

Waking the Dead (Rom, 28 -29 Jan 11)

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WAKING THE DEAD

Sublime poetics and popular culture in the aftermath of the French Revolution

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One of the oldest claims of art is that it can bring back the dead. Leon Battista Alberti for instance included this claim in his praise of the Painter's art in *De Pictura*, where it is part of the humanist interest in the rhetorical concept of *enargeia*, a representation, be it in words or images, that is so lifelike, so vivid, that it seems to dissolve the representation into what it represents. But what happens when this endeavour to animate the inanimate matter of the work of art is applied not to the high art of the Renaissance and the Baroque, in the accepted contexts and genres of religion and politics, where it is anchored in generally accepted poetics, artistic canons and aesthetic traditions, but in periods of profound upheaval, such as the French Revolution?

To those who lived through the events of 1789-98, it seemed as if an irreparable gap had opened between the past of the Ancien Régime and the present times which were completely out of joint. The way artists and writers have tried to cope with this sense of loss (in many cases compounded by very real personal loss of relatives and friends who had died under the guillotine) has often been studied, and recently the concept of the sublime has been evoked for instance by the philosopher of history Frank Ankersmit to define the undefinable experience of a complete break with the past. In this conference we want to take a close look at one particular artistic variety of dealing with the French Revolution: the rise of new genres of popular culture such as the panorama, the tableau vivant or phantasmagoria to bring back events such as the execution of the King and Queen of France, the storming of the Bastille, or dead persons. These performances or installations drew on all the arts, drew huge crowds, and were often so effective in creating the illusion that the dead had returned from the grave that viewers fainted or became hysterical with terror. If, as David Freedberg observed on the closing page of *The Power of Images*, "we think we can escape bad dreams by talking about art", these terrifying performances, fraught with loss and guilt, propose a particular challenge for art history.

In this conference we welcome reconstructions of such performances, considerations of the role the various arts, and in particular architecture and acting played in them; but we are also interested in investigations of some more general themes:

- The shift from extreme vividness as a humanist concern with enargeia and life to a coupling of such vividness with death, loss, terror and the abject; how, in other words, did the poetics of suggesting life evolve into a technique of terror?
- Shifts in the relation between high and low art: how, for instance, did the high art of architectural and archaeological reconstructions of ancient monuments feed into the staging of tableaux vivants and panoramas?
- What do these performances tell us about the rise of new aesthetic categories such as the sublime and the uncanny; or the development of new artistic and aesthetic experiences such as the Gothic frisson or Ruinenlust?
- Can we identify particular objects, works of art or buildings as particularly significant for such attempts to bring back the dead?

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Please send an abstract of 350 words, together with a short cv and list of relevant publications in English or French before July 1, 2010 to Marc Bayard (marc.bayard@villamedici.it) and Caroline van Eck (c.a.van.eck@hum.leidenuniv.nl).

Reference:

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