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## REVIEWS

### ***Seeing Ghosts: 9/11 and the Visual Imagination, Karen Engle (2009)***

McGill-Queen's University Press, 183 pp., ISBN: 0773535411, Paperback, £16.99, ISBN: 0773535403, Hardback, £64.00

*Reviewed by Simon Downs*

At the risk of encouraging you to stop reading now, let me preface this review by saying that Karen Engle has given us a genuinely fascinating insight into media and 9/11. This is a book that, despite possessing some idiosyncrasies, is well worth buying. Beyond the manifold tragedies that were spawned by the events of 9/11, this book demonstrates that the event itself continues to serve as a fairground hall of mirrors reflecting the prejudices of the viewer.

If we visit the website 'Scholars for 9/11 Truth' we find a narrative of covert operations examined and exposed with scholastic rigour – unsurprising as the scholars in question are an odd mixture of ex-spooks and observers of all that is wicked in the world.

When we watch Adam Curtis's *The Power of Nightmares* (Curtis, 2004) we see a man of the media reading the day's events through a frame of political power play and media manipulation.

And in *Seeing Ghosts* Karen Engle gives us a reading of terror (and the repressive governmental response to acts of terror) as critical theory writ large: and in doing so encapsulates the problems of postmodern analysis of cultural things. Once you discard notions of 'the cultural', of movements, of historical and national narratives, it becomes hard to draw broad conclusions about common experience: you are left with the reporting of personal response. I am reminded of Alan Kirby's definition

of postmodernism as a culture that fetishizes the author (as a presence or absence); this is in sharp contrast with current western milieu, which fetishizes the 'recipient'. At its best this book does what a critical investigation should do, it raises uncomfortable questions, de-naturalizing *natural assumptions*; and it does so with grace and conviction. At its worst it raises opinion to a status it does not deserve by repeating it in an authorial tone.

The book is scholarly in nature, offering the reader the means to locate the debate in a broader critical context. Less helpfully it engages with the sort of reflexive wordplay that too frequently forms the staple of critical debate and analysis. While this formally locates the text as 'worthy' within the academy, it does not offer us tools that we (as co-authors of the meaning in the world) may use to understand the spectacle of terrorism aimed at civilian populations.

So in the section on methodology we are told that the choice of '... material here is visual, and I chose images that struck me, punctum-like. They were images that haunted me and of which I wanted to make some sense' (2009: 7). This is honest and fair enough but limits the value we ascribe to the text as knowledge. Such personal responses do not tell us how the world's media responded nor do they help us understand the media's responses. This book is about personal textual analysis of public visual events.

The text presents us with a kind of psychic questing: the quest being the sum total of the phenomenological experience of an individual reporter. We have no common ground with the reporter except for the mediated events of 9/11 and so we are forced to accept the report as presented, with no means to participate or refute it. For example the case of the media's reporting of the terrorist John Walker Lindh is cast as a deliberate transformation by the forces of the establishment, an intentional rebranding akin to Rihanna's endless costume changes. This may well be factually correct, but we have no way of knowing. This represents a recourse to the philosophy of propositions, not the philosophy of evidence, and in a postmodern text it seems curiously authorial – locking down the range of interpretation in just the spirit that so troubled Barthes.

So where Derrida notes 'there is no outside-text' (1974: 158) – no sharp disjunction between the author and the authored – as a tool for investigating the relationship between the report and the world being reported on; this book sometimes treats this as a permission to upwardly reflect the personal onto the global. This is not necessarily a terminal criticism. If we read the book as a poetic reading of a global, shared and mythic event (rather than as a record, research and meditation on events) it succeeds admirably.

And where this sense of poetry is brought to bear on the harsh events of the day it sensitively reveals troubling truths; Engle's analysis of Fischl's *Tumbling Woman* is rather beautiful and presents an emotionally satisfying proposition. We are disturbed by the intense proximity of death captured by the image: that sickening moment just before the tumbling woman's head bursts on the pavement

and her life is extinguished. Engle's analysis *feels* right: the text frames the image as a powerfully disturbing reminder that the moment of death and mourning is not over.

The book gets stronger the further it moves away from personal exposition and the closer it gets to the public sphere, as in the case of the 'Falling Man'. The authorial voice imposes itself upon our possible readings of events. For example, clumsy commentary links the public fascination with the 'Falling Man' image with the public consumption of porn. Contrasting the number of online viewings of the image with the public's accustomed diet of online pornography does not constitute evidence: other readings are not explored, and validation is not sought. The link is made baldly and left as fact.

Morbid curiosity is not synonymous with pornography, even etymologically. While we can read the image (in a US context) as *obscure*, or even *taboo*, that does not make it pornographic. No evidence is presented that the image was constructed to be sexual or that it is commonly read as such. Such an image might well be read as obscure (not to be publicly viewed, veiled or obscured), and quite possibly as taboo (as the reader you are socially constrained from engagement with the image and the thought of the 'Falling Man'), but it would not, unless you had very perverse nature, be pornographic.

The kind of analysis formally denied by the book's methodology is frequently applied; and where it is the book takes off. In the same chapter ('Falling Man') a structured argument is made about state control of the imagery associated with 9/11 that raises the hair on your neck. Even if we charitably allow paternal motivations for this image-consumption control Engle is correct in drawing the parallels with a police state.

Do not buy this book to learn about official responses to the attacks, do not buy this book if you hope to peek into the secret motives of the authors of the attacks (whoever they are): this is not *that* book. It is not a broad examination of media responses to 9/11. However the book is a fascinating, partial and infuriating personal journey to Ground Zero that left me a little wiser to the media response to 9/11, but much better informed about current attitudes in critical studies.

For an alternative view of the relationship between 9/11 and the media *The Shock of the News: Media Coverage and the Making of 9/11*, by Brian Monahan, will be reviewed in issue 2.

## References

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- Kirby, Alan (2006), 'The Death of Postmodernism And Beyond', *Philosophy Now*, <http://www.philosophynow.org/issue58/58kirby.htm>. Accessed 27 December 2009.

## Exhibition: *Revolution on Paper: Mexican Prints 1910–1950*

Reviewed by The Poster

*Revolution on Paper* is a fascinating example of the impulse to shape the world through visual persuasion. As a confirmed poster junkie, in love with the visual culture of revolution, I was looking for the lexicon of revolt written in the bold strokes of a Peckinpah movie: instead we are presented with a thoughtful class in the fabrication of national identity. So where the exhibition purports to be about revolution, it is not: it's about the aftermath of revolution and the rhetorical establishment of identity, and this is its strength.

The images in the exhibition illuminate a determined attempt to build a unified Mexican national culture in response to both internal and external threats. For Mexico the nineteenth century was a cycle of fractured government, violence, repression, revolts, oligarchic counter-revolutions and foreign invasion. For the artists of twentieth-century Mexico forging a unified state founded on a common identity represented a goal worth working for, and a fitting use for their time and efforts.

Progressing through the exhibition we first encounter authentic revolutionary propaganda in the form of José Guadalupe Posada's Mexican gothic *calaveras*, which, through the appropriation of the pre-Columbian visual forms of the Day of the Dead (combined with a European pamphleteer's inflammatory visual rhetoric) form a revolutionary iconology reflective of a desire for national unity (figure 1: cat. no. AN84637).

Along with an extensive range of agitprop covering the first half of the twentieth century, we witness the intentional formation of a nationalist narrative established through educational material, magazines and politicized artworks. While the artworks may seem tame compared to their contemporaries in Europe (Dix or Groß carry a nightmarish edge that this work does not) such comparisons rather miss the point. These are works created to dream a national ideal into the waking world. The exhibited books and journals are a revelation of vivid, rich and powerful imagery aimed at translating public positions into private beliefs.

The exhibition might usefully be read as a manual for the rhetorical construction of a national identity. It incorporates stereotypical European revolutionary culture, stereotypical Eurocentric oligarchs (in the role of the villain), pre-Columbian and peasant culture (as the hero) and the world (natural and supernatural) as a canvas on which Mexican concerns are reflected. Stripped of its national framing, there is little in the exhibition that could not be found in any revolutionary graphic language, but the concentration of imagery makes you appreciate how rarely we see the act of visual persuasion, the forming of identity, laid out for us with such clarity. In a world where those who

wish to frame the social and political project continually address us, this exhibition helps to uncover their little tricks. This exhibition is recommended for all those who study communication, and the political uses of the image.

The exhibition will tour to three venues around Britain in autumn 2010. For more information see: [http://www.britishmuseum.org/the\\_museum/news\\_and\\_press\\_releases/press\\_releases/2009/revolution\\_on\\_paper.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/the_museum/news_and_press_releases/press_releases/2009/revolution_on_paper.aspx).

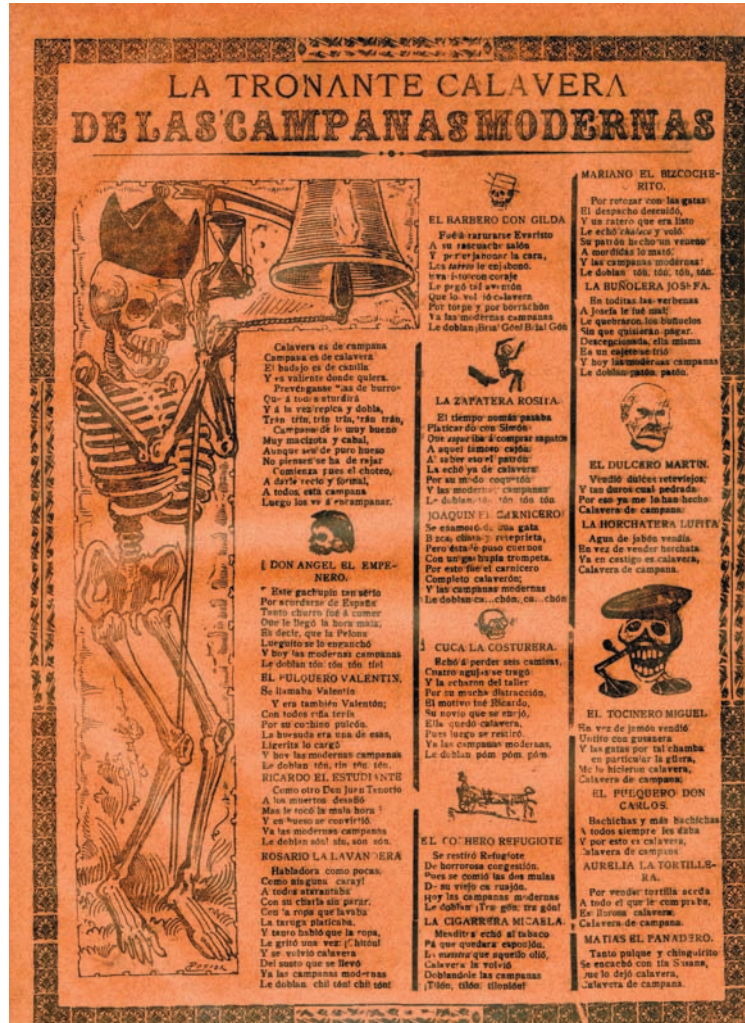


Figure 1: cat. no. AN84637. The thundering skeleton of the modern bells, Jose Guadalupe Posada, 1905. © Trustees of the British Museum.



Figure 2: cat. no. AN483373. Victory, Ángel Bracho, 1945. © Trustees of the British Museum. Reproduced by permission of the Sociedad Mexicana de Autores de las Artes Plásticas (SOMAAP).





Figure 5: cat. no. AN483021. Fourth C.T.A.L. Congress, Santiago, Chile, 22–29 March, 1953, Pablo O'Higgins and Francisco Mora, 1953. Courtesy of Fundación Cultural María y Pablo O'Higgins.