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Carl Goldstein, *Print Culture in Early Modern France: Abraham Bosse and the Purposes of Print*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. xvi + 221 pp. Tables, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$79.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-107-01214-1.

Review by Luc Racaut, Newcastle University.

There are few scholarly works on the printing industry that are as lucid and well-written as Goldstein's *Abraham Bosse*. This work is concerned with one master engraver who was active during the culturally significant middle decades of the seventeenth century in Paris. Bosse is famous for his frontispiece for Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651) but also for *Les Cris de Paris* (cries of Paris) that depicts the world of peddlers and petty merchants that filled the street of the French capital. Bosse, like his precursor Jacques Callot, who made a series of prints depicting the horrors of the Thirty Years' War (*Les Grandes Misères de la guerre*, 1633), was an acute observer of his time. High quality reproductions of this considerable corpus of etchings are offered here (sixty illustrations in total) that alone make this book a valuable source for scholars of the seventeenth century. The etchings speak for themselves, it seems, although they often feature pieces of texts that have largely been ignored by scholars who have chosen to concentrate on the visual components of the works alone. This is a grave mistake, Goldstein argues, as words and images taken together reveal ambiguities that only a very sophisticated reflection on authorship, agency, and the purposes of print can resolve.

The etchings in *Print Culture in Early Modern France* are lavishly reproduced, and the work is of very high quality as befits its subject matter, but it is also much more than that. Bosse's etchings are just the starting point for a very skillfully and clearly executed re-assessment of the printing industry as a whole. Taking into account the works of Elizabeth Eisenstein, Adrian Johns, and Henri-Jean Martin, Goldstein argues that the question of agency in print culture is one that is often misconstrued.^[1] It is commonly assumed that agency rests with the author, but that is no longer taken seriously. Where does agency lie then if not with the audience? But Goldstein also proceeds to demonstrate the paucity of social determinism in establishing agency in the reader. A more intriguing and promising proposition is then put forward. Agency may also lie, beyond the obvious answer of emitter and receptor, in the media themselves or the craftsmen who made them. There is much more than meets the eye in Bosse's etchings, and they contain ironic statements, often in the texts (but not always) that accompanied them. In other words, the mismatch between the visual and the textual suggests a number of layered interpretations that were available to some audiences but not to others.

A case in point is the farcical or Bakhtinian elements of Bosse's prints that are not altogether obvious at first sight. One has to read the text to realize the deeply subversive messages that are often there. Consequently, not all audiences had access to the more subversive content of the works, and counter intuitively from a Bakhtinian point of view, it was the higher echelons of society that were more likely to understand it. The illiterate had to content themselves with extremely prosaic and conventional representations of social and sexual hierarchies that seemed to re-enforce rather than challenge normative behaviors. Chapter five on the royal portrait is particularly enlightening as it discusses representations of the royal person that may in some cases have been commissioned by Louis XIV or members of his court. One particular etching comes to mind where the king is represented as the Gallic Hercules (figure 44). The text contains many intentional spelling mistakes in Greek, and only the classically educated would have gotten the joke. This may have been pleasing to the king, who is known to have enjoyed a joke once in a while and who performed himself in plays

staged at court as comic characters typical of the burlesque genre. Other etchings, however, may not have been so amusing to the king such as one very revealing representation of David slaying Goliath (figure 45) that was a reference to the *Fronde* (1648-1651).

Was Bosse then a *frondeur* or a craftsman who served the court? Goldstein argues that he was both, since craftsmen who worked in the printing industry served more than one master, and their works cannot be used to ascertain their opinions or beliefs. A perfect demonstration of this lies in Bosse's series depicting the seven acts of mercy, ostensibly Catholic "good works," even though Bosse himself was a Calvinist. For some reason historians are seldom capable of applying the same degree of relativism that can be observed in their contemporaries to people in the past. To give just one example, there is the view that printing was a Protestant medium and a force for progress. Recent scholarship has demonstrated in fact that Catholics were just as capable as Protestants of using print effectively, and that printing was not always a force for social change. A case in point is the printers of the Reformation period who changed allegiances, depending on which patrons they served, and were often capable of printing for both sides, Catholic and Protestant. This does not mean, however, that printers were just craftsmen who had no agency and did not control part of the message that was delivered through their media, mere neutral intermediaries of print.

Goldstein illustrates this last point by retelling the struggle that seems to have dominated Bosse's life to raise the engravers (like painters) from the status of craftsmen to members of the liberal arts. Chapters seven and eight are devoted to that question through a discussion of Bosse's role as a teacher of perspective at the Royal Academy for Painters and Sculptors (now subsumed in the *Beaux-Arts*). Bosse defended the academic credentials of his profession, arguing that its use of perspective made it more like the liberal arts and sciences than craftsmanship to which the arts were usually relegated. This is an interesting chapter in the history of the arts and sciences as the hard and fast distinction with which we are familiar had not yet been made. The legacy of medieval taxonomy was still strong. Bosse taught and defended the work of a leading theorist of his time, Girard Desargues, at the Academy from its foundation in 1648 until he was expelled as a result of controversy in 1661. The idea that perspective, and by extension etching and painting that made use of it, should be part of the liberal arts was motivated by the high regard in which optics and mathematics were held. These disciplines, according to Neo-Platonism, could be used to attain certain knowledge of the world and transcend chaotic appearances, just as Bosse argued perspective corrected perception. This chapter reveals that Bosse was conversant with contemporary philosophy and participated, through book illustrations, in the emergence of what is often called the scientific revolution.

There are many more aspects to this book than can be done justice here, in particular the very interesting discussion about what distinguishes an original from a copy, a particularly thorny problem when it comes to etching, or the description of Bosse's championing of new techniques. The whole is a very pleasing book, both to look at and to hold and to read, which achieves moreover the feat of making accessible to a wider public some of the most interesting debates about this field. More than a simple case study or an exercise in micro history, Goldstein's *Abraham Bosse* holds some very important lessons for scholars of early modern printing and/or the seventeenth century. It forms part, along with other recent works, of a promising trend in the historiography of the early modern period that replaces material culture and the processes that produced it at center stage.

NOTE

[1] Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (Cambridge University Press, 1980); Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book* (Chicago University Press, 1998); Henri-Jean Martin, *Livre, pouvoirs et société* (Geneva, 1969).

Luc Racaut
Newcastle University

luc.racaut@ncl.ac.uk

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