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book review of

The Troubled Republic: Visual Culture and Social Debate in France, 1889–1900 by Richard Thomson

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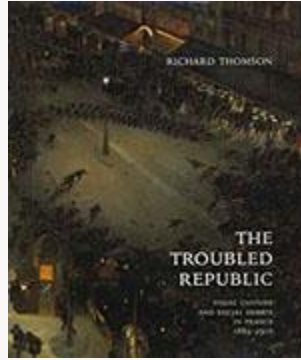
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The Troubled Republic: Visual Culture and Social Debate in France, 1889–1900

Richard Thomson

New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004

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It would be hard to imagine a decade more under-studied than the one Richard Thomson has chosen as the terrain for his latest investigation into the history of nineteenth-century French art. Although we know much about the avant-garde artists working at the time, and there have been many, mostly not terribly scholarly books on the so-called Belle Epoque, the diversity of visual production in this period is familiar only to those of us who have had the questionable privilege of leafing through illustrated Salon catalogues of the 1890s in search of monographic or thematic information of various kinds. Herein undoubtedly lies one of the most important contributions of Thomson's book: with its striking illustrations, it provides us not only with a real impression of the heterogeneity of French art of the time, but also encourages us to take this material seriously.

It is Thomson's contention that such works can contribute not only to a fresh understanding of the history of art in this period, but also—and perhaps even more importantly—can help us understand the French mentality of the 1890s; and that visual culture in fact played an important role in shaping that mentality. Paintings, drawings, sculptures and decorative objects are seen not as mere reflections or illustrations of social circumstances; nor is the social history of the era treated as mere context or "background" for the works of art. It is precisely the interaction of the two—the active agency of both history and the artworks—that is the subject of the book. *The Troubled Republic* thus holds out a methodological as well as a factual and interpretive promise.

The book is divided into four chapters, each one dealing with a different theme pertinent and vexing to the otherwise optimistic ideology of the Third Republic: sex, the masses, religion, and the *revanche*. All were areas which, many believed, posed a threat to the nation: the declining birth rate; a growing proletariat that could either rally around or destroy the Republic; the persistence, even revival, of Catholicism in the face of an official policy of secularization and modernization; and the Hun at the gates. The discourse around these

issues was, Thomson argues, not only a verbal one—expressed in the writings of historians, sociologists, government functionaries, partisans of the new science of psychology (most of them probably completely unknown to most art historians)—but also a visual one.

As discussed in chapter one, "Public Health and Private Desire: Exploring Modernity and the Erotic," France became obsessed with what it perceived to be its increasing degeneracy following the defeat in the Franco-Prussian War. There was widespread concern about the nation's sexual and physical wellbeing. In depicting the human body, artists "touched on, even engaged in, debates about degeneration, sexuality or public health" (13). Particularly in the art of the avant-garde—which in this chapter gets more attention than elsewhere in the book—we find many of the most pressing moral and sexual issues of the day explored: prostitution, adultery, lesbianism and other forms of "deviance," each made all the more troubling for their novel form. (See, for example, Anquetin's marvellous and mysterious *Rond-Point des Champs-Élysées*, 1889) The modernists' fascination with the possibilities offered by such themes, both in art and life, stood in marked contrast to the admonishing tone adopted by the Republic, but both were part of the same worried disquisition, flip sides of the same coin.

In addition to the general anxiety regarding sex, there was also a perennial fear of the crowd, the subject of chapter two, "Picturing and Policing the Crowd." The masses that formed the Republic's base could also become its undoing, as they had so often in the past. Artists of all political stripes, both champions of the underclass and partisans of the government's ideology of fraternity, depicted crowds, sometimes with sympathy, sometimes with trepidation. Interestingly enough, these images do not always break down along party lines: the discourse of policing and control and the preoccupation with crowd psychology as articulated by conservative thinkers like Gustav LeBon was so pervasive, argues Thomson, that its vocabulary entered even into images that seem either to show the masses as the Republic wanted and needed them; or that at first glance appear entirely neutral; or that may be presumed to empathize with those depicted, often the victims of officially sanctioned brutality—as for instance in Félix Vallotton's *The Crowd in Paris* (1892) and *The Demonstration* (1893).

Chapters 3 and 4 ("The Religious Debate" and "Always Think About It, Never Discuss It") offer some of the most persuasive and novel arguments in the book. Particularly the former, with its plethora of sometimes quite bizarre images, provides insight into an aspect of French visual culture and thought that have been steadfastly neglected by art historians of the period—works such as Tissot's *What Our Savior saw from the Cross* (1890-94), Jean Béraud's *The Magdalene at the House of the Pharisee* (1891), or Dagnan-Bouveret's *Christ and the Pilgrims at Emmaus* (1896-97). Religion, it seems, continued to play an important part in French life, and the efforts French artists made to reconcile this with the modernizing impulses of the Third Republic—expressed both in the concept of the *raillement* and in the propagation of the naturalist style—yielded some truly remarkable results. Whether of the avant-garde or of a more conventional bent, artists grappled with ways of giving form to the Scriptures that would make them relevant to a new society, with new expectations *vis à vis* visual representation. As Thomson himself puts it: "In this strange cultural environment, where an ancient ideological tradition struggled for survival while a new one strove to take root there

was, it seems, a process of cross-fertilization, of unusual graftings and hybrids. For where the religious ended and the Republican began was by no means always clear..." (134).

It is a commonplace among historians of the nineteenth century that by the 1890s the wounds of the Franco-Prussian War had largely healed and that the issue of the *revanche* had ceased to play a major role in French thought and society. Thomson contends that quite the opposite was true: given the evidence of visual culture, the proliferation in all forms of images revolving around the war and revenge—monuments, paintings, prints, even decorative objects—the idea had never been more alive among the French populace. There may well have been a taboo on the part of the government about speaking of the lost provinces and France's hereditary enemy, but no such injunction was placed on artists, as the widespread reproduction of works such as Detaille's *The Dream*, which even appears as a print in other images, attests. The memories of the defeat lived on, and the images helped to prepare a whole new generation for the battles to come. They were a subtle, but persuasive form of propaganda, perhaps more effective than any public speech or official rallying cry could ever have been in convincing young Frenchmen that it was their duty to die for *la patrie*.

In many ways, *The Troubled Republic* makes a commendable contribution to our understanding of late nineteenth-century French culture, visual and otherwise. One can, of course, argue with the author on a number of points: he often relies too heavily on a single text (as with LeBon); the images chosen do not convincingly illustrate his argument (Hermann-Paul's *L'escargot de l'omnibus* is a more jolly than threatening depiction of the urban crowd); there is barely any mention of *anti-clerical* imagery; and, more surprisingly, no discussion of the imagery of the Dreyfus Affair. Thomson's analysis of the *revanche* as an enduring and integral part of the popular imagination is convincing, but, as I have argued elsewhere, even the official ideology of the Third Republic, above all its commitment to internationalism in the artistic sphere, can also be read as a means of dealing with the great problem of Germany and revenge, a way of healing France's wounded (cultural) pride.^[1] Thomson also fails to place his analysis in broader European perspective—France, after all, was not the only country to suffer the anxieties of modernization and industrialization in this period—and some comparison with, for example, Germany itself, could have been extremely enlightening.

A more fundamental critique, however, has to be the lack of an articulated theoretical framework. Nowhere is the term "visual culture" given a definition; and there is no mention of the debate surrounding the term, which caused so much uproar during the 1990s. Where does Thomson stand in this debate, particularly in its relation to the discipline of art history? What is the status of his book? If it is truly to be read in the "tradition" of visual culture studies, he has concentrated too exclusively on images of high art (kitsch or not). If it is an art history book, on the other hand, there needs to be some (aesthetic?) distinction made between, for example, a Degas and a Béraud. Both are equally beautifully illustrated, so that the latter achieves the same standing as the former. This is highly problematic as long as there is no theoretical formulation of what the study of visual culture actually is. If any scholar is in a position to propose such a formulation, it is Richard Thomson. In this sense, the book somewhat disappoints the methodological promise it appears to hold out. It does, however, make good on its myriad other fronts.

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Notes

[1] See Rachel Esner, "Art Knows no Fatherland': Internationalism and the Reception of German Art in the Early Third Republic," in *The Mechanics of Internationalism: Culture, Society and Politics from the 1840s to World War I*, ed. Martin Geyer and Johannes Paulmann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 321-56. See also Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Die Kultur der Niederlage* (Berlin: Alexander Fest Verlag, 2001); translated as *The Culture of Defeat* (London and New York: Granta Books, 2004). For an interpretation of the imagery of the Franco-Prussian War along these lines see the author's "Gloria victis: Französische Gemälde des Deutsch-Französischen Krieges," in *Bilder der Macht - Macht der Bilder: Zeitgeschichte in Darstellungen des 19. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Stephan Germer and Michael Zimmermann (Munich: Klinkhardt and Biermann, 1997), 390-402; and "René Princeteau's Dragoon and the Depiction of the Franco-Prussian War," *Van Gogh Museum Journal* (1996): 145-65. It is, unfortunately, not atypical of Anglo-American art historians that they take little account of the (secondary) literature published in languages other than English and French.