drawings as pictures (p. 142). No mention of the location of works illustrated is provided in the captions, an omission that significantly abolishes the distinction between reproduction and original, image and material object.

[6] To the bibliography can be added a suite of important publications by Claudette Hould relative to the *Tableaux historiques de la Révolution française: La Révolution par la gravure* (Vizille: Musée de la Révolution française, 2002); *La Révolution par l’écriture*, (Vizille: Musée de la Révolution française, 2005); and *La Révolution par le dessin*, (Vizille: Musée de la Révolution française, 2008). There is also a series of studies by Gerrit Walczak, *Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun. Eine Künstlerin in der Emigration 1789-1802* (Munich and Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2004); “Die Französische Revolution und die Kunstmarkt Englands. Jean-Laurent Mosnier in der Londoner Emigration”, *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 69, 2006, no. 1, pp. 37-66 ; “Low Art, Popular Imagery and Civic Commitment in the French Revolution [on the painter Jean-Jacques Hauer]”, *Art History*, 30, 2007, no. 2, pp. 247-277 ;

and a recent essay by Amy Freund, "The Legislative Body: Print Portraits of the National Assembly, 1789–1791", *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 41, no. 3, 2008, pp. 337-358.

[7] One remarkable example of interpretative method that conveys the full complexity of the social and political context is Klaus Herding, "Davids *Marat* als dernier appel à l'unité révolutionnaire", *Idea. Jahrbuch der Hamburger Kunsthalle*, 2 (1983), pp. 89-112, which inspires Kohle and Reichardt's excellent commentary on David's *Death of Marat* (pp. 168-169).

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