

Punishment in the Frame: Rethinking the History and Sociology of Art

The boundaries between art history and the sociology of art are today deeply entrenched. A look at a fairly recent survey of art theory, as gathered in Smith and Wilde's (2002) *Companion to Art Theory*, reveals no chapters on Becker, Bourdieu, Elias, or Heinich, for example, and of these only Bourdieu is mentioned once (Craven, 2002:279). The gulf that separates them is a perfect illustration of how 'Sociology and art do not make good bedfellows' and Bourdieu (1993:139) has insisted that this is 'the fault of art and artists, who are allergic to everything that offends the idea they have of themselves'. Although social readings and hermeneutical interpretations of art have been readily accepted by art historians, it remains the case that more systematic sociological analyses are often met with disdain and disregarded for their crushing reductionism. By refusing to 'address "art itself"' much of the sociology of art has been criticized for failing to 'acknowledge its specificity' (Hennion and Grennier, 2001:342). The tension has arisen as art historians have 'redefined their discipline in such a way as to marginalise sociological concerns', while sociologists have 'developed specific attitudes toward art and methods of analysis which were increasingly peripheral to art historians' core interests' (Tanner, 2003:2).

Any attempt to integrate art analysis into sociology will be a difficult proposition. Indeed, it has been argued that 'the field has not seen much movement on these matters in the last two decades' (Born, 2010:174). In what follows I set out the sociology of art in a little more detail, before discussing 'new' art histories that are inspired by social analysis and then turn to a discussion of how images of punishment have featured in Renaissance art. This substantive material provides a rich resource to understand the force of representation and offers an opportunity to develop an aesthetic sociology that avoids some of the problems outlined in the first part of the paper. In taking this lead I will be developing my work on the iconography of punishment (Author Refs) by focusing on some of the dominant ways in which penal landscapes have been represented since the 1500s. The approach developed in the second part is one seeking to elaborate an aesthetic sociology that combines a historical sensitivity to images with the analytical concerns of social science. In doing so it strives to extend the art historian Michael Baxandall's (1974, 1985) writings toward more sociological interpretations of visual analysis.

The overall ambition is to indicate how punishment has an art history and by studying it as such the suggestion is that the gap between the disciplines might be bridged. It is driven by the premise that the history of punishment and the history of art are linked in ways that have yet to be fully recognized. For instance, studying the visual culture of punishment is a way of recovering a body of thought about how the poor "saw" in eighteenth-century Britain, not least since one of the many slang terms for the gallows was the 'the sheriff's picture frame' (Gamer, 2015). It has even been claimed that:

the revolutionary realism of Florentine art, as it spread through all of Europe during the Renaissance, helped raise people's consciousness concerning the inhuman brutality of legalized torture and public execution. By comparing the plight of the poor criminal on the scaffold and vividly realistic portrayals of martyred saints and Jesus's suffering, Christians slowly became aware of their own inhumanity in practice. From the sixteenth through to the eighteenth century, art prodded the Christian conscience concerning the paradox of capital punishment, just as during the nineteenth century in France, academic painting (still following in the Florentine tradition) helped to make people aware of the

miserable life of peasants and laborers, thus provoking the bourgeoisie to think of democratic reform.

(Edgerton, 1985:14)

This is, no doubt, an optimistic reading of the power of images to shape social change, but the passage does unwittingly invoke Elias's (1939/1984) ideas on the 'civilising process' and it should not be difficult to see how an engagement with them would have strengthened Edgerton's position considerably. In Elias, 'civilising' does not theoretically equate with 'progress' nor is it a 'value judgement', rather heightened emotional sensibilities to the suffering of others are situated in a broader sociological argument on the pacification of social life through the increasing ability of nation states to effectively impose law and order over their territory. Those few scholars who have addressed the relationships between art and punishment will be discussed in more detail below, once I have set out the main approaches in the sociology of art and art history.

The State of the Art

The defining characteristic of the sociology of art is the drive to demystify 'art' by bringing in the 'social' to debunk any claims for art's autonomy, and to analyse the collective determinations of aesthetic experience. As Inglis (2005:99) notes this desire to drag 'art "down to earth" is the keynote of most, if not all, forms of the sociology of art'. It was the publication of two landmark texts: Becker's (1982) *Art Worlds* and Bourdieu's (1984) *Distinction* that did much to shift the somewhat eccentric status of this specialisation in the discipline and gave rise to two rival approaches. One which studies 'the art object as a social process' and another that analyses 'the art object sociologically' (Zolberg 1990). The former is associated with Becker (1974) and his insistence that art is a form of collective action, while the latter is most readily seen in Bourdieu's extensive enquiries into the changing fields of artistic production and the social conditions shaping how art is consumed.

Becker's (1982/2008:xxv) work draws on the symbolic interactionist tradition, where the negotiated order of any given situation is key, and he explains that his approach to art 'is social organizational, not aesthetic' and would not 'quarrel' with those who complain he is not a sociologist of the arts, but rather a sociologist of 'occupations applied to artistic work'. Yet in doing so he challenged influential understandings of art as the product of a unique, isolated genius. Instead of reifying individual artists and their particular works, his approach emphasizes their social character. Art worlds involve extensive networks of cooperation, convention, opportunity and stratification among large groups of people participating in the creation of the work and the making of reputation. It has given rise to a whole 'production of culture' school, providing empirically detailed accounts of the organisational dynamics and divisions of labour involved in making art (examples include Crane, 1987, DiMaggio, 1982; Peterson, 1976; Peterson and Anand, 2004). His approach reinvigorated the study of culture and is considered by some as the leading US sociologist studying art as a form of collective action (Cluley, 2012).

In contrast Bourdieu's work belongs to a lineage that includes Hegel, Marx, Weber and Adorno who each seek to place art in sociohistorical contexts. It is a long tradition that involves equating artistic styles with class interests and wider cultural forces, as in the work of the Marxist social historian of art Arnold Hauser (1951, 1958) who revealed the mundane material foundations and market relations that sustain the ideology of an autonomous creator. This commitment to unmasking illusions is famously developed by Bourdieu (1984:11) and

he compares sociology to ‘psychoanalysis’ in its approach to art and aesthetics, as we are ‘in the area par excellence of the denial of the social’. The beliefs attacked include, on the side of artistic production, the ‘ideology of charisma’ and, in the realm of consumption, the idea of a ‘pure’ or ‘disinterested’ gaze that he locates in Kant’s (1790/1992) *Critique of Judgement*, the philosophical cornerstone of modern Western aesthetics. Bourdieu’s approach is both structural and historical as it emphasises the processes of differentiation that have transformed societies into networks of specialist fields legitimating certain kinds of taste and reinforcing social hierarchies.

It is difficult to exaggerate the influence of Bourdieu on the sociology of art and culture (see Hanquinet and Savage, 2016, for an indication), but there is a sense in which the artistic work itself gets lost amid the detailing of all the struggles surrounding it. In her critique Georgina Born (2010:172) sets out a ‘post-Bourdieuian’ position that draws on ‘aspects of structuralist and post-structuralist theory as well as new ways of conceptualising temporality’. She insists that the sociology of art has been unable to resolve the fundamental problem of how a value-free sociology can engage with questions of form and aesthetics in non-reductive ways. It is a significant intervention, but what is ignored is how the writings of certain art historians have ‘overt sociological implications’ (De La Fuente, 2010:218) and it is these I explore in what follows. Especially through the concept of ‘pictorial intelligence’ (Alpers and Baxandall, 1994) that has been developed to understand the visual qualities of a painter’s representational medium. In particular, I will argue that Michael Baxandall’s approach to understanding a work of art and the society that produced it offers invaluable ways to recover the meaning of images from the past and to rethink the relationships between the history and sociology of art as they currently stand.

Baxandall’s approach is difficult to place in any characterisation of art history’s recent development (Harris, 2001:42). Sometimes it is regarded as ‘new’, yet in other ways it is seen as ‘traditional’. What was once called the ‘new art history’ (Rees and Borzello, 1986) is now decades old, yet the challenges posed by feminist, structuralist and post-colonial thinking continue to be felt in the discipline. An early statement was delivered by Timothy J. Clark (1974/1995) arguing that it was no longer asking the important questions, but had descended into a ‘dreary professional literature’ guarded by connoisseurs, largely content to decide attributions and cultivate the canon. As he goes on to explain:

Iconography is the notorious example: in a generation it has declined from a polemic about tradition and its forms, an argument over the conditions in which an artist encountered an ideology, into desultory theme-chasing.

(Clark, 1974/1995:250)

His vision is one that urges a more Marxist understanding of how ideologies work through recovering the Hegelian legacy of dialectical thought. Indeed, Clark maintained that a number of scholars from the earliest decades of the twentieth century, and some from the nineteenth, provided the richest legacy from which to challenge the deadening confines of the present. As he went on to write, he was ‘not interested in the social history of art as part of a cheerful diversification of the subject, taking its place alongside the other varieties – formalist, “modernist”, sub-Freudian, filmic, feminist, “radical”, all of them hot-foot in pursuit of the New’ (ibid.). Among the older generation he names are three – Aby Warburg, Heinrich Wölfflin and Erwin Panofsky. They are worth introducing here as they have provided essential statements in the disciplinary formation of art history and have given rise to two competing approaches.

Form and Meaning

The Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölfflin (1915/1950) set out some of the defining principles of 'formalism' through a method of comparative visual analysis involving the identification of an internally coherent system of differences between objects and epochs. Although his terms were employed to capture the transitions from the classical style of the Renaissance to the Baroque, they have since become widely used outside his original discussion. His set of five oppositions are:

1. Linear versus Painterly
2. Plane versus Recession
3. Closed versus Open
4. Multiplicity versus Unity
5. Absolute versus Relative Clarity

The first element in each pair describes a defining characteristic of art in the Renaissance, while the second element describes it in the Baroque. Each pair of oppositions suggest a different way of looking at the world and these categories have provided 'art historians with a basic grammar for discussing the formal constructions of art' (Edwards, 1999:3). Wölfflin's approach deliberately ignores the subject-matter or 'content' of paintings in order to concentrate on their visual appearance or form, and this neglect of meaning was to an extent rectified by an alternative method of art historical interpretation that attempted to read images as if they were texts.

The terms 'iconography' and 'iconology' came to prominence in the 1920s and 1930s, and were associated with the art historian Aby Warburg and his followers. They were each concerned with the meaning of works of art, and their approach was a reaction against the predominantly formal analysis of how a painting looks, in terms of mood or colour, at the expense of the subject matter. Instead, as one influential definition put it, 'iconography is that branch of the history of art which concerns itself with the subject matter or meaning of works of art, as opposed to their form' (Panofsky, 1939/2009:220). It is an approach emphasising the intellectual content of a work of art, how the symbols and signs in it would have been understood at the time it was produced. Although set up as an opposition between 'form and meaning' it is evident that in Panofsky's method this distinction is blurred, becoming less of an antagonism, but more complex and multi-layered, as I indicate in the second half of this paper.

The method distinguishes between three levels of meaning. The first of which is 'pre-iconographical' and is concerned with 'natural subject matter', which consists of identifying objects and 'pure forms' (such as animals, plants, buildings, people) and grasping their 'mutual relations as events' (battles, meals, processions and so on). The second level is iconography in the conventional sense, where the specific depictions arranged in an image have a particular symbolic resonance, enabling the viewer to tell the difference between a depiction of a dinner party and the 'Last Supper'. The third and 'deepest' level is the 'iconological', which concentrates on 'intrinsic meaning' and identifies 'those underlying principles which reveal the basic attitude of a nation, period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion' (Panofsky, 1939/2009:222). This final level attends to the general cultural significance of an image and requires a thorough grounding in historical contexts to be fully understood.

When it was initially propounded by Warburg it was a wide-ranging approach to art history and his ambitious research program was devoted to illustrating how the memory of a past impacts on culture. It has been said that the ‘iconological enterprise which Warburg “invented” was devoted to tracing the *Nachleben*, or afterlife, of antique images as they re-emerged in supposedly more domesticated guises in later ages’ (Holly, 1999:7). In particular, Warburg was concerned with identifying the devastating impact Western cultural practices were having on non-European forms of expression around the world. His approach was emphatically interdisciplinary and was fundamentally opposed to what ‘he called the “border police” of disciplinary specialization and parochial and fragmented knowledge’ (Preziosi, 2009:153). But in the postwar period, as it became practiced by Anglo-American art historians, it devolved into an ‘approach in which authoritative texts controlled unruly images’ and became ‘heavily invested in demonstrations of literary subject matter in art’ (Zorach, 2011:28), and so it began to lose its critical edge – a point that was at the core of Clark’s (1974/1995) initial polemic.

The work of Michael Baxandall (1974, 1985) is especially significant, providing a bridge from the earlier Warburg tradition and the ground breaking studies in iconology associated with it, to the ‘visual culture’ paradigm that he was instrumental in establishing. A move that led art history into a lively engagement with cultural studies, often through the prism of post-structuralism. His efforts to develop a systematic theoretical framework for the ‘historical explanation of pictures’ and his study of early Renaissance art have also informed the work of Becker (1982/2008), Geertz (1983) and Bourdieu (1996) who frequently returned to Baxandall’s ideas in their own social scientific approaches to art. His concept of the ‘period eye’ has generated such notions as the ‘gendered eye’ and the ‘contextual eye’ (Tanner, 2010:232), while elsewhere I have drawn on his approach to study medieval penal imaginaries (Author, 2016a). For some new art historians his emphasis on the relationships between language and the visual belongs to the same sensibility as Barthes, Derrida and Foucault (Rifkin, 1999). This brief indication of the range of different positions deploying his approach gives some sense of the richness of his analytical method.

A constant thread running through it is the distinctiveness of the visual – how there is a fundamental distinction between words and images – demanding ‘different modes of attention (a key concept in every text) than other historical artefacts’ (Holly, 1999:6). Baxandall’s approach was informed by anthropological research on cross-cultural perception and it is concerned with *how* people saw, to read pictures through their eyes. It is a way of interpreting ‘codes of gesture, emotion, economic imperatives, or mathematical thinking’ to build ‘up a sense of the broader culture in which a certain form of art emerged’ (Zorach, 2011:32). In addition to this concern for social practice is a focus on the notion of ‘institution’, which is among his key concepts – perhaps second only to ‘style’ in frequency of use (Tanner, 2010:236). In his attention to visual style Baxandall can be seen as reviving the earlier formalism of Wölfflin, but from within the Warburg tradition, which was fascinated with the work of cultural memory and the historical explanation of pictorial language. Although Baxandall was deeply ambivalent about the sociology of art, his approach does provide a framework for exploring art and its social contexts, matters to which I now attend.

The Iconography of Punishment

So far I have been describing a range of positions in sociology and art history in an effort open up a dialogue between the two disciplines and now I turn to the substantive focus of this

paper, which is how punishment has been represented in the visual arts. Images of punishment have featured prominently in Western art – from Laocoon’s tortured scream, through Piranesi’s carceral fantasies to Warhol’s Electric Chair – the practice has been the subject of numerous artistic treatments. They pose important questions over the meanings of pain, suffering and justice depicted in such a rich variety of cultural material. The overall research project begins from the 1500s and builds on earlier analyses of the ‘medieval penal imaginary’ (Mills, 2005, Author 2016a). This scholarship is part of a small body of art history literature exploring the relationships between martyrdom, passion iconography and the spectacle of punishment (see also Edgerton, 1985, Puppi, 1991 and Merback, 1999). Although the main aim of this paper is the development of a closer relationship between sociology and art history, it also speaks to the growing body of ‘punishment and society’ scholarship in criminology, in an effort to understand penal practices of the past.

The paper concentrates on the early modern era and some of the artistic achievements of the Renaissance at a time when the feudal, warlike knightly order of late medieval Europe was evolving into a court society during the sixteenth and seventh centuries. Here the princes who ruled these city-states cultivated their own distinctive forms of governance and relied on artistic patronage to promote their legitimacy. There are different theoretical interpretations of this era – ranging from Foucault’s understanding of disciplinary power to Elias’s account of the ‘civilizing process’ – but all the courts shared the same ambition to visibly establish and bolster the authority of their rule:

Nearly every ruler in fifteenth-century Italy had a tenuous or disputed claim to power. Many were born illegitimate, with no legal basis for their succession; others had seized power by military means. Still others, including the early fifteenth century popes, were facing multiple challenges to the nature of their authority. All shared an urgent need to establish the justice of their dominion, to stamp their authority on their territories, and to produce a stable social hierarchy...As a consequence, these rulers developed a sophisticated understanding of the role that art, sacred ritual, scholarship, pageantry and aristocratic traditions could play.

(Cole, 2016:14)

There is no doubt that the Renaissance used to be ‘studied as part of a “grand narrative” of the rise of modern Western civilization, a triumphalist and elitist story which implicitly denigrated the achievements of other social groups and cultures’ (Burke, 1998:9). Instead what is now emphasised is how the movement drew on other cultures and interacted with them in processes of considerable exchange, not least with the world of Islam, while the contributions of Jewish scholars to the Renaissance has long been obscured.

Baxandall also insisted that the choices made by both patrons and painters operated ‘within institutions and conventions’, which helped to articulate the patron’s demands – for an altarpiece, frescoes for a family chapel, a Madonna for the bedroom – and to formulate briefs for the artist in highly routinized ways (1974:1–3). His attempt to recover the social experience and historical logic of the ‘Quattrocento eye’ has revealed just how different the ‘picture trade’ was then. Not least since the idea of the individual artistic genius was yet to take hold and painters were craft trained as ‘professional visualisers’ of biblical and hagiographical stories (Baxandall, 1974:45-56). By the fifteenth century most pictures are religious pictures, but this does not just refer to the range of subject matter, rather it describes their institutional role in meeting certain intellectual and spiritual ends under the patronage

and control of the Church and the network of European royal courts. Up until the nineteenth century European art is dominated by the ‘sacral institutions’ (Bürger, 1984) and is closely tied to Renaissance traditions, where artists and their field of production had yet to secure creative autonomy from the external demands of Church and State (Bourdieu, 1996).

Although there is no complete catalogue of Italian paintings produced during the Renaissance, one sample of just over 2,000 surviving paintings found that around 87% of them are religious – half represent the Virgin Mary, a quarter show Christ, while the remainder are concerned with the saints – and 13% are secular works (Burke, 1998:165-6). Of course, there are problems of reliability and generalisability in any sample, but the statistics do have their uses. They tell us that most secular paintings were portraits (over two thirds) and that before the middle of the fifteenth century they were rare; only saints had their images painted, which gives an indication of their importance in Italian culture. Images play an increasingly prominent part in religious life from the later Middle Ages onwards and in Christian theology the ‘sweetness of redemption and the spectre of punishment went hand in hand’ (Kemp, 2014:32), so that the heightened preoccupation with pain and suffering should be understood in this context. The view that justice was equated with extreme cruelty is a longstanding one, where the insistence is that gruesome torture and spectacular executions were an integral part of everyday medieval life (Puppi, 1991). However, this emphasis on medieval alterity, in which the monstrous otherness of the times is accentuated, has been challenged by some recent writers who have instead sought to provide a more nuanced interpretation of premodern experience (Mills, 2005, Author, 2016a).

It is also no longer obvious that medieval art is inferior to what came later, and while the enthusiasm for classical antiquity is one of the defining characteristics of the Renaissance movement it enabled them to ‘attack medieval tradition as itself a break with tradition’ (Burke, 1998:16). Innovations certainly flourished across the arts (many came to Italy from Germany and The Netherlands), though they were often seen and presented as a revival of earlier techniques and styles, Renaissance artists generally sought not just to imitate the achievements of the classical age, but to surpass them. Among the most important were the discovery and use of rules of linear perspective by Italian artists, where it became possible to depict solid objects and architectural spaces with mathematical precision.

Renaissance Perspective

The birth of linear perspective in early fifteenth century Florence not only had a profound effect on the history of art, but was also crucial to the history of science and technology in the Renaissance – ultimately undermining the very medieval Christian cosmology that inspired it in the first place. An example painted around 1500 by an unknown Florentine artist depicting the *Execution of Savonarola*, (Figure 1) <Figure 1 near here> which did historically occur just two years before in Florence in 1498, illustrates the technique taking shape. The puritanical Dominican friar had become the ‘moral dictator’ of the city, ending the carnivals and popular festivities to which the Florentines had become accustomed, while hosting regular ‘bonfires of the vanities’ in which the many objects he considered objectionable were burnt in the street (Cavendish, 1998). His fanatical zeal and disavowal of all frivolity, luxury and the excesses he associated with the humanistic culture of the Renaissance meant that he made powerful enemies – including the pope, who eventually excommunicated the friar and two of his most ardent followers. All three were hung from a scaffold and their bodies subsequently burned to ashes. It is this grim fate that is depicted at the centre of the picture and Edgerton (2009:73) has described how the ‘gruesome scene is taking place on a gridded

piazza projected in ordinary, but somewhat inaccurate, “one-point” perspective, very much like so many iconic Renaissance paintings from the fourteenth through fifteenth centuries’.

The ruled pavement blocks are likely to have been imagined, but they do appear to converge, more or less, on a single point near the upper centre of the picture. For Edgerton the painting is a good example of an artist knowing something of the new optic rules of perspective but does not deploy them in the naturalistic ways to which we have become accustomed. It is also telling that many of the citizens appear oblivious to the giant bonfire in the square and this theme of how the audience respond to the penal spectacle before them is a significant one. As are the relationships between art and urbanism that are a further defining characteristic feature of Renaissance culture. The composition is dominated by the ominous town hall on the right with its tall watchtower, further to the right is a vaulted arcade with three open bays, while on the far left edge of the painting is part of great dome of the Cathedral, the overall effect of which suggests the importance of civic space and the burning pyre at the centre of the town hall square is a reminder of the ultimate power and authority behind the flames.

A key idea in Baxandall’s approach to the historical understanding of pictures is the idea of a ‘brief’ and who set it. The opening chapter of his *Painting and Experience* (1974) is focussed on the ‘Conditions of Trade’ and discusses how the social and economic organisation of artistic production, evidenced by contracts, shaped the visual character of quattrocento art – with some considerable detailing of what the painter is to paint, when they are expected to deliver it, and specifying the use of high quality pigments (especially gold and ultramarine). Later he would formulate the relationship between painters and their larger cultural worlds in terms of a ‘troc’, a French term describing a ‘barter primarily of mental goods’ in a ‘market’ (Baxandall, 1985:47-9). Pictures are understood as solutions to particular problems, so that the historical explanation of a picture requires an examination of the problem and the historical circumstances in which it was solved. How the artist in Figure 1 responded to the ‘brief’ can be compared with another painting of the same scene produced at the turn of the sixteenth century, but which tells the tale through an older medieval narrative technique. In the top right hand corner of Figure 2 **<Figure 2 near here>** the three defrocked frati are kneeling, dressed in white, receiving their sentences before they are led down a ramp (top, centre left) in the company of two black-robed ‘comforters’ to the third stage in the scene where the three hang on gallows, which looks more emphatically like a cross (than in Figure 1), above a great fire. The artist then emphasises where their sympathies lie by depicting them fully resurrected in their Dominican habits and ascending into heaven as saints in the upper left-hand corner of the painting (see also Edgerton, 1985:136-139).

In Baxandall there is a defining concern with what we choose to attend to, and what we overlook, when we view a picture. This point is made in the following passage written in collaboration with Svetlana Alpers, making an argument for a fuller recognition of the distinctiveness of the painter’s representational medium through what they term ‘pictorial intelligence’. They make this general point:

Most renaissance pictures are of established subjects – by which we mean subjects that were painted repeatedly. The study of iconography has emphasized the identification of the subjects of images and the objects they depict, often with reference to specific textual sources. Painters are praised for their close attention to a text. This calls attention to difference between pictures at what might loosely be called the subject and object level. It has diverted attention from the prevalence of repetition. Pictorial narrative depends on the acquaintance with

prior texts. One interest a painter had in painting, and viewers in looking at, an Annunciation or a Crucifixion, a Venus and Adonis or a Finding of Moses was at the reworking of previous paintings of the subject. When subject matter is a pictorial given, the interest lies in what a painter can do with the picture. The difference lies in the painting.

(Alpers and Baxandall, 1994:21)

Many artists reserved some of their greatest efforts to representing extreme cruelty and violence, and this was especially the case in the hundreds of images of saintly martyrdom produced during the late Middle Ages and Renaissance.

The Spectacle of Martyrdom

One such example, produced by an enthusiastic proponent of the principles of perspective at around the same time is Albrecht Dürer's *The Martyrdom of the Ten Thousand* (Figure 3) <Figure 3 near here>. This striking image graphically depicts all manner of horrific tortures and modes of execution in the massacre perpetrated by the Persian King Saporat against Christians on the command of the Roman Empire. The story narrated here is one where the:

indiscriminate violence extols the innocence and purity of heart of those who, by themselves count as nothing. Then, as now, the visual and textual representation of the massacre walks a fine line between the one and the many. If it were not offset this way, the scene could only display an implausible set of disconnected crimes...the artist may very well highlight some cases, but must be careful not to misrepresent the whole. The specific circumstances of this or that martyr are only of interest within the broader context of the massacre.

(Moscoso, 2012:23)

The conventions in these martyrologies is to present the cruelty as part of a seething whole and situate them as ongoing episodes in the history of the faithful.

As if to underline this point the artist includes contemporary elements in his reconstruction of the ancient legend, to highlight ties between past and present. These include the Persian King portrayed as an Ottoman sultan, riding a horse in the lower right corner of the picture. The executioners also wear garish, blue Ottoman clothing, so that the image speaks to a then current fear of the Turkish empire, following the fall of Constantinople. At the centre of the picture, standing somewhat incongruously amidst all the carnage is the artist himself, holding a staff with the inscription "Made in 1508 by Albrecht Dürer, German". Dürer was the most famous representative of the Northern Renaissance and his remarkable body of woodcuts and engravings, each signed conspicuously with his monogram, is a further indication of the changing status of the artist. In previous centuries artists' names were generally not recorded for posterity, but by the fifteenth century some began to sign their work in an effort to distinguish themselves from mere artisans and craftsmen. The process had begun earlier in Florence, from around 1300 with public acclaim moving from admiration of Cimabue to his successor Giotto, so that by 1500 the very idea of artistic individuality was becoming an increasingly important commodity, with contracts for commissions indicating patrons demanding the personal skills of an individual artist rather than purely specifying the use of precious pigments (King, 1999).

Dürer's representation of space contrasts with the open, sunlit-piazza effect so often depicted in Italian art (as in Figure 1), while the insertion of huge rocky outcroppings into the scene provide prominent vertical elements in the composition. The grey tones of the rocks complement the dominant green of the surrounding vegetation in ways that are no doubt highly contrived. These help establish a sense of perspectival depth in the picture plane and envision a panoramic natural landscape that becomes a striking framing device for the biblical tale. The suggestion here of a 'wild' nature sets the stage for an orientalist representation of punitive mass-martyrdom¹, so that the landscape imagery itself has a narrative purpose. Questions remain over the extent to which the extreme violence represented in these depictions of suffering resembled lived experience and punitive practices. They should be read not so much for evidence of how the law worked in practice, but how it should ideologically (Mills, 2005:16).

Images of extreme violence do not exactly reflect the realities of social life, rather they helped to dramatize them. In Renaissance art the 'dominant characteristic' is 'the quest for naturalism, driven by a conviction that art should imitate nature' the philosophical driving force behind the movement was the development of Humanism and the aspiration 'to revive ancient Latin learning' (Kemp, 2014:41). Although this would take many forms it was 'an artistic language of metaphor and elevation' that self-consciously drew on 'Greco-Roman antiquity and mythology, the Bible and aristocratic history' (Eisenman, 2007:60). In the sociology of the Renaissance the pioneering work is Alfred von Martin's (1932/2010) account, which has been largely ignored by his own discipline but is regarded by historians as a classic contribution, not least since it provides an analysis of the emergence of early capitalism in Florence. Combining Marx, Weber and Simmel his approach explores the economic basis of the 'bourgeois revolution' in the city and the immense fortunes merchants amassed enabling them employ painters as agents confirming their status in the world.

There is much to admire in his account, especially since it aspired to analyse the 'social realities which gave rise to this culture' (Von Martin, 1932/2010:ix), but it remains very much tied to what Bourdieu (1993) defines as an 'external' mode of analysis. Here the origins of an artwork are often reduced to the social milieu in which the artist operates (such as the rise of a mercantile class and art patronage in Renaissance Florence). Of course, Bourdieu also emphatically rejected 'internal' readings of artworks, which maintain that the meaning and value of art transcend the historical conditions of their initial creation and reception. The key is to view both approaches as capable of generating interpretations of art and society, but to use the tensions between them productively. In other respects, they could be seen as microsocial and macrosocial in focus, so they are complementary rather than contradictory. In an example such as Titian's *Martyrdom of St Lawrence* (Figure 4), [<Figure 4 near here>](#) which was painted in the late 1550s, it gives an indication of how Renaissance artists relished 'the grandeur of Roman culture and uses the glory of martyrdom to highlight the coming victory of the Christian church over pagan religions' (Kemp, 2014:61). This is just one instance of how the tormented body becomes aestheticized in a particularly exuberant way at this time. For some commentators the kind of spirit displayed here is bound up with the 'Counter-Reformation', which was intended as a strict revitalization of Catholic theology as a response to rise of Protestantism and favoured a style of art we now call 'Baroque' (Spivey, 2001:127).

Titian's *Martyrdom* makes dramatic use of foreshortening – a technique used to create the projection of depth – where monumental classical architecture is depicted in steep perspective and contorted muscular bodies give a certain heroic cast to the suffering. The tormented saint

gazes upwards and gestures to the divine light piercing through the dark clouds, while vivid bursts of flame punctuate the night (breaking with the full-lighting tradition typical of the Renaissance). The use of light adopted by Caravaggio later in the century was radically innovative, creating intensely sharp and almost hallucinatory pictures, which departed significantly from the harmony displayed in much Renaissance art. Some historians have argued that the Reformation constituted a 'crisis of the image', signalled by a shift from 'image culture' to 'textual culture' and the rise of iconoclasm in the sixteenth century supports this interpretation (Burke, 2001:57).

However, it is likely that sacred images retained much of their power in Protestant as well as Catholic Europe. Catholic image culture also changed, often by accentuating and exaggerating the very features Protestants criticized. The Council of Trent, which sat between 1545-63, did much to reshape early modern Catholicism as an 'evangelical campaign' (Spivey, 2001:127), reaffirmed the importance of sacred images alongside pilgrimages and the cult of holy relics. Catholic art after the Council of Trent is increasingly ornate, decorative and reveling in an extreme sensuousness. The ecstasies of the saints, for example, seem to be designed to overwhelm the viewer and underline the difference between holy people and ordinary mortals. The increasingly theatrical style of images can be seen as a vigorous response to Northern Europe's Protestant reformation, whose more zealous factions were seeking to banish all ornament – whether it be artistic or literary (Callaghan, 2016:470) – and the Titian epitomizes what was to be expected from art after Trent.

Conclusion

In this paper I have employed some of Baxandall's ideas to understand the force of representation, a key strength of which is the integration of social and visual analysis into a single framework that does not ascribe 'one to the sociology of art, and the other to art history' (Tanner, 2010:249). Moreover, it seeks to overcome a certain reluctance to engage with artworks themselves, which has been a defining feature of classic and contemporary positions in the sociology of art (de la Fuente, 2007, 2010). By focussing on four images of punishment my aim has been to offer a glimpse of the different ways in which the spectacle of suffering was depicted in the Renaissance and the possibilities for analysis offered in these pictures. In our efforts to put art back into the frame of social science research we will need to borrow histories, theories and methods from our neighbours in art history, but we should not do so naively. Instead, we need a strong sense of what it is that different disciplines bring to debates in these multidisciplinary times and to be able to intervene in them competently, critically and imaginatively.

The framework employed by Baxandall can be criticised for being too intuitive and too speculative, but this is to ignore the sophisticated resources it brings to bear on our understanding of 'pictorial intelligence'. Whatever its shortcomings it does permit the 'analysis to reach from the micro level of specific engagements between viewers and works of art, to the macro considerations of the relationship between art and the broader social structures within which art is located' (Tanner, 2010:250). As such it provides an invaluable way for understanding not only the way people looked at pictures and how they thought about the world, but also the historically variable and socially constructed condition of artistic agency. What emerges is a nuanced critique of economic and political determinism, though one that recognises the role played by material practices in shaping the socially organised bases of artistic production and consumption.

In important respects the focus is upon both the “what” and the “how” of signifying practices, which allows us to search for the meanings behind appearances. It enables us to understand something of the mentalities of earlier times and while ‘no two historians see mentalities in quite the same way’ a distinction can be made between “strong” and “weak” dispositions, where the former are ‘grand intellectual structures’ and the latter ‘more prosaic habits of mind’ (Gaskill, 2000:6-7). The concept of the ‘period eye’ developed by Baxandall (1974) is one that grounds ‘mental habits in the inculcation of social practices generated by individual’s relationships with their culture’s institutions’ (Langdale, 1999:25), and as such echoes the ‘weak’ formulation of mentalities. Ultimately, he is concerned with the dynamic relationships between what people saw, thought, wanted and did, but is careful not to treat culture as a collective and homogenous totality. The range of shared visual experience operates within certain orbits:

One is not talking about all fifteenth-century people, but about those whose response to works of art was important to the artist – the patronizing classes, one might say. In effect this means a rather small proportion of the population: mercantile men, acting as members of confraternities or as individuals, princes and their courtiers, the senior members of religious houses.

(Baxandall, 1974:38-9)

The parameters of experience and practice that Baxandall identifies in the visual culture of quattrocento Italy offers a rich repertoire of methodological and conceptual resources that significantly aid our sociological understanding of pictures. Each of the images discussed in this paper are works of the imagination and should not be confused with historical fact, but they are loaded with symbolic meaning. They were produced in particular contexts, by artists working for patrons, and leave invaluable traces of the conventions governing perception in a given culture.

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¹ I am grateful for Reviewer 2 highlighting this point.