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REVIEWS

Maria Pia Di Bella and James Elkins, eds., *Representations of Pain in Art and Visual Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2013.

Asbjørn Grønstad and Henrik Gustafsson, *Ethics and Images of Pain*. New York: Routledge, 2012.

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With Asbjørn Grønstad and Henrik Gustafsson's collection of essays, *Ethics and Images of Pain* ["*Ethics*"], Routledge has inaugurated a new series, "Advances in Art and Visual Studies." The fourth volume in this new series, Maria Pia De Bella and James Elkins' edited volume, *Representations of Pain in Art and Visual Culture* ["*Representations*"], focuses on similar themes, questions and issues. Taken together, this rich, engaging, incisive, provocative body of work—twenty-five essays across the two anthologies—demonstrates that Routledge was fully justified in presenting two books on similar subject matter so early in the life of this new series. While developing and detailing so much with respect to how we should think about visual representations of physical suffering, *Ethics and Images of Pain* and *Representations of Pain in Art and Visual Culture* show that we have barely begun our endeavor to articulate, let alone answer, the range of vital historical, aesthetic, political and ethical questions we need to ask about representing, viewing, and interpreting injury, suffering, cruelty, catastrophe and torture.

While both volumes demarcate their subject matter as "pain," it becomes quickly evident that both are concerned with a much narrower topic. In his preface to *Ethics*, J.M. Bernstein quickly reduces pain to suffering—bodily suffering at that. Similarly, with an epigraph devoted to torture, the editors of *Representations* reveal the core of their concerns. And the editors' contributions in *Representations* are devoted to state-sanctioned execution. In

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thinking about representations of pain, these volumes could have examined professional sports, amateur "daredevil," dance performances, body modifications of various kinds, or erotic/pornographic images, but they did not—and they are silent about why they limited their subject matter in the fashion they've chosen. While contributors discussing lynching and Abu Ghraib discuss the erotic dimensions of their images in passing, the virtual absence of consideration of a relation between pain and the erotic across these complex, sophisticated essays is quite striking. The authors collected here often worry about the voyeuristic pleasures viewers may take in images that depict suffering and torture, but none of them pause to consider that pain may, to some persons, in some contexts, be *experienced* as pleasure.

During the roundtable conversation that closes *Representations*, Stephen Eisenman notes that the contributors' choices "exclude large bodies of material, which reveals the ideological character of this category of pain" (189). In *Ethics*, Mark Reinhardt notes that there is a distinction between pain and suffering, but he does not pursue it because he concludes it has no relevance for his analysis (50n1). The editors of and contributors to *Ethics* and *Representation* equate pain with suffering and torture: they thus preclude the possibility of using "pain" as a neutral term, as a means of describing a particular experience, a certain kind of stimulus. For precisely this reason, despite James Elkins' desire in *Representations* to focus first on how pain is represented and why scholars are interested in such representations, both volumes are fundamentally about the ethical and political questions surrounding the images considered, primarily because they have defined and approached pain in a value-laden manner. This is not necessarily a flaw in these collections, but it reveals an unexamined assumption—and shows an area of growth in this field of visual studies. What happens if we include representations of pain where the pain is understood as neutral, as beneficial, as therapeutic, as (unproblematically) beautiful in our body of examples? How would they—*would they*—reshape the terms of our inquiry? Surely it isn't voyeuristic, in the same way, to watch a ballet as it is look at a lynching photograph. Surely it doesn't exacerbate the degradation of the subject of representation, in the same way, to watch an episode of *Big Brother* as it does to look at the photographs from Abu Ghraib. But, given what we know about the effects of concussive head injuries, where do we put the pleasure we take from watching football, or boxing, or mixed martial arts? How do we think about the commodification of those visual artifacts? Or, by including the representational field of sport, have we gone too far afield from the realm of art?

While they do not consider these questions explicitly, there are essays in these volumes that allow us to begin thinking about where and how we might start to consider this more expansive understanding of pain. In both volumes, contributors consider artists who depict the infliction of pain and the threat of violence against their own bodies. These representations, then, at least on an initial consideration, involve subjects who willingly undergo the pain depicted. At least to my understanding, they would fall outside *Representations'* epigraphic invocation of torture as a frame of reference. In *Ethics*, Øyvind Vågnes examines three works by Dutch artist Mathilde ter Heijne that feature images and representations of suicide. In *Representations*, Kirstin Ringelberg provides a careful, detailed account of the complex formal, historical and cultural context of Japanese artist Yasumasa Morimura's restaging of Eddie Adams' (in)famous photo of General Nguyen Ngoc Loan executing an apparently unarmed civilian during the Vietnam War. What both of these essays highlight is the way in which the

artists under consideration force us to think about complicity with violence. As Vågnes and Ringelberg detail, their respective artists present themselves as victims—and as perpetrators—of violence, with all of the attendant colonial, racial, national and gender complications of those roles. When an artist—or a person—willingly takes her or him-self as the object of violence very different issues are raised than when a body is compelled to become the site of state-sanctioned torture. Moreover, as the title of Ringelberg's essay highlights ("The Faked Pain of the Artist"), these depictions *represent* rather than *document* pain. While Vågnes discusses extensively ter Heijne's use of mannequins, and the effect of this use, as proxies for herself, the language of her essay blurs the distinction between actual and representational violence. Failure to notice this tendency to blur different modes of depicting violence is a matter which must be attended to with great vigilance in any future work on representations of pain.

But taking one's own body as the object of violence is a complex phenomenon, as Helge Meyer's contribution in *Representations* makes clear. Meyer considers two artists—Kira O'Reilley and Udi Da—whose performance art centers on mutilation of the artist's own body. Here, although these artists willingly undergo pain, it is not merely representational, but actual. At the same time, given their orientation to the pain, as well as its precise character, it's unclear whether it should be named as suffering or torture. O'Reilley stages scenes in which audience members are allowed to cut her body so they can grapple with issues of touch, intimacy and complicity in violence. Da, on the other hand, exhibits his practices of self-mutilation as a kind of therapeutic intervention—presenting the effects of his own mental illness as a way to intervene in his own self-destruction. The shift from the enactment of violence (Vågnes, Ringelberg) to the infliction of violence (Meyer) as well as the shift from a fully willing masochistic scene (O'Reilley in Meyer) to one typified by a greater degree of compulsion (Da in Meyer) opens a space to begin sketching a conversation about the distinctions among pain, suffering and torture—distinctions that are not sketched by any of the contributors in these two volumes.

And, of course, even if Udi Da's performance art is experienced by the artist as therapeutic, this category is also not a simple one. In his essay, "Medical Horror," which appears in *Ethics*, Jon-Ove Steihaug considers paintings and sketches by Bendik Riis alongside documentary photographs Dr. Carl-Wilhelm Sem-Jacobsen's archive, which depict practices surrounding the lobotomies performed through the mid-twentieth century at Gaustad asylum in Olso, Norway. While Steihaug presents evidence that Sem-Jacobsen knew that not all the "treatments" he pursued had medical value or justification, medical opinion during this era did consider lobotomy a legitimate therapeutic intervention, even though Riis' rendering of the effects of the procedure help us comprehend its horrific nature. So, although the pain of medical treatment, and its representations, may be neutral in some contexts, it is (a record of) torture in others. Think, for example, of the difference of medical textbook photographs of tubal ligation procedures and medical record photographs of involuntary sterilizations performed on women of color in prison.

By arguing that, in relation to events that transpired at Gaustad asylum, Riis' paintings should be understood as documentary evidence and Sem-Jacobsen's photographs should be understood as fictionalized stylizations, Steihaug also helps us think about questions of form, technology and medium. While almost all of the authors across the two collections gesture

toward the difficult questions raised by different media when thinking about representations of pain, these issues are never confronted head on or treated in detail. In *Representations*, James Elkins, for example, considers photographs of *lingchi*[1] so that he can "say, as succinctly as possible, what actually happened in the course of a *lingchi* execution, from moment to moment" (75). Elkins' approach betrays a surprisingly naïve understanding of the relationship between photography and reality. How, for example, do we know that the forty photographs he consulted—but does not reproduce—faithfully record the entire event? In what way do the photographs give us access to the photographers' and executioners' motives and perspectives in recording the *lingchi* in the manner that they have? In what way, in other words, do we think about the representational agenda of those who created the artifacts that we are consulting to grasp the reality beyond them? How does Elkins' "empirical" approach assume a transparency between photograph and reality that Elkins' own scholarship on image-making challenges, as does the scholarship of countless others? Steihaug's essay should certainly give us pause when reading Elkins' essay; John Peffer's essay that examines the staging of "documentary" photographs that record flogging in the Congo should as well. When we shift our attention to more narrative oriented media (film) or non-indexical media (drawing, painting), the issues are even more fraught.

One of the common worries concerning representations of suffering and torture, which many contributors here rehearse and complicate, is whether the virtually inevitable aestheticization that occurs when the body in pain is photographed or filmed does something ethically odious to the suffering person. (Although there have also been worries that aestheticized representations of pain will motivate viewers to inflict pain, because they fail to capture the very real harm of pain, authors in these collections do not consider this issue.) In sharp contrast to this worry, Frank Möller, in his contribution to *Ethics*, contends that aestheticization might be one way in which a still image—without a caption, without a narrative context—can say "no" to the violence and horror it depicts. By aestheticizing the suffering body, Möller contends, the image suggests that that body is something more than a victim, that that body transcends the pain, humiliation and degradation it undergoes (24). Similarly, Holger Pötzsch argues, in his contribution to *Ethics*, that a "poetic" approach to representing violence may be more ethically defensible than a "mimetic" approach that adheres sharply to conventions of realism. Contrasting the styles of *Black Hawk Down*, *Battle for Haditha*, and *Waltz with Bashir*, Pötzsch persuasively argues that the uncertain, non-linear and fantastical nature of *Waltz* interferes with a desire for mastery and knowledge that *Black Hawk Down*'s grittier realism purports to provide. One way of characterizing Pötzsch's contribution is to point out that there is no way *not* to aestheticize, so the important question is what different aesthetic codes do with respect to how we question the inevitability of violence. The conversation Louis Kaplan stages between Susan Sontag and Georges Bataille in *Representations* supports Pötzsch's insights. According to Kaplan, what Bataille valuably insists on, in marked distinction to Sontag, is the ethical promise of unknowability and impossibility—that is, the way in which certain representations of violence disrupt our strong desire to know, understand, interpret, name, control, master, and overcome the world and its violences. In other words, certain representations of violence seek to prevent violence by violating the viewer's relation to the world and other, perceived first and foremost as object. Thinking Kaplan's reading of Bataille's

"unknowing" against Elkins' desire to provide an empirically adequate account may shed some light on Elkins later comment—not fully explained—that thinking about Bataille "may be a trap" (*Representations*, 191). Elkins wants to stay outside Bataille (192), wants to maintain his ability to know and understand, whereas Kaplan is exploring what happens when we are cast into the space of unknowing possibility from which we can no longer inflict violence (54-55).

Dovetailing somewhat imperfectly with Bataille's non-knowledge, both Mieke Bal, in *Ethics*, and Maria Pia Di Bella, in *Representations*, are interested in allusive depictions of suffering and torture. Bal considers the sculpture of Doris Salcedo as well as her own film, *A Long History of Madness*, as exemplary ways of compelling the viewer to think about pain without running afoul of the ethically problematic depiction of pain. I must confess it struck me as quite odd for Bal to rely on her own representational practice as a model for how to overcome the fundamental moral problem she diagnoses. Again, the inherent violence of knowingness and certainty could be fruitfully brought to bear on this rhetorical choice. What kind of pain is elided when Bal positions herself so clearly outside the circle of pain infliction? Di Bella considers photographs of prison execution chambers in the United States. She focuses a great deal of attention on what it means that the state refuses to allow documentation of executions, but quite readily circulates images of execution machinery. Once again, I wondered about the scope of subject matter when reading Di Bella's essay. What kind of pain is being documented when pain is only alluded to or suggested by the images? What is the relationship between a photograph of a gallows—as haunting and horrifying as it may be—and a photograph of a lynched body?

Lynching photographs—as historical documents and contemporary objects of interest—are, unsurprisingly, the subject of several essays across these two collections. Depictions of war, the Holocaust, the Gulag and the photographs taken at Abu Ghraib are also among the unsurprising subjects considered here. With respect to the photographic record of lynching and Abu Ghraib in particular, authors ask what it means to circulate images that were produced to humiliate, demean and degrade in the first instance. If the images were created so that the record of humiliation would degrade the suffering subject, does any circulation of the image, regardless of context or audience reaction, continue, at least in part, the trauma, violence and injury depicted? Mark Reinhardt's contribution to *Ethics* provides some useful guidance for grappling with these questions. First, he poses the question in its starkest terms, using a range of examples. At the same time, he reproduces some of the images he discusses. Does this illustrative practice run afoul of the ethical inquiry? He also makes the historical case that, at least with respect to lynching photographs, opponents of lynching used the images produced by lynch mobs as part of their public, anti-lynching campaigns (*Ethics* 43-46). In other words, the meaning, operation, and effect of these images has never been singular, so any ethical analysis that assumes such singularity is flawed from the onset.

But, despite their polyvalence, the lynching photographs—along with those taken at Abu Ghraib—are, without question, part of the violence they depict: these photographs of suffering bodies are a means of inflicting suffering, not merely a record of it. In *Representations*, John Peffer considers the early twentieth century campaign opposing colonial violence against black bodies in the Congo. He documents the role of photographs in these campaigns and explains how successfully images of violence were used to foment condemnation of physical

brutality against colonial laborers when used in public lectures. He also substantiates, however, that some of the key photographs used most frequently during such lectures were undoubtedly staged. We worry about our display of the Abu Ghraib photos because they were produced to humiliate their subjects: in circulation, they primarily generate critique, but in conception, they produced humiliation. What are we to think, then, of images that marked subjects as degraded in their circulation, but were created in order to critique that humiliation, and operated successfully on that front? With respect to questions of staging, artifice and forgery, Timothy Brook's careful analysis of postcards depicting "Chinese" torture that reveals a Western authorial hand in *Representations* also cautions us to be incredibly careful when thinking about the ideological effect of representations of pain.

Michael Godby's contribution to *Representations* raises an even messier set of historical discontinuities with its consideration of photos from South African concentration camps at the turn of the twentieth century. As Godby explains, these photographs of emaciated, traumatized bodies have been used to denounce the horror of the camps—in no small part because they invoke the spectre of Nazi death camps from a few decades later. But, according to Godby's research, the photos were initially produced and circulated to comfort the relatives of those who were dying in the camps. So, here, we have non-staged photographs of real horror circulated and received initially within a frame of compassion, but now interpreted through a frame of degradation. Insofar as we should worry that our engagement with representation of violence may repeat or exacerbate the violence depicted, how do we determine the proper context for evaluating what the representations—and what our reactions—do?

Holly Edwards and Dora Apel, both in *Representations*, do not examine primarily historical context, but think instead about the museum as a frame in relation to photographic depictions of recent, well-publicized events. What, they ask, is the point of displaying—as works of art?—images, like the Abu Ghraib photos, that are readily available to almost anyone who wants to see them? Why provide still *another* opportunity to examine these records of colonial, imperialist violence? What the museum space may provide, Edwards and Apel suggest, that few other spaces do, is the opportunity to pause, to reflect, to linger, to *witness*. In a fashion similar to scholarly analysis, the framing of the museum, while certainly running the risk of aestheticization mentioned above, interrupts the desire to consume, to formulate a talking point, to establish the "right" position. The museum space, with its silence, with its open vistas, with its communities of bodies, may allow for a different kind of encounter with images and the events they depict. Once again, of course, we are back to form. Edwards and Apel were both responsible for organizing exhibits that focused primarily on photographs. What kind of disruptions, what new ways of seeing and feeling, would be generated if indexical and fabricated depictions of war, of execution, of torture were placed next to each other? Even if aesthetics came to the fore, what might a forced intimacy between our experiences of attraction and repulsion, between our judgments of beauty and horror, in relation to spectacles of violence expose? What are the constellations of images that we should work to organize—in our texts, in our exhibits, in our classrooms—if we want to work out the ethical and political problems that representations of pain pose?

Extending Reinhardt's historical consideration of the contestatory use of images, Tara H. Milbrandt's essay in *Ethics*, the role of a cell-phone video in generating public furor regarding

the death of Robert Dziekanski at the hands of Canadian police at the Vancouver airport documents the ways in which images circulated via the internet may allow ordinary citizens to challenge effectively state and institutional authority. While the circulation of images of pain, suffering and torture on the internet is absolutely vulnerable to critiques made by Sontag regarding desensitization and voyeurism, Milbrandt's essays shows that analyses like Sontag's are not the whole story. As the only essay in both collections to think about this particular media form, Milbrandt's essay marks one of many sites for further research. In what form, and with what kinds of commentary and attention, do images of pain circulate on social media? Why do some images capture people's attention and others don't? Under what circumstances do they spark outrage—and under what circumstances do they foster mockery and ridicule? And, of course, as Milbrandt concludes, the most significant ethical and political question may be why "an unlikely and fortuitous audio-visual recording was needed to move this . . . tragedy into the domain of public discussion and formal inquiry" when "the gravity of the incident" itself should have been sufficient (*Ethics* 88). What do *images* of pain accomplish that *reports* of pain, *stories* of pain, *knowledge* of pain do not?

With her concluding sentence, Milbrandt asks us to think about how and why we attend to violence in the first place. In her contribution to *Representations*, Sharon Sliwinski argues that photographs of suffering demand a certain kind of ethical response and responsibility. Möller, writing in *Ethics*, asks what kind of response to depictions of suffering would count as adequate. In one of the most thought-provoking contributions across either volume, Mark Ledbetter argues, in the lead essay in *Ethics*, that we shouldn't be worried about our voyeuristic investments in representations of pain, but rather that voyeurism is the foundation of our ethical orientation to the world. Voyeurism, according to Ledbetter, is a form of attention; it is a refusal to look away—an all-too-frequent reaction to images of pain and violence. For Ledbetter, voyeurism is *merely* attention: it is not an attempt to name, interpret or make meaning. Here, he aligns himself with Bataille (especially as interpreted in Amy Hollywood's *Sensible Ecstasy*[2]), without invoking him. In the closing sections of his essay, Ledbetter lists toward more traditional concerns of transformation and evaluation that undermine this commitment to witnessing as ethical practice, but the transvaluation of voyeurism is an important intervention, especially in the context of these essays. In his consideration of cinematic work of Michael Hanecke and Gaspar Noé in *Ethics*, Mattias Frey categorizes various motives and modes for turning away from depictions of violence and also describes how artists' various challenges to keep looking shape certain depictions.

More fully articulating the stakes of witnessing as an ethical practice is another way in which the work of these essays can be furthered. While the contributors here range across a number of media, historical, and geographical specialties, and while some have more extensive philosophical disciplining than others, the questions they raise as a collective demonstrate that the potential for interdisciplinary conversation is enormous if representations of pain are placed at the center of the inquiry. Not only is it vital to have people trained primarily in the study of art and visual culture as parties to this conversation that considers *representation*, but also people trained primarily in the fields of history, sociology, ethics, and religion have valuable contributions to make. And this conversation would be even richer if it was more deeply

informed than the essays gathered here by considerations of gender, race, imperialism, colonialism and sexuality.

Similarly, perhaps because indexical media like photography and film raise the ethical questions most sharply, most of the work in these two volumes focuses on examples from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Tomas Macsotay's detailed summary of the "science" of pathognomics and its relation to sculpture in seventeenth and eighteenth century France and Valentin Groebner's account of medieval devotional practices before depictions of suffering, both in *Representations*, lift the curtain on resources available from other historical eras. Groebner's essay also reveals the intense secular focus of both collections. Given the ubiquity of suffering bodies in religious art, especially in Christian art, conversation between religious and non-religious modes of seeing, interpreting, experiencing representations of pain may be another direction for future research. Tonje H. Sørensen's discussion, in *Ethics*, of the ways in which the fallen soldier is afforded sacred status in most war films marks a place that secular and religious modes of meaning-making in relation to violence are already linked.

Just as the gaze of these contributors is trained primarily on the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, it is also concentrated fairly heavily on Europe and America, and on high art traditions. On this front, with the contributions of Ringelberg, Elkins, Brook, Peffer and Godby, *Representations* has a much broader geographical scope. Building on the solid foundation provided here—a foundation that insists on careful historical, contextual, political and formal analysis—future work can definitely expand into other temporal and geographical sites—as well into the arenas of popular and folk art.

Insofar as this is a review of books produced in a series devoted to art and visual culture, I imagine readers will expect me to comment on the quality and quantity of reproduced images in the volume. The quality of the images varies highly, and some of them are not of a quality to make out the details that some authors highlight. (And it is quite disappointing that Routledge was unwilling to reproduce any images in color.) But the mere presence (or absence) of reproductions raises much more serious questions than their quality given the subject matter of these two volumes.

If the images at hand inflict pain through their very existence, if we perpetuate the violence depicted merely by looking, then what does it mean to reproduce the images in scholarly tomes? If these representations are so troubling ethically and politically, simply because they exist, then why does almost no one in either collection ask questions about the ethics and politics of *studying* them, of organizing conferences devoted to them, of publishing—and selling (and reviewing)—books about them? As Elkins asks in his introduction, in his essay, and in the roundtable that concludes *Representations*, *why* are we interested in studying representations of pain in the first place? What do we gain from this endeavor—if "gain" is even the right word? Neither Elkins nor anyone else answers this question, but it does seem like an important one, as we think about future work in this field.

And what if Elkins is right that the analysis of visual artifacts can be meaningfully analogized to the practice of *lingchi*—the cold, calculated dismemberment of another human's body—what then? While Elkins' comparison seems, at least, far-fetched and, at most, morally obscene, others have made similar claims. In *God's Gym*, for example, Stephen Moore offers a comparative reading of dissection manuals and biblical commentaries, and worries along

parallel lines about the ethical implications for biblical scholarship.[3] If the beginning of our ethical responsibility to those who suffer is some kind of witnessing—a commitment to voyeurism, to follow Ledbetter—how can we tell when its distanciation isn't scholarly detachment that leaves people to struggle on their own or when its passionate commitment isn't infected with sadistic glee in the torment under consideration?

Near the end of the roundtable conversation that concludes Maria Pia Di Bella and James Elkins' *Representations of Pain in Art and Visual Culture*, Kirstin Ringelberg asks, and her question applies to Asbjørn Grønstad and Henrik Gustafsson's *Ethics and Images of Pain* with equal force, "Is this book unethical?" James Elkins immediately responds, "I am happy to leave our discussion at that point" (*Representations* 197). Rather than leaving the discussion at that point, with that question, I suggest that those of us who study representations of pain, suffering, violence and torture be forever haunted by it, that we always start our discussion cognizant of it. In what ways are we complicit with the depicted violence we study? How, exactly, are the pleasures we derive from our scholarly engagement distinct from the pleasures associated with cruelty? In what manner, if any, does—can—our analytical acumen alter the suffering it seeks to describe, to understand? With these capable and insightful authors as our guides, with these courageous and troubling images as our companions, let us continue this conversation well begun, this conversation about our investments in representations of pain, what we expect them to do, why we find them fascinating, and how they compel us to evaluate our standing as ethical subjects.

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[1] Chinese form of torture by flaying and dismemberment, sometimes referred to colloquially as "death by

[2] Amy Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 60-110.

[3] Stephen Moore, *God's Gym* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 37-72.