Book Review/Compte rendu

Ron Eyerman, *The Assassination of Theo van Gogh: From Social Drama to Cultural Trauma*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008, 232 pp. $US 22.95 paper (978-0-8223-4406-3), $US 79.95 hardcover (978-0-8223-4387-5)

On November 2, 2004, the recently radicalized Moroccan-Dutch Islamic militant Mohammed Bouyeri assassinated the filmmaker Theo van Gogh as he rode his bike to work in Amsterdam, shooting him first, then stabbing him. Van Gogh had long criticized Muslims and scandalized many by making the movie *Submission*, which showed Koranic texts affixed to the body of a semi-nude woman. The script for the movie, intended as a protest against the treatment of women in Islam, came from Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Somali immigrant who was then a member of parliament for the conservative-liberal VVD. Bouyeri addressed the infidel Hirsi Ali in a statement attached to the knife used in the killing. Though Bouyeri apparently had meant to die as a martyr of Islam, he was arrested on the day of the murder and later sentenced to life in prison. Not surprisingly, the crime drew much attention abroad and caused some collective soul-searching in the Netherlands.

Eyerman puts the original reporting in perspective by treating the crime as a type of performance, quite deliberately plotted by Bouyeri but involving Van Gogh and Hirsi Ali in distinct roles. In his thick description of the performance, he traces the background of the protagonists in some detail. The occasion became an "event," in his telling, as it was interpreted in different ways by initially panicked audiences. To understand those reactions, Eyerman shows how public fears had been stoked by previous debate on immigration, the "clash of civilizations" response to the attack of 9/11, and the assassination of populist leader Pim Fortuyn in 2002. The soul-searching, Eyerman argues, really had to do with Dutch identity: in making sense of the crime, people also tried to articulate what it meant to be Dutch. In this way, the event unfolded as a "social drama," a breach of basic Dutch norms that exposed some "root paradigms" of Dutch society, such as the notion that the Netherlands is a divided but liberal and tolerant society. Eyerman suggests that this exposure was particularly painful to the Dutch because it opened the "festering sores" of the accumulated (but hidden) trauma caused by German occupation, the fate of Dutch Jews, and the loss of empire.

Even in this brief summary, readers may detect the influence of Victor Turner, Robin Wagner-Pacifici, and Jeffrey Alexander. Their ideas, discussed at some length, shape Eyerman's approach to the Dutch case. The book in fact works best as a case study illustrating that approach. It shows how far a close-up interpretation of performance, discourse, drama, and trauma can take us. To scholars interested in this line of work, Eyerman's thick description offers much food for thought. In some ways, however, the description is not quite thick enough.

The voices of several protagonists remain muffled. Eyerman does best with Hirsi Ali, already a well-known figure outside the Netherlands, though he equivocates on her role, suggesting she could be "considered a part of the establishment" (p. 36) but also calling her "an outsider" (p. 139). Actual establishment figures could have enlightened him. Hirsi Ali even gets an extended comparison with Salman Rushdie that seems beside the point of the book and comes across as padding. Readers will miss Van Gogh's own strident voice, since Eyerman hardly delves into his actual writings. Eyerman reports the reaction of Amsterdam mayor Job Cohen to the murder, but does not discuss his extensive commentary on integration issues, which helped to make him an "enemy" to Van Gogh. Other participants, like the prominent public intellectual Paul Scheffer, also get short shrift. English-language readers will find a more vivid account of the event and the participants in Ian Buruma's *Murder in Amsterdam*, though his sources have challenged his accuracy.

Eyerman is right to suggest that the murder inflamed tensions had been building for some time, but in setting the stage he misses several important pieces, leaving his sketch of Dutch debates about integration less complete than one might wish in the type of fine-grained analysis he champions. For example, he omits any mention of the unprecedented two-day parliamentary debate devoted to an essay by Scheffer on the "multicultural drama." Parliament's inquiry into integration policy, a significant political event that resulted in a hefty report earlier in 2004, also did not make it into the book. Eyerman's review of Dutch integration policy, especially in the 1990s, is not very detailed, and interested English-language readers now have access to many reliable sources on the subject, such as publications by Han Entzinger and Ruud Koopmans.

Much of the drama of the murder played out in the reactions, which interpreted the crime as a sign of civilizational conflict, failed integration, or an attack on free expression. Eyerman's analysis of these reactions is surprisingly selective, limited to some translated newspaper pieces taken from an English-language website and quotes from public officials. It is difficult to judge how representative the illustrations are, or whether the "clash of civilizations frame" was as prevalent as Eyerman

claims, because he does not offer any systematic overview of the range of reactions in different newspapers or other media. For lack of detailed analysis, it is equally difficult to gauge how the drama dissipated, though we do learn that the "tear in the social fabric" was soon "patched" (p. 16), partly because, as the last sentence of the last footnote informs us, Dutch authorities had made a "concerted effort … to defuse the event's repercussions" (p. 201). The patching and defusing might have merited closer attention from a student of Dutch identity.

Eyerman's causal argument, linking the drama's impact to the lingering accumulated traumas of World War II, remains speculative at best. He does not demonstrate that the supposed traumas were a going concern for most protagonists in 2004. The war certainly had left scars, but Eyerman has little to say about how the Dutch dealt with them over time, simply because he does not engage the "leading accounts" by historians of the war, mentioned only in a footnote, that in fact shaped Dutch perceptions for many years. The war legacy is itself only one strand in lively Dutch debates about national identity, but Eyerman addresses neither the actual debates, for example as they unfolded in major newspapers, nor the outstanding Dutch scholarship on the subject. Dutch colleagues are therefore likely to view the book as the ruminations of a visiting outsider rather than a scholarly analysis rooted in the relevant literatures. A passage in which Eyerman misspells the name of Queen Beatrix's deceased husband as Klas and calls Sinterklaas a "Christmas figure" will reinforce their impression that his feel for the Dutch scene is not entirely secure.

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