JOURNAL of the NORTHERN RENAISSANCE

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Imagineering violence:
The spectacle of violence in the early modern period

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[1] In 'Visualizing violence' Mark Hewitson describes how World War One brought about a genuine culture of violence. World War One was perhaps the first real mediatized war (with tabloid, twenty-four-hour headline news, journalistic sensationalism, etc.). In the build-up to the war, artists like Ludwig Meidner (*Apocalyptic Landscape*, *Burning City*, both 1912) and Max Beckmann (*The Destruction of Messina*, 1909 and *The Sinking of the Titanic*, 1912) had contributed to the development of new representational strategies, which were used to evoke the atrocities of war, while other artists idealized violence, struggle and warfare, the most poignant example of this cult being the manifesto of futurism published in 1909.

[2] Very soon, however, idealistic expectations fuelled by patriotism and economic concerns clashed with the reality of industrialised warfare: heroic images of the battlefield were in abhorrent contradiction with the horrors of lived experience. The violence of warfare, it became clear, was anything but heroic. It was purposeless, banal, useless, it turned history into a senseless, disorganised, chaotic and most of all pointless narrative, as it tragically demonstrated that humanity seemed to be prepared to destroy itself. Documentary photography brought reports on war without any embellishment, radically deconstructing the heroic rhetoric of military representations. Writers like T.S. Eliot (*The Waste Land*) and painters like Otto Dix (*Der Krieg*) translated this profound crisis of Western culture in haunting artistic languages, while Dada explored the fragmentation of reality, showing that all boundaries between reality, art and advertising seemed to have become conflated in a meaningless chaos of fragmentation.

[3] With World War Two and the Holocaust, the shared cultural experience of nihilism and existential crisis became even more apparent. European culture painfully acknowledged that no meaning whatsoever could be attributed to the cataclysm of war, and it saw itself confronted with the sheer meaninglessness of history. *Night and Fog*, the famous 1956 film by Alain Resnais, offers an intriguing case in point for our understanding of the complex relationship between historical reality, collective memory and the cultural representation of violence. The title of the film refers to 'Nacht und Nebel', the infamous 1941 directive of Hitler permitting deportation of anyone opposing the Third Reich (Stackelberg 2007: 286). These deportations took place in absolute secrecy, and the Reich had no obligation whatsoever to give any information. The name of the ordinance is in its turn a quite cynical reference to the Wagner opera *Das Rheingold* (1869), where it is a magic formula to make someone invisible (Culbert 2007: 259-260). Resnais' film was commissioned by the 'Comité de l'histoire de la 2e guerre mondiale' to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the liberation of the camps, and had a double goal: documenting the atrocities in all their cruel and gruesome details on the one hand, and commemorating the lived experience of these same events on the other. The film shows the industrialisation of evil, the rationalisation, technology and efficiency of warfare, but also the banality of evil. The text written by Jean Carol (a member of the resistance deported to a camp in 1943) and read by actor Michel Bouquet accompanies the haunting footage, describing the everyday life of torture, terror and humiliation.

[4] In the fifties and sixties Resnais' film was criticized for its generalizing perspective on suffering under the Nazi regime, which seemed to homogenize victimhood. *Fog and Night*

presents Germany as one big camp, in which all victims seem to be alike. Historical reality, however, was not as homogenous: of the non-Jewish deported people in France, 59% returned; of the Jewish people, only 3% returned. Only from 1970 on, historians and museum workers developed a specific memorial culture devoted to the Shoah. Both the Lanzmann movie *Shoah* (1985) and blockbusters like *Schindler's Liszt* (1993) and *La vita è bella* (1997), played an important role in this shift.

[5] The reception history of *Night and Fog* provides us with a particularly revealing example of the tension between collective memory and collective imagination: collective memory of these horrors is impossible (because too traumatic) but the film provides communities with a collective imagination as it builds bridges between eye-witnesses who could not speak of the experience and those who escaped the experience. This complex relationship between lived or observed experience and its transmission (for whatever reason) is of course not new, nor is it exclusively linked to the Holocaust experience. In the early modern period religious wars ravaged the European continent. With the gruesome violence produced by these wars, the need for documentation and representation grew. Some wanted to prove the perversity of the enemy (think of the wide range of martyr books such as *Le théâtre des crautés* (1587) by Richard Verstegan or Antonio Gallonio's popular *Trattato degli instrumenti di martirio e delle varie maniere di martirizzare*, first published in 1591 and widely translated), while others tried to reap economic profit by exploiting the spectacle of violence. Others still tried to contribute to a new memorial culture, aiming to foster community. More often than not these different attempts were criticized for various reasons, while at the same time being facilitated by a new infrastructure for cultural distribution (the book market, public theatres, journalism). But most of all they were all attempts to make the past live in the present of historical imagination, or to bring distant worlds of violence (like the battlefields) closer to consumers of news.

[6] An important principle in the early modern representation of violence was that of transmitting an experience of witnessing the described events at first hand. The baroque, bird's-eye views of the battlefield produced in the second half of the seventeenth century, for instance, not only depicted the spectacle of war, but also enabled the onlooker to focus on close-ups of the performed violence, like a man-to-man fight, or certain atrocities committed by soldiers against citizens.

Figure 1a. Coloured engraving of the Battle of Blenheim by Romeyn de Hooghe (full engraving and close-up): Zegen by Hoogstad op de Fransen en Beyersen door S.H: Marlbourg en Pr. Eugenius van Savoyen verkreegen (Amsterdam: Pieter Schenck, 1704). Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Figure 1b. Detail from 1a, above.

Overwhelming spectacles of war were thus combined with detailed depictions of violence (Korsten et al. 2020). Secretly glimpsing the intriguing, horrific details of such depictions, however, can only be a source of enjoyment for the onlooker as long as he or she acts like a voyeur who is not involved in these acts and is unable to intervene in them. From the perspective of the onlooker and in contrast with fictional or symbolic violence, these representations that set out to show 'real violence' also raise moral questions, especially when seen from a current-day stance concerning photography and video recordings: are we actually allowed to see the pain and suffering of others? (Sontag 2003: 37-38).

[7] Harari (2008) has claimed that the early modern representation of violence was uncoupled for a very long time from the idea of 'flesh-witnessing', providing only factual knowledge that can easily be transmitted, but that seems to do without any references to the experience as such. This eyewitness perspective is determined by the gaze of the uninvolved onlooker who can look at an event in all its details, without taking part in it. According to Harari, this would link early modern experiences of looking at violence to a distinctively modern perspective: 'The differentiation between eyewitnessing and flesh-witnessing is doubly important today, when so many people eyewitness war via live television broadcasts, without ever flesh-witnessing it' (Harari 2008: 8). The early modern representation of violence, however, may contain emotional and experiential layers that we can only explore if we approach them from a historical perspective. De Boer, for instance, has shown that even the rational and factual description of the battlefield on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century siege maps helped build an emotional community between the civic buyer of such maps in

town, uninvolved in military business, and war professionals who were flesh-witnessing the war events on the ground. She points to the fact that these maps (even those produced for the wider market) were also used for military business by, for instance, officers in the field. There are also affective layers involved in the reception of these kinds of representations that we today would not recognize as emotions, such as the 'love for truth' expressed by the very detailed description of the battlefield, its terrain and movements of troops (De Boer 2016: 214-218).

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[8] The early modern period witnessed an explosion in the representation and performance of violence. In European cities, renaissance and baroque theatre staged gruesome and passionate plays, while in the streets, during religious festivals and public entries of sovereigns, state and church conjured up violent images of subjection and suffering. The book market added to this spectacle of violence, as the early modern period saw the development of an advanced material infrastructure for the production, distribution, consumption, and appropriation of such imagery. A fast-growing body of texts and prints registered violent episodes of the past and the present. The growing news market of pamphlets, newspapers and weeklies offered facts about public violence on a daily basis, based on a European network of information (Haks 2013: 14-16). All these publications enabled the public to study in detail the techniques used in battle, to torture martyrs, or to execute criminals. How can we explain this apparent fascination for violence? What effects and affects did these scenes aim to arouse? What relationships were evoked or enforced between the audience and the depicted or enacted scenes? What groups were depicted as violent, and with what specific violent practices and qualities were they associated?

[9] This special issue aims to analyse early modern techniques of representing violence and their transformations over time. Violence engages audiences in complex ways: it can fascinate or repulse, provide strong embodied experiences, exploit the curiosity and the desires of the public of consumers, create a breach with daily life, or turn reality into a stage. The different contributions to this special issue analyse the technical and performative aspects of the depiction of violence, whether in print or painting or on stage, in the anatomical theatre, on the scaffold, or elsewhere, questioning different regimes of representation ranging from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century in various countries in Northern Europe.

[10] The idea of violence seems to have grown into a crucial theoretical and analytical problem in different fields of the humanities. Research on the historical and contemporary representation of violence covers a wide range of topics and questions, including the spectacle of violence and its aestheticisation, the problem of the beholder, our present-day obsession with the more-than-real and its historical roots in (early) modern European culture, voyeurism, sexual violence, and the complex history of trauma. Some of these studies investigate from different disciplinary angles the legitimacy (or, in most cases, the flagrant absence thereof) of the infliction of any kind of harm, whether physical or psychological, mainly focusing on different forms of *violentia* (illegitimate violence) (Schinkel 2009: 84; van Duijnen 2019: 37). Other authors analyze different forms of *potestas*, violence facilitated by state authorities; often inspired by the writings of Foucault on sovereign and governmental powers. Several contributions to this special issue explore the fundamental porosity between what is considered to be legitimate and what is not. Other contributions focus more specially on processes of mediation, such as the intertwinement of word and image, or the sensory experience of the sound of violence transmitted through words and imagery.

[11] In a recent article in *History and Theory* historian Penny Roberts observes a 'violent turn' in French historiography (Roberts 2017: 61). All of the questions addressed in this

special issue, however, bring us back to a larger, fundamental question: what were the cultural, ideological and generic mechanisms behind the representation of violence in early modern Northern Europe? Each of the contributions in this special issue explores a different type of real or symbolic violence, each with a different performative impact, operating within a specific historical context. Some of the contributions, such as those of Thom Pritchard and Yannice De Bruyn, focus on memory culture and how perspectives on acts of war were shaped by political and religious interests. Other contributions more specifically pay attention to representational techniques as such, focusing on a specific type of violence, such as Michel van Duijnen's article about judicial violence in early modern history prints, and Frans-Willem Korsten and Marijn van Dijk's contribution about the sensory experience of sea battles in Dutch literature and the visual arts. Klaas Tindemans and Jan Frans van Dijkhuizen discuss how the theatrical representation of juridical violence and the literary representation of religious violence were shaped by the respective discourses of law and Protestantism in early modern England. The latter is focusing on Christian martyrdom, which is also true for Johan Verberckmoes, who wrote a contribution on the transcultural elements concerning child martyrs in Japan in the historical accounts of an Antwerp Jesuit.

[12] This special issue aims to contribute to a contextual approach to the history of violence in Northern Europe, through the analysis of specific case studies which operated within equally specific historical contexts. It is one result of a broader research project on the cultural representation of violence funded by the Dutch and Flemish Research Councils (NWO and FWO). Within the framework of this project we developed the concept of 'imagineering' (Korsten et al. 2020) to help us to analyse the complex intertwinement of cultural practices, cultural imagination and specific contexts. Imagineering refers (1) to imagination as it is used in representing other possible worlds, and (2) to engineering; that is, to the techniques employed and designed to do this — with technique indicating both the technical element of theatre and other public stages, and the broader possibilities of rhetoric, props and acting employed in such theatrical stagings. Imagineering describes a historical shift in which new techniques were deployed to make images speak to the public and to one another, with the aim of creating a shared space for cultural identity and memory. The authors in this special issue analyse a wide range of cultural practices that each in their own way contributed to the development of this new infrastructure, producing distinct historical selves through new collective cultural imaginations.

[13] The articles in this special issue combine research methods and approaches from literary studies, performance studies, visual analysis, cultural history, criminology and many other disciplines, but all of them share a similar cultural historical approach in which violence is always understood as part of a broader process of cultural representation and symbolization. Violence is always a cultural performance (Diamond 1996) and requires in that sense an anthropological approach. Moreover, the different articles show that violence is anything but a stable concept and that its nature, definition and performative impact are profoundly contextual and historical. Present-day conceptualisations of violence cannot just be retroactively transposed to the early modern period — the use of the term itself requires systematic historicisation.

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