Violent Victorians: Popular Entertainment in Nineteenth-Century London

Review Number:
1279
Publish date:
Thursday, 28 June, 2012
Author:
Rosalind Crone
ISBN:
9780719086847
Date of Publication:
2012
Price:
£16.99
Pages:
320pp.
Publisher:
Manchester University Press
Place of Publication:
Manchester
Reviewer:
Jennifer Wallis

Rosalind Crone's *Violent Victorians* is the kind of book that should be on every undergraduate reading list for 19th-century studies. The intricacies of class, of the multi-faceted character of a modernising society, and of the many faces of urban popular culture are all brought together here by a central thread examining the place of violence – or rather, its representations – in the Victorian era.

Crone's study, '[b]y drawing attention to the very violent content of a range of prominent genres of entertainment between *c.* 1820 and *c.* 1870', aims to '[challenge] the common narrative of reform and pacification so often used to describe nineteenth-century society'. At the heart of her study is the tension she perceives between our view of the 1800s as witness to what sociologist Norbert Elias famously called the 'civilizing process' (1), and the darker image of its urban centres as places of 'dreadful delight' (2), where Jack the Ripper stalked shadowy alleys and crowds bayed for blood at public executions. For Crone, narratives of violence (and it is the most extreme form of violence, murder, that forms the basis of most of the book) were not simply devoured by the vulgar and bloodthirsty 'lower orders', but infiltrated all levels of society – albeit often in subtly different forms.

The format of the book is clever, with each chapter examining one form of violent entertainment as a way in to wider discussions on the character of Victorian society and industry. Chapter two uses Punch and Judy shows to examine the rise and fall of street entertainments as well as perceptions of gender behaviour, whilst chapter five views the mid 19th–century press and growing literacy levels through the lens of Sweeney Todd and his 'murder machine'. The picture that Crone paints is one of constant innovation and adaptation to

changing social mores and economic pressures. Punchinello, the marionette puppet who we meet at the beginning of chapter two, was a character who initially provided comic interludes to performances during the Restoration period. As such entertainments began to move from the fairground to smaller-scale street performances, the glove-puppet version saw Punch become the star of his own show, but also a wife-beater and murderer. Other characters arrived to share Punch's stage, all meeting the same unfortunate fate in short self-contained scenes that could be watched from beginning to end by passers-by. Later, Punch and Judy shows shifted into the domestic arena, with showmen hired for private performances to indulge a middle- and upper-class sense of nostalgia – Punch reflecting 'the pleasurable elements of Regency culture, including hedonism and misogyny' (p. 63).

One of the most fascinating chapters is that examining 'scaffold culture' and the 'cult of the murderer'. Here, Crone charts the disappearance of the former with the abolition of public execution in 1868, and the subsequent emergence of exhibits and memorabilia that constituted the latter. These ranged from 'execution broadsides' (apparently increasing in number as the spectacle of public execution became less usual) to Madame Tussaud's Chamber of Horrors, where the visitor could contemplate the visages of England's most notorious criminals. Perhaps most bizarre were earthenware figurines of murderers, their victims, and the scene of crime. The scene of crime became a huge draw in the 19th century as other tangible manifestations of crime (such as the execution) disappeared from public view; murder scenes came to serve a double function as both real-life tableaux and source of souvenir material. Boards from the infamous Red Barn where Maria Marten was killed by her lover were ripped down and split into fragments for sale as 'curiosities', and customers were able to buy pieces of a hedge – through which a body had been dragged – by the inch. Crone locates the fashion for macabre pottery within two crazes of the 1820s and late 1840s. The 1820s saw the Red Barn murder immortalised in figurines of Marten and her murderer William Corder, but also quaint models of the barn itself. The second craze drew upon the case of James Blomfield Rush who was executed for murder in 1849, both he and his house being quickly modelled in earthenware. These souvenirs, says Crone, were likely bought from itinerant traders, or at fairgrounds and seaside resorts – one example is a creamware mug bearing a portrait of the murderer framed by a delicate leaf garland. Painted in attractive bright colours, they were a form of conspicuous working-class consumerism as well as a convenient alternative to attending the site of murder itself, often depicting events from across the country that were sold to a London audience.

Explaining her explicit focus on London, Crone notes that this was where processes of change in the 19th century were 'experienced most intensively'. Although the 19th century saw a move towards urban regeneration with streets re-designed and slums eradicated, for the everyday Londoner the period was 'one of instability, social upheaval and discontentment', as people struggled to adapt to the rapid changes taking place around them. It was also the place that was seen by contemporaries as most receptive to narratives of violence, where audiences were apparently 'easily delighted with the spectacle of bloodshed and suffering'. (3) (This wasn't a spectacle peculiar to the 19th century: the annual May Fair near Piccadilly entertained audiences with cudgelling, prizefighting, and mock executions performed by puppets until the Fair's abolition in 1760.) Whilst the concentration on London is logical, and likely the only practical way to tackle the overarching issues whilst retaining the book's general readability, Crone's focus on developing communication networks (such as the popular press) necessarily raises the question of how tales of violence were played out beyond the metropolis, and in this way the book is likely to be a jumping-off point for much future work on the subject.

Situating *Violent Victorians* within the wider historiography, Crone notes how the notion of separate spheres (in which women were confined to the domestic, and men enjoyed the privilege of forays into the public) has recently lost its dominant position as an interpretation of the period, and asks if we are 'on the cusp of a similar revolution with respect to our understanding of respectability in Victorian England' (p. 265). She points, for example, to digitisation projects that have challenged our traditional image of the Victorians in recent years – such as The Proceedings of the Old Bailey online [2], and collections such as Adam Matthew Digital's *London Low Life*. Whilst some historians may question the utility of comparing the notion of gendered separate spheres to the world of popular entertainment, Crone successfully highlights how neat

articulations of historical phenomena such as separate sphere ideology are rarely wholly accurate. The decline of penny bloods (violent and cheap instalment fiction) as evidence of the 'purification' of print culture for example, must be viewed alongside the rise of the penny dreadful produced for young male readers, which reinvented the old tropes of the penny blood by adding heroic characters to appeal to an adolescent readership.

Throughout *Violent Victorians*, the reader is cuaght wondering how different we really are today in our fascination for violence, murder and stories of human tragedy. Interest in the scenes of horrific crimes continues in the form of London's Jack the Ripper walks, whilst the production of murder souvenirs is paralleled in the cult of celebrity surrounding individuals such as Charles Manson (staring out from countless t-shirts) or John Wayne Gacy (whose paintings are sought after by collectors of murder memorabilia). In the epilogue, Crone's brief examination of modern phenomena such as the hugely popular *Saw* franchise highlights a central argument of the book nicely: in identifying parallels between our own world and that of our 19th-century counterparts, we are also forced to question our vision of Victorian society as easily divisible using convenient taxonomies, such as low culture vs. high or violence vs. civility. Throughout the book, Crone clearly emphasises that the penchant for violent entertainments was one that cut across all sections of society, re-cast in various formats according to audience.

Considering the wide range of subjects covered, a useful addition to the book would have been a short glossary. Though it admittedly doesn't require too many leaps of the imagination to surmise what 'throwing-at-cocks' or 'duck-hunting' consisted of, some items are less obvious to the reader unfamiliar with the history of print culture ('flash ballads', for example), and a short note on these terms would have been most welcome. The volume is generously illustrated, with full page reproductions of the striking imagery used in the ephemera Crone analyzes, and her writing style is enjoyably accessible – despite its subject matter, *Violent Victorians* is really rather good fun to read.

Notes

1. N. Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (2 vols., Oxford, 1978).Back to (1)
2. See J. R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in late-Victorian London* (Chicago, IL, 1992).Back to (2)
3. W. B. Boulton, *The Amusements of Old London* (2 vols., London, 1901), vol. 2, pp. 222–3. Cited in R. Crone, *Violent Victorians: Popular Entertainment in Nineteenth-Century London* (Manchester, 2012), p. 42.Back to (3)

Other reviews:
Journal of Victorian Culture Online
http://myblogs.informa.com/jvc/2012/06/05/book-review-bloody-victorians-violence-and-historical-narrative/ [3]

Source URL: http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1279

Links
[1] http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/22699
[2] http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/
[3] http://myblogs.informa.com/jvc/2012/06/05/book-review-bloody-victorians-violence-and-historical-narrative/