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Foulest, Vilest, Obscenest

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Iconoclasm
by David Freedberg.
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On the evening of 22 August 1566, a crowd gathered in the town of 's-Hertogenbosch to listen to an open air sermon by an itinerant Protestant preacher. Afterwards they rushed from church to church, singing psalms and smashing images. Two days later, the reformers held their first sermon in the town cathedral, now purified of the paintings and statues they believed tempted churchgoers into idolatry or lust. The *Beeldenstorm*, the 'storm of images' that swept across the Netherlands in 1566, affected almost every town in the country. Many Dutch Catholics were persuaded by the reformers' arguments that their contemplation of the divine would be purer without the distraction of images. Others, especially the minor nobility, were eager to defend the smashing of images as a symbol of rebellion against Spanish rule. Many were motivated by hunger. Grain shortages after the failed harvest of 1565 brought receptive audiences for travelling preachers who argued that the Church was wasting its wealth on art. There were similar attacks all over Europe, from the British Isles to the Balkans.

David Freedberg, who teaches art history at Columbia (and who was, long ago, my dissertation adviser), describes himself as 'haunted' by the question of what it is about art that arouses such fierce responses. Most academic art history considers the social and historical contexts of art-making, but Freedberg instead investigates emotional responses we are generally embarrassed to admit even to ourselves.

Alonso Cano's 17th-century painting of *The Vision of Saint Bernard* in the Prado is one of many illustrations of the popular legend about a statue of the Virgin Mary coming to life. Like a bartender doing a trick pour, she squirts a jet of breast milk into the praying saint's mouth to reward him for his devotion. The story, Freedberg explains, is a miraculous amplification of the way images are used in many religions, not just Catholicism. An image 'brings the transcendent to earth', helping worshippers understand invisible mysteries by picturing them. Saint Bernard's 12th-century encounter was supposed to be exceptional: the story wouldn't be miraculous if listeners believed a statue could lactate like a living woman. Still, Freedberg believes that our brains initially respond to figural images as if they were alive. Only afterwards do we shape our response by reassuring ourselves that the image is inanimate. If you have ever been affected or aroused by an arrangement of pigments or pixels, you too have felt the power of images. Such responses are universal, Freedberg argues, because of 'our psychological, biological and neurological status as members of the same species'. Factors such as gender, race, culture and personal history play a 'conditioning role', modifying and shaping our reactions as well as our conscious understanding of them.

Some neurological studies seem to support Freedberg's contention that we respond to images as if they were alive. The same regions of our brains are activated when we see an object and an image that represents it. But the promise of neuroaesthetics remains largely unfulfilled. Few scientists have been willing to carry out expensive brain imaging studies on our responses to art, and the data that has been collected is hard to interpret, though some of it seems to contradict Freedberg's thesis that our immediate responses to images are biological and precognitive. Subjects in a 2011 study, for instance, showed markedly different neurological activation in response to images they were told were painted by Rembrandt compared with images they were told were copies of his work. This occurred whether or not the paintings were genuine (the investigators randomised the descriptions), suggesting that our conscious beliefs about an image can shape our biological response to it.

Whether or not we accept his central premise, Freedberg's insistence on the importance of irrational, bodily, emotional responses to art is still valuable. He is fascinated in particular by sexual responses to images that are not explicitly erotic. Cano's painting of Saint Bernard, with Mary's bared breast and bodily fluid passing from one figure to the other, is supposed to inspire viewers to emulate the saint's chastity. Freedberg argues that this apparent contradiction isn't an accident. For him, our sexual response is what allows us to conceive of images as a pathway to the divine. We respond to images of the beautiful Virgin Mary or a handsome saint because we are attracted to their bodies. Religion's necessary subterfuge is to convince us we are aroused by the subjects' spiritual qualities rather than their physical ones.

For Freedberg, sexualised looking is universal, while the ways we shape or repress our arousal are the products of particular cultures and circumstances. In *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (1989), he challenged the then standard labelling of some cultures as 'primitive' because of the ways they responded to art: if our responses are universal, we in the modern West are equally primitive. Freedberg sought to collapse the supposed distinction between responding to images as aesthetically beautiful and as religiously or 'magically' potent, discussing such European practices as hanging life-sized wax votive portraits in churches, or painting traitors on prison walls so their punishment would continue even after their execution. People from all cultures and all times 'vacillate between love of images and hostility towards them'. All humans have been aroused by art, have cried before it – and destroyed it.

In *A Tramp Abroad*, Mark Twain called Titian's *Venus of Urbino* 'the foulest, the vilest, the obscenest picture the world possesses', joking that it was made for a brothel but 'probably refused because it was a trifle too strong. In truth, it is too strong for any place but a public art gallery.' Freedberg expands on what Twain's joke recognises: the museum is a place of repression, where the power of images can be tamed and our responses to art rationalised. In a gallery, where certain codes of behaviour apply, we tend not to fall to our knees in prayer, attack the art or react sexually to it, however powerful our initial responses may be.

The repression extends to what we allow ourselves to think about the history of images. Although museums now rarely describe non-Western art as 'primitive', it is still unusual to hear a European artwork's original erotic, medical or miracle-working purpose described in an art history lecture. We are still reluctant to admit that we respond to art on anything other than an intellectual level, although Freedberg asks us not to forget 'the elements of sexuality that lie beneath the sophisticated indifference' of the modern museumgoer. Titian's *Venus*, painted in 1534, was probably intended to arouse a young bride at a time when female orgasm was thought necessary for conception. But audiences now usually ignore or reinterpret the evidence before their eyes, claiming, for example, that the painting's subject is modestly covering her genitals with her hand. Algernon Swinburne, always keenly attentive to sexual imagery, knew this was far from the truth: as he put it in a letter of 1864, she has 'four lazy fingers buried dans les fleurs de son jardin'. He marvelled that anyone could remain 'decently virtuous within thirty square miles' of the canvas.

If the museum shapes the viewer's reaction, censorship and iconoclasm shape the work itself. They try to prevent a socially undesirable or personally intolerable response to an image by damaging or destroying what provokes it. A censor covers the genitals of a nude statue; an iconoclast smashes them. *The Power of Images* includes a series of case studies of people slashing, breaking or throwing acid on artworks, including Rembrandt's *Night*

Watch and one of Michelangelo's Pietàs. Iconoclasts who operate in groups, as during the *Beeldenstorm*, usually claim to have rational theological or political aims, but Freedberg argues that those who attack images do so because they find it hard to draw a line between image and reality. For protesters, 'the broadly political act becomes allied with the idiosyncratic, neurotic one.' Freedberg sees both iconoclasm and censorship as a way of repressing the irrational fear that an image might truly come alive. If you want to change the meaning of an image or the way it makes people feel or act, he suggests that you encourage people to reflect on their relationship to it.

Freedberg, who describes himself as a member of the 'bien-pensant liberal bourgeoisie', decries racism and the histories of oppression honoured by many of the monuments that protesters have targeted in recent years. But he can't condone their destruction. His own history goes some way towards explaining the reason. He is an expert on Netherlandish art, and his interest in iconoclasm arose from his struggle to understand the *Beeldenstorm*, which destroyed so many of its masterpieces. His theory of iconoclasm has no place for any argument that might justify destruction. 'Charlottesville', his chapter on the toppling of monuments in the US in 2020, doesn't quote any protesters, although it does cite a *New York Times* interview with Randall Woodfin, the mayor of Birmingham, Alabama. 'Any Confederate museum that wants this thing can have it,' Woodfin said. He was the first official to order the removal of a Confederate monument during the 2020 protests, and Freedberg interprets his statement as a cavalier rejection of the power of the monument, which has 'become just a thing to be dismissed, granted free to the first willing taker … reduced to the level of raw materiality, devoid of shape or meaning'.

The statement Freedberg quotes was made in 2019, well before Woodfin's decision to remove the obelisk from Birmingham in May 2020. In fact, Woodfin, a Black lawyer in his early forties, has a nuanced understanding of the power of Confederate monuments erected long after the Civil War by politicians intent on intimidating Black citizens and preventing them from exercising their increasingly theoretical right to vote. In an interview soon after the obelisk came down, Woodfin described Confederate monuments as celebrations of systematic racism based on claims of the biological inferiority of Black people. He explained that his role as mayor was to fight the disparities in education, unemployment, incarceration and life expectancy that resulted from centuries of unequal treatment of whites and Blacks. It seemed to him that the racist intent of the officials who put the obelisk up in 1905 was ridiculously clear. The base was inscribed with a text dedicating it to the Confederate dead, even though Birmingham wasn't founded until 1871, after the war was over. By 2020, in a majority Black city, the monument was an unwanted celebration of a past Birmingham had never had.

Woodfin clearly didn't see the monument as 'devoid of shape or meaning'. His seemingly flippant words – 'any Confederate museum that wants this thing can have it' – were driven by frustration. His predecessor, William Bell, had pledged to remove the monument, only to be sued by a Confederate heritage group. The resulting delay gave the state legislature time to pass a law prohibiting the removal or alteration of public monuments more than forty years old. Conceding that he could not remove the monument, Bell instead ordered it to be covered by a plywood box, at which point Alabama's attorney general sued the city, claiming the box illegally altered the monument. The state demanded a fine of $25,000 be paid for each day the statue remained covered.

The city's appeal against this order was still pending when Woodfin came to office. He felt so strongly about the injustice of the state forcing the citizens of Birmingham to look at a monument most of them found abhorrent that he considered removing it anyway, but feared he might be expelled from office and face prosecution. He hoped a Confederate heritage group might lobby the state for an exception to the law and take the thing away. In the end, Alabama's highest court held that Birmingham was liable only for a single $25,000 fine for covering up the monument. Six months later, with protesters at risk of serious injury as a result of their attempts to topple the obelisk, Woodfin decided that another $25,000 was a small price to pay, and it was gone.

The historical iconoclasts Freedberg discusses usually had no previous relationship with the artworks they attacked. The man who entered the Rijksmuseum in 1911 to slash *The Night Watch* with a pocketknife was seeing it for the first time. Freedberg sees such iconoclasts as overriding, or sealing themselves off from, their own responses to an image. Most of the recent protesters, however, have had long-standing relationships with the public monuments they understand as constituting attempts to oppress the members of the minority group to which they belong. What's more, their encounters with these monuments aren't voluntary, but forced on them whenever they visit a courthouse, or a post office, or a university, or when they simply go downtown. A group of protesters attaching a monument to a truck under cover of darkness may seem to be acting on an unthinking iconoclastic impulse. But only if you don't appreciate that such actions are a consequence of laws that cut off all peaceful, legal routes to achieving a community's wishes.

I have been interviewing protesters for a book about American monuments, and they mention a wide variety of motives, most of which are ignored in the news coverage Freedberg seems to have relied on. It should please him that the one thing the protesters have in common is a deep awareness of the way images encourage certain responses. They understand that the monuments they want removed were created to take advantage of

what Freedberg calls 'our inclination to lapse into empathy before all images'. Like Saint Bernard's Virgin, many monuments make abstract ideologies comprehensible by representing them in desirable human form. Putting up a few signs to explain the oppressive nature of the ideology embodied in a work will do little to stop viewers from reacting positively to a beautiful image. But reducing the attractiveness of an ideology by reducing the physical attractiveness of the bodies used to represent it makes sense. Toppling a monument will not prove the falsity of the ideology that created it, but it will remove one of the potent ways that ideology spreads.

In *The Power of Images*, Freedberg paid exacting attention to overlooked historical sources, and built his theories from a comprehensive and non-judgmental review of his material. *Iconoclasm* stumbles both when he fails to collect enough information, as in the case of the Birmingham monument, and, more seriously, when he allows his existing theory to colour his interpretation. This is most evident in his discussion of *The Spear*, Brett Murray's 2012 portrait of Jacob Zuma, painted with a large penis hanging from his open trousers. There is no question that the painting was satire – Zuma was tried for rape in 2006 – but even critics convinced of his guilt were appalled by Murray's reliance on a racist trope about the supposed sexual prowess of Black men.

Freedberg left South Africa as a young man as a result of his political activities. He writes movingly about the crucial role that posters and other visual art played in the resistance to apartheid. Although convinced that censorship is a weapon of oppressive state power, he is dismayed that *The Spear* was vandalised by activists and removed from view, and suggests that those who criticised it for perpetuating a stereotype were really trying to rally support for Zuma in an upcoming election. 'Every powerful image arouses deep emotions,' he writes, arguing that *The Spear* received the heightened attention given to all explicitly sexual images, and that this response was exploited for political reasons. Freedberg doesn't believe the protesters' accounts of their reactions to the image, since they don't match his theory that a sexualised response to an image is more fundamental than one based, for example, on group identity or personal trauma.

'When fear of the power of images is broken in the heat of iconoclasm,' Freedberg writes of the *Beeldenstorm*, 'it takes some time and effort before that feeling seeps back into the imagination.' Catholic services in the Netherlands were restored soon after the attacks of 1566, with new paintings and sculptures replacing the ones that had been destroyed. As in 2020, the authorities rushed to clean up signs of disturbance. But in 1581, there was a quieter but 'more systematic' outbreak of iconoclasm in the Netherlands. The recent protests may have similar aftershocks, now that we have demonstrated to ourselves that public monuments aren't as immovable as they pretend to be.