Pinkus, Assaf, *Visual Aggression: Images of Martyrdom in Late Medieval Germany*.
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Unusually brutal depictions of the deaths of martyrs populated the Upper
and Middle Rhine during the fourteenth century. Unlike the typified, clinical
images of martyrian deaths of the period, which portray figures in transcend-
ent detachment from their suffering, these intense images favor a distress-
ing emphasis on corporeal anguish. Surviving examples portray figures sus-
pended in permanent states of torture, pain, and bodily dissolution, assembling
what Assaf Pinkus astutely deemed "galleries of violence." In his latest mono-
graph, *Visual Aggression: Images of Martyrdom in Late Medieval Germany*, these
scenes of execution and mutilation are explored from a somaesthetic stand-
point that integrates visual reception and bodily response into the current dis-
course surrounding violence in the later Middle Ages. Convincingly, the author
positions galleries of violence as cysts that grew from the moral and ethical
conversations surrounding the body, as well as cruelties committed against it,
that arose in fourteenth-century German-speaking lands.

Previously, Pinkus outlines, the body had been thought of as the property
of the Church, on loan from God; however, after the spread of Dominican ide-
ologies and Thomistic thought across the region, the body became the private
property of the individual. Now conceptualized as a thing in relative equi-
librium with the soul, its boundaries in relation to others—and to society—
became subject to redefinition. Positing that violence committed against the
body, newly understood as a moral problem, became an issue of artistic spec-
ulation, the author argues that the images of corporeal torment found in gal-
leries of violence encouraged viewers to imagine such afflictions upon their
own corporeal forms. Reconsidering these visuals under new implications, he
notes that the medieval devotional texts that promoted *imitatio Christi*, or the
imitation of Christ (often through bodily and emotional suffering), were for
a restricted audience and may have been irrelevant to the public's reception
of such violent imagery; following this intellection, the visuals included in
Pinkus's discussion were not necessarily intended to bring viewers closer to a
holy entity, but saturated them with the physical agonies of the characters rep-
resented to produce a "different, unpredictable, irrepressible meaning for the
public."

The book consists of five chapters. The first two, "Visual Rhetoric" and
"Between Theological and Juridical Positions," contain relatively adherent argu-
ments that have been bifurcated, perhaps for the convenience of the reader.
They center the strangely non-narrative martyr imagery in the northern choir

of the Holy Cross Minster of Schwäbisch Gmünd and the (seemingly) disordered martyria of the Church of St. Theobold in Thann, each of which have been unsettled by art-historical analysis. Devoid of their vitas and thus their individuality, the martyrs of Schwäbisch Gmünd favor a spectacular and experiential violence that, Pinkus argues, was augmented by the viewer's personal experience of seeing violent behavior in daily life. Similarly, he suggests that the confusing organizing principles of the Thann martyria—previously considered an impotent attempt at sculptural communication—might be found in the local *Annales*, records that were dedicated to documenting the era's abrasive events on local and continental scales. Its imagery of villains and self-sacrifice, he proposes, were participating in Franciscan efforts to make meaning of current violent events by tracing "a specific teleology in the face of the turbulent times." Arguing that the basis of social belonging and categories of torture represented coalesce with contemporaneous local discourse of martyrdoms and pogroms, he suggests that the martyrs are arranged according to their societal roles and the types of torture they were subjected to (as opposed to a calendrical mode of organization). Critical readers will appreciate Pinkus's awareness of the problems of depending on *Annales*, which were laced with subjective interpretations and political agendas, and although these chapters may initially seem conjunctive, their resolutions necessitated strategic separation in order to lead the reader toward ensuing arguments.

Chapter three, "Bodily Imagination, Imagined Bodies" raises issues of sensational responses to violent imagery along the Rhine by centering depictions of the flaying of Bartholomew and the (mis)representation of the breaking of Catherine on the wheel. The former of these two mutilations was rarely performed in reality and existed primarily within the imaginations of viewers. However, the latter—the wheel, which appears in an edited depiction of Catherine's vita at Thann (she was, in writing, spared this torment through divine intervention)—held a gruesome presence in medieval punitive systems, its depiction evoking associations with public-facing juridical discipline. Reflecting on the body as a medium through which the aesthetics of sensations such as pain could be explored, Pinkus offers the term "bodily imagination" to flesh out the reception of such scenes. This, he defines as "the ways in which images encouraged viewers … to imagine tortures and pains on and through their own bodies, as their own suffering, and … to project their own bodies, imaginations, and range of associations related to the visualized torments upon the image." Here, we are reminded of Hans Belting's work on the body as medium, wherein the imagination resides within the viewer's physical self; but Pinkus draws unique attention to an interconnection between image, mind, and body that results in a theologically unmediated corporeal activation.

Additionally, he uses a rich comparative example between the life-size *Bamberg Reiter* and over-life-size statues of Roland the knight to consider how the viewer's imaginative faculties responded to scale, medium, and an imagined past filled with giants and other mythical creatures. This addition incorporates the "colossi imagination"—a subject he has published on previously—which complicates an already surgical chapter, leaving the reader flush with anticipation for much more from Pinkus on this topic in the future.

Chapters four and five are particularly potent, carrying the study into more intimate realms of viewership to consider the social and material connotations of violent images. In chapter four, "Eroticized & Sexualized Bodies," the author diverges from modern feminist and queer theories "to reflect on the tension between eroticized and sexualized bodies of the martyrs and their torments within a medieval context." He provides a sufficient justification for this approach: because the definitions of the erotic and sexual are culturally contingent, modern theories that concern them risk inadequacy. Then, differentiating between erotic and sexualized—where eroticism is derived from a mystical interpretation of bodily sensation, while the sexualized related to the cardinal sin of lust—he examines the construction and mutilation of bodies in Master Francke's Saint Barbara Altarpiece. Here, according to Pinkus, the naked St. Barbara should be understood within these two distinct characterizations. While the bodies of her tormentors are sexualized, appearing as bestial and grotesque to indicate corporeal desire and lust, Barbara's is eroticized, her radiant white skin and golden hair encoded within the language of the Song of Songs and its uses of corporeal love as divine metaphor. Under these distinctions, sexuality and eroticism are prorated concepts: eroticism is located within the martyr, rendering her an embodiment of mystical exegesis, and sexuality located within her aggressors, suspending their potential as surrogates for devoted viewers (they are instead likened to demons and allegories of lust found in representations of the Last Judgment). Effectively coercive, this discussion demonstrates familiarity with modern complications of viewership—which may perceive the scene as literal, with St. Barbara's nudity a source of abusive titillation—and replaces it with the medieval viewer's polemical vision to understand the staging of nudity and bodily violation.

Readers may find themselves most captivated by chapter five, "The Body Reincarnated," in which Pinkus articulates the scholarly and clerical thoughts that underpinned painting and sculpture to examine objects that are, on one hand, fundamentally transformative and, on the other, fundamentally fragmented. He is quick to identify an important disjuncture between the modern and medieval eye, noting that hierarchical distinctions between painting and

the plastic arts are the result of the early modern *paragone*. Medieval artistic sensibilities lacked this framing, instead viewing the multivalence of media in non-hierarchical, nearly lateral relations. A thoughtful encounter with the metamorphic *Schreinmaddonen*, hinged wooden statues of the Virgin Mary that open to reveal carved and painted images within, expands the discussion of such multimedial works to encompass their perceived animacy and capacity to oscillate between painting and sculpture. The fleshy qualities of wood are identified as an essential component of the materialization of the divine as Pinkus draws the works of figures such as Isidore of Seville, Caesarius, and Vincent of Beauvais, while paint is treated as a material that gave "life, harmony, beauty, and value" to objects.

These dynamic *Schreinmaddonnen* create the foundations of Pinkus's brilliant discussion of the wooden busts of Ursula and the eleven thousand virgins of Cologne. Produced after the discovery of a mass grave that was believed to have been the burial site of the martyr and her companions, these sculptures were painted in unprecedentedly lifelike detail and accentuated with heavenly gilding. Their wooden forms were shells that housed the exhumed skulls of the dead (thought to be Ursula's band of virgins), acting as both containers of relics and animate supplants for their missing flesh. Referring to stories in which they sing within the bounds of church walls to substantiate his claims, Pinkus regards these busts as "complete substitutes" for the absent saints. Here, he argues that the interplay between wooden sculpture and enlivening paint activated the intuitions and imaginations of viewers: martyrian pains were not projected onto the viewer's body from a distance but amassed within their own space, restoring their fragmented bodies from annihilation. Materiality, it seems, bridged the fragmented bodies of saints with the living world, with animated (and thus living) reliquaries inhabiting the same real space that viewers did. The chapter invigorates the body of research with a vital heartbeat, and those familiar with the author's 2014 monograph, *Sculpting Simulacra in Medieval Germany, 1250–1380*, will find its fundamental tools reignited and refined therein.

Employing a sensitive eye, Pinkus's labors generate a pulsing art-historical gradient between Caroline Walker Bynum's generative work on the medieval body and Valentin Groebner's seminal studies of late medieval violence. He impressively wields (and discards) numerous theoretical apparatuses—reception and response, feminist analysis, and materiality among them—to position violent images within the juridical, ethical, and cultural contexts from which they arose. This approach is dense, occasionally risking coagulation. But, if the reader fears that the argument is clotting, they will soon discover that such instances are fleeting and dissolve back into a powerful flow of research that

reveals the precise implications of violent medieval images. Equipped with an abundance of impressively photographed objects (many of which were taken by the author himself), as well as rich literature reviews in each chapter, *Visual Aggression* is a manifold, insightful, and engaging study.

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