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VALENTIN GROEBNER, *Ungestalten: Die visuelle Kultur der Gewalt im Mittelalter* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2003), 208 pp. ISBN 3 446 20373 7. EUR 17.90

There are plenty of good reasons not to judge books by their covers, but just occasionally the temptation cannot, and maybe should not, be resisted. For what meets the eye on first encountering Valentin Groebner's arresting and provocative extended essay?¹ It is Grünewald's Isenheim Christ, though not as we might think we know him. No body is seen, only a nailed and blood-drenched right hand, fingers splayed in agony, the rough and knotty cross behind. Yet we know at once what we are looking at—and that, of course, is part of the point. Christ himself has been physically obliterated, turned into a Groebnerian *Ungestalt*, a literally faceless terror; yet, drawing on our own resources of knowledge and imagination, we 'see' him none the less. What else do we see? Little beyond sleek, cool black, within which, we notice, the title word itself has been subjected to a knowing visual *Verunstaltung*. Something very smart indeed is clearly afoot here, in this study of 'the visual culture of violence in the Middle Ages'. But is it all just a little *too* smart? Is pre-modern bloodshed really the proper occasion for such a streetwise piece of post-modernist eye-candy? Are we about to be taken on an intellectual journey, we wonder nervously, or merely made complicit in a clever game of semiotics? The reader—or at least this reader—therefore opens the volume already on guard: black may be a seemly colour for a serious book on a grave historical subject; *noir*, surely, is not.

The reader perhaps also wonders how a pocket-sized volume of just over two hundred pages can possibly do justice to such a vast theme. The European Middle Ages produced, as everyone knows, an immense quantity and variety of visual images of violence, many—whether evoking the triumphs of Alexander, Caesar, or Arthur of Britain, Jerusalem falling to the crusaders, or the superhuman feats of contemporary chivalric paragons—of a frankly celebratory kind. The school texts in which most people have their first serious encounter with the Middle Ages used to be filled with them. Nearly all of these sanguinary images, we quickly learn, will fall outside Groebner's purview. Instead, he will track down portrayals of a special kind of

¹ Quotations are from the German edition; all translations are my own.

medieval violence – what he calls ‘extreme violence’ (*extreme Gewalt*). So just what is it that renders some violent acts more ‘extreme’ than others? The social status, religion, ethnicity, special vulnerability, or even sheer number, of the victims? The peculiar injustice, illegality, or notoriety of certain bloody deeds, for contemporaries or for us? The shock which they delivered to the fabric of medieval society? In an age of wars great and small, of burning villages and towns, crusades, pogroms and massacres, of insurrections and their bloody suppression, there ought to be no shortage of candidates – nor, at a time when the Slaughter of the Innocents could supply a narrative staple for religious art, any want of visual representations.

Again, however, Groebner’s concern is more specific. For him, what qualifies some acts as ‘extreme’ is their association with the concealment, blurring, or outright obliteration of personal identity, with processes of masking, disfiguring or defacing – with the creation, in short, of *Ungestalten*. He would argue, in fact, that this anonymizing process is inherent in the very act of representing violent deeds – deeds done to others – in visual form. Framed thus, as Groebner is wont to frame his utterances, as a lapidary general proposition, it seems unconvincing: violent images in medieval art frequently aimed not to erase individual identities, but to fashion them, authenticate them, and render them manifest, and thus memorable – and that means the identities of the crushed, the dishonoured, and the infamous, hardly less than the glorious or the vindicated. Here again, however, the author will take up position on more particular ground, of his own choosing, through a series of specialized, interlinked case studies. The reader is first introduced to the complex and contested visual language of urban power and faction (chapter 2), and to the symbolically charged facial disfigurements wrought on sexual transgressors in late medieval Nuremberg (chapter 3). Attention then switches to the sanguinary and unstable symbolic repertoire of late gothic religious art and drama (chapter 4). Finally, we are plunged into the semiotic nightmare world of the Swiss urban commune at war (chapter 5).

It is through this, very concrete and specific, body of material that Groebner roots his broad and ambitious theorizing in the evidential soil of past times. It is perhaps worth noting here that, despite the broad panorama conjured up by the book’s title, his findings do not really address ‘the Middle Ages’ as such, but speak instead to an

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assemblage of incidents and phenomena culled overwhelmingly from the south German, Swiss, and (to a lesser degree) north Italian towns of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. A reason for focusing on this late, urbanized world is, we learn, its fertility, when compared with the preceding medieval millennium, in the particular *kinds* of violent representation, written and visual, which Groebner proposes to exploit. So how far, one naturally wonders, are the sources upon which his thesis draws specific to the time and the place of their making—and, by extension, how fit to sustain the broad, general insights that he wishes to put forward? Georges Duby is among those who have judged the graphic depiction of ('extreme'?) physical suffering to be a distinctively *late* medieval cultural trait.

What excites Groebner in his sources is the way in which their various representations of ('extreme') violence tended to fashion unpersons, drained of identity; and yet, he insists, they were at the same time crafted in such a way as to impel the spectator to supply what was absent, to fit faces to the faceless spectres, drawing on his or her own imaginative fund of horror. Medieval portrayals of violence functioned, he explains, 'like any good present-day motion picture or advertisement, ... in that material images and accounts of the *Ungestalt* conjured up in the heads of the public other, immaterial images that the observers knew from elsewhere, and recalled' (pp. 16–17). The ambiguous, confused, and contested meanings which resulted are at the heart of the book. But with whose meanings, exactly, are we dealing here—Groebner's own, or those of his medieval subjects? For this is no mere sober-sided piece of dry academic fare. 'American gangster movies and reports from the Yugoslav civil war will concern us', the reader is assured, 'as also will photographic exhibitions and campaigns for tidy inner cities' (p. 11). Along the way, there will be several name-checks for Quentin Tarantino, and Hong Kong action-movie director John Woo will also earn a mention. 'Such lateral connections', he truthfully observes, 'are not exactly axiomatic in German-language [or English-language!] books about the Middle Ages' (p. 11). Groebner's preferred angle of approach to these *Querverbindungen* is not the conventional one, either: 'Let us try starting out from these present-day violent images when we deal with representations of the horrific and the deformed (*Ungestalt*) at the end of the Middle Ages', he recommends (p. 23). 'After all, this

Medienszenarie at the start of the twenty-first century forms the determining background whenever we look back at the historical material' (pp. 23-4).

Does it? Still more importantly, *should* it? It seems, first of all, somewhat rash to assume that 'we' necessarily all have an identical relationship with the violent visual culture of 'our' own day (the character and dimensions of which are in any case perhaps less fixed, and more subjective, than Groebner allows), or that 'we' will all read the written and visual records of the Middle Ages through it in a single, standardized fashion. It is one thing to recognize that historical writing is always, in a sense, shaped by the cultural milieu within which it is made, another to reduce historians to mere weather-vanes, twisting helplessly before the capricious gusts of pop fashion and the morning's headlines. Anyone studying the culture and perceptive modes of a past society will naturally aim to do more than that, and must strive to understand the cultural artefacts of past times through the eyes of those who made them, lived with them, and interpreted them. Groebner makes a thought-provoking case when he argues that violent images worked on the perception in essentially similar ways, and demanded from the viewer comparable mental and imaginative responses, in the Middle Ages and today. But we cannot, surely, rest there. A study of pre-modern perceptive practices would be fruitless, indeed misleading, unless accompanied by careful investigation of the contemporary meanings ascribed to the images in question, the cultural (and, in many instances, specifically religious) impulses which led to their consumption, and the social milieu in which they were experienced. It is hard, too, to see how such a study can avoid examining the larger place of the visual in pre-modern society and culture. We will wish to discover, in short, not only how medieval people's responses to portrayals of 'extreme' violence resembled 'ours', but also, perhaps still more urgently, how they *differed*.

How well does Groebner's startling viewpoint equip him to supply these things? Early on in the book, he recollects what it was that led him to his chosen theme: 'Particular motifs of the *Ungestalt* as [signifying] absolute horror, which I encountered in texts and images of the twentieth century, seemed to me strangely familiar' (p. 13). But, as Groebner himself is at pains to remind us, appearances can be deceptive. Horror, like pain, has contexts in time, from which it

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should not be lightly abstracted. The 'terror' registered by a cardinal's secretary on encountering the monumental, gory wayside crucifixes of southern Germany in the early sixteenth century will have been in important ways different from that induced in consumers of news images of mutilated corpses at the end of the twentieth. There is a danger that the frame through which Groebner has chosen to inspect his remote images of violation ('and some of them are really revolting', p. 38) will telescope that indispensable space in time. When he reflects that 'the wounded body in the contemporary, media-induced, culture of fear has to be located in an exotic Elsewhere in order to appear a terrible-fascinating image' (p. 21), what surely strikes the medievalist is above all the gulf which is opened up between contemporary values and those of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries – where we can encounter St Sebastian transfixed with arrows against a deliberately homely sub-Alpine backdrop of lakes and green hills. Groebner's frame looks quintessentially modern – or post-modern – in its construction. Masked, shadowy, or dehumanized assailants, disfigured or wilfully anonymized victims, the shocking inversion of the quotidian, the brutal paraphernalia of graphic personal obliteration – such staples of the slasher movie (as of Groebner's book) appear to bespeak a distinctly contemporary, rather solipsistic, sensibility, one in which ultimate horror resides in personal invisibility, 'facelessness', equated with the extinction of self. Purveyed as popular entertainment, the appeal of such motifs seems, in addition, to be attuned specifically to the sated ennui of thoroughly ordered and pacified western societies, in which violence itself is (in historical perspective) rare, veiled, 'abnormal', and thus taboo – hence the voyeuristic frisson of its controlled, tantalizing televisual unmasking. For that reason, invoking the neurotic bourgeois fears spawned by the enigmatic 'tags' left behind by nocturnal graffiti artists in the micro-regulated contemporary European (Swiss!) city (pp. 39–41) seems an ill-suited preface to the account which follows (chapter 2), of shadowy forms and shady deeds in the dangerous world of the late medieval town. If there was an entertainment for which the imperilled fifteenth-century burgher had little need, it was surely Hollywood-style 'fear as fun' (p. 21).

Even when Groebner gets down, in his final chapter, to examining what must be the most familiar site of medieval violence – the battlefield – the shade of contemporary western priorities is not far

distant: 'extreme' is that behaviour which dissolves or destroys *personal* identity. The soldier cunningly donning enemy dress to gain advantage is no less *ungestalt* than the mutilated battlefield corpse. Groebner sternly rebukes mere 'comforting' (p. 141) attempts to rationalize, and thus 'short-circuit', reports of medieval and modern violence. And his own narrative is certainly well larded with the stomach-turning, as we watch Swiss soldiers grease their boots with the body fat of the butchered mayor of Zurich, after tearing out his living heart. Indeed, we might wonder for a moment whether Groebner's manner of assembling his materials does not occasionally risk making the reader a gawping spectator at precisely the sort of cabinet of ('medieval') monstrosities that he so vehemently condemns elsewhere (pp. 27–34). Instances of *Raub und Brand* were, after all, for medieval people, scarcely less deplorable even when not accompanied by the sickening examples of cannibalism and the gratuitous violation of the dead listed here. Yet, for all the author's taste for gruesome sub-headings—'Slashed Bellies, Severed Fingers', 'Belly Fat and Salad'—violence as such emerges as less central to his concerns than we might suppose. In the end, Groebner's own approach, too, is apt, in a way, to sap the battlefield of its horrors, since his battles are at heart games of semiotic atrocity—struggles of contending *signs*. They are, above all, events in which recognition, labelling, ordering, and categorizing (by means of colours, emblems, and devices) became crucial—at the time, but also subsequently, in the recollections of victors and vanquished. His battlefield *Unge-stalten* attest the fundamental subjectivity, as well as the urgency, of those tasks, but reveal also what imperfect—slippery, contestable—tools visual symbols represented for their accomplishment.

A concern with signs, recognition, and authentication, and with the complex relationship in visual culture between the seen and the unseen, represents the strongest thematic current in this volume, permeating every chapter—from the contests of public signs and covert deeds in the late medieval town (chapter 2), via the visible, violent inscription on the human body of concealed moral infractions (chapter 3) and the troubling ambiguities revealed in representations of the suffering Christ (chapter 4), to the treacherous symbolic realm of the battlefield (chapter 5). This matrix of studies and approaches gains a fresh significance when we note that Groebner has also been engaged in researching the history of the passport. Here is another topic

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which raises urgent questions about the problematical relationships between power and the ascription of personal identity, and between authentication and the mass multiplication of visual images: *is seeing really believing?* It is also a topic which highlights the crucial importance of the late medieval or early Renaissance period, in which most of the material for this book originates—and in which, too, the history of the passport begins. From this perspective, the bloody history of southern Germany and northern Italy at the end of the Middle Ages takes on new meaning. The problem, taking Groebner's standpoint, is no longer so much, as it often has been in other studies, the proliferation of violence, as the uncontrolled multiplication of *signs*. If blood matters much for him, that is above all because blood *authenticates*—not just Christ's blood, ever staining in effigy the hands of his enemies, but also the blood-red insignia which betray nocturnal intruders on the street, or hostile armies on the battlefield. At the end of the Middle Ages, the urgent task of authentication, in which secular and spiritual authorities were engaged, had become simultaneously more feasible—in an age of increasingly intrusive, bureaucratic government—and more problematical, as visual signs luxuriated, in number and variety, particularly in the towns: through the commercialization of the visual arts, the dissemination of printed texts and images, the growth of popular religious drama, and the mass production of insignia, armorials, and badges of all kinds.

It is beyond question that Groebner's approach holds out bold and stimulating insights into political and social mentalities at the end of the Middle Ages. Some of these are displayed especially strikingly in chapter 2, where he, in effect, sketches the outlines of a new history of late medieval urban political culture—one which replaces the familiar picture of public life and broadly 'progressive' developments in government under the law with an account emphasizing secrecy, concealment, spies, denunciations, and the behind-the-scenes manipulation of symbols of power and violence by regimes and their opponents alike. There is much in Groebner's book that is original, engrossing, even exhilarating, and the specialized chapters rest upon the deft and confident synthesis and re-evaluation of a remarkable range and variety of sources. But the book also, inevitably, leaves a good deal unsaid about how violence was envisaged by medieval Europeans. Nor does it wholly succeed in transcending its roots in four originally separate, though thematically

related, pieces, around which an attempt has been made to construct a bold, over-arching interpretative structure. For this reader at least, Groebner's detailed thematic chapters carry, individually and collectively, considerably more conviction than do the more general reflections on past and present visualizations of violence with which the work begins and closes. But if this is in some ways a flawed book, it is also an ambitious, exciting, important and – on the whole – highly readable one, which deserves, and will surely enjoy, a wide readership.

By way of a coda, it is maybe not without interest to note that a book which began by inscribing its own *Verunstaltung* ends, appropriately enough, with an act of veiled textual disfigurement – at least if one turns to the recent English-language translation.² There, it transpires, Groebner's two-page polemic against 'the American war against Iraq', with which he draws his original, German-language, essay towards its close (pp. 170–2), has been excised. But whose was the hidden hand wielding the mutilating knife? When a book wears its conscience as insistently on its sleeve as this one does, and is as avowedly concerned to bring violent past and violent present into mutually illuminating dialogue (and this review is being typed, well over a year after Iraq's 'liberation', with a new breed of *Ungestalten* – mirror-shaded GIs, hooded, mutilated, and systematically dehumanized 'interrogation' victims – stalking the western media), we surely should be told. For after all, 'the Middle Ages always take place in the researcher's own present – where else?' (p. 11).

² Valentin Groebner, *Defaced: The Visual Culture of Violence in the Late Middle Ages*, trans. Pamela Selwyn (New York: Zone Books, 2004), 199 pp. ISBN 1 890951 37 4. £16.95.

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