Between silence and speech: spectres and images in the aftermath of the Reign of Terror

Ronen Steinberg

Prof R Steinberg, Department of History, Michigan State University, Room 350C, Old Horticulture, 506 E. Circle Dr, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824; ronens@msu.edu

The study of responses to mass atrocities is overwhelmingly focused on the present; yet societies in the past also had to deal with the difficulties that arise in the aftermath of such events. This article examines one such case, the aftermath of the Reign of Terror of the French Revolution. This period was characteriaed by ambivalence toward the memory of revolutionary violence, which was at one and the same time repressed and encouraged. In this context, ghosts offered a way for simultaneously talking and not talking about the legacies of the Reign of Terror. This article focuses on the case of the phantasmagoria, a unique lantern show that featured ghosts and debuted in Paris after the Reign of Terror. It argues that the spectral images, which the phantasmagoria created, occupied a middle ground between silence and speech, making it possible for contemporaries of the revolutionary era to face the notion that the past, which they destroyed, would return to haunt them.

The study of responses to mass atrocities, whether within the framework of transitional justice or in relation to the concept of trauma, is overwhelmingly focused on the present or on the very recent past. Yet societies in more distant times also had to face the challenges that inevitably arise in the aftermath of such events. How did those who had lived through mass atrocities in the past struggle to come to terms with their experiences before the advent of modern discourses of human rights, transitional justice, and trauma? What can we learn about the historical specificity of the confessional model by examining how societies negotiated the painful choices between talk and silence, memory and amnesia, vengeance and forgiveness in a world that did not prioritise psychoanalytic concepts or the American experience?

In this article, I apply these questions, which are customarily addressed to, and discussed almost exclusively in the context of the twentieth century, particularly the aftermath of the Second World War, to the time of the French Revolution. Specifically, this article looks at the aftermath of the Reign of Terror. The Terror was a period of state-sanctioned violence in the midst of the revolutionary decade (1789-1799.) Its main characteristic was the abuse of judicial norms for political purposes. For a period of approximately eighteen months, from March 1793 to July 1794, citizens could be arrested on the slightest and often quite vague charge of counter-revolution. Trials of political suspects took place in an expedited manner, before revolutionary tribunals and ad-hoc committees that bypassed due process. During the Terror, power was concentrated in the hands of a small body of men, the Committee of Public Safety, which functioned as the executive arm of government during this time and which came to constitute a *de facto* dictatorship. Freedom of speech and movement were severely curtailed. Public executions on the guillotine became a daily spectacle in many urban centres. The Reign of Terror ended in July 1794, in a *coup d'état* that brought down Maximilien Robespierre – the most famous member of the Committee of Public Safety – and that led to his execution, without trial, alongside about a hundred members of his close circle. By that time, some 17.000 citizens had been sentenced to death, many more were killed in extra-legal reprisals, and hundreds of thousands were languishing in makeshift prisons across the country (Andress 2006, Greer 1935, Martin 2006).

How did contemporaries of the revolutionary era confront the legacies left in the wake of an event of mass violence? What legal, political, intellectual, and even therapeutic models were available to them in order to address the effects of massive repression on self and society? This article addresses these questions through a rather narrow and, one might add, odd perspective, namely, spectres and visual culture. I show that the aftermath of the Terror was characterised by ambivalence toward the memory of revolutionary violence. On the one hand,

there was an explicit preference for silence and forgetting. On the other, the
democratising thrust of the Revolution made it impossible to control memory's
speech. In this context, ghosts provided a way for talking and not talking about
a difficult past, one that many in France preferred to, but could not leave behind.
This article illustrates these claims by focusing on the case of the phantasmagoria,
a new type of lantern show that debuted in Paris after the Reign of Terror and that
featured projected images of spirits rising from the dead. As a new kind of visual
technology, the phantasmagoria gave a tangible, concrete form to the notion that
the past, which the revolutionaries destroyed, would return to haunt them.

1.   Silence and speech in the aftermath of the terror

Contrary to the prevailing norms in our day and age, silence and forgetting were
openly encouraged in the aftermath of the Terror.[1] About two months after the fall
of Robespierre, Robert Lindet, a senior member of the revolutionary government
who had played a key role in the Terror himself, argued that it was better to forget
about the violence and let bygones be bygones. Lindet agreed that the Revolution
had caused much suffering, and that many of the victims were indeed innocent,
but he insisted that such is the fate of revolutions. As he put it to his colleagues in
the National Convention – France's legislative assembly from 1792 to 1795:

> Let us reproach ourselves neither for our misfortunes nor for our
> mistakes [...] we have all been thrown pell-mell into the same
> galloping race. The Revolution has taken place, it is the work of
> everyone [...] it [the Revolution] has left many victims in its wake.
> Are you now going to authorize inquiries into each and every
> case? Reason, the welfare of the fatherland does not allow you
> to look back on the ruins that you have left behind (Lindet 1794).

Radical social and political change, according to Lindet, was forward-looking
in essence. One feels empathy for the victims, but the revolutionary gaze is fixed
resolutely on the future. It does not allow looking back at the past. It is best to
forget, leaving judgement for posterity.

---

1   There is an interesting paradox to explore in this instance. The editors of this special issue made
recurrent references to the confessional mode which the South African Truth and Reconciliation
Commission embodies, and which has become hegemonic in contemporary cultural and
intellectual life. The confessional mode is, of course, not only psychoanalytic, but also, and perhaps
primarily Christian. After all, the leader of the TRC was an Archbishop. The paradox is that, in the
eighteenth century, France was a deeply Catholic country, where the church held a central place in
people's everyday life; yet when it came to the aftermath of events of mass violence, there was a
marked preference for silence and forgetting. How then do we explain that the confessional model
was absent from a traditional, Christian society such as eighteenth-century France, but seems to
be so central in our own modern and, one might add, secular world?

It is not surprising that Lindet argued in favour of silence, given that he had been heavily implicated in the repression of the previous years. Like many public officials after the fall of Robespierre, he had every reason to fear a rigorous, public examination of the recent past (Brown 2010.) Yet it was not only people who had been directly involved in the Terror that argued in favour of silence. Roughly seventy years later, in the early 1860s, the historian Edgar Quinet also bemoaned the tendency of the French to talk and to talk incessantly about the Terror in its aftermath.

Quinet was an ardent republican, a supporter of the revolutionary cause who, like many in his camp, saw the Jacobin Terror of 1793 as the moment when things went wrong. In his magisterial analysis of the Revolution, *La Révolution* (1865), he argued that "the Terror was the first calamity; the second disaster, that defeated the Republic, was putting the Terror on trial" Quinet (1987: 2, 829). Quinet was referring to a series of trials of key functionaries in the apparatus of the Terror, which took place in 1794-1795. But more generally, he was lamenting the many ways in which the French refused to leave the memories of the Terror behind.

Quinet compared the conduct of the revolutionary government after the Terror to the conduct of Lucius Cornelius Sulla, the Roman dictator who carried out a brutal purge of the city's notables in 81 BC. After carrying out the massacre, Sulla abdicated, and took to walking the streets of Rome, unprotected, and ready to explain to anyone who reproached him how his actions had served the interests of the Republic. In contrast, the leadership of the Revolution turned to scapegoating, thus launching an endless cycle of recriminations and counter-recriminations. Quinet faulted the leadership of the Revolution for not taking responsibility for doing what had to be done, and then drawing a curtain over the past. As he put it, "this is why the Convention did not enter history in the manner of the tyrants of antiquity: it did not know how to impose silence on posterity" (Quinet 1987: 2, 832).

So, for a variety of reasons and from a variety of political perspectives, many in France favoured silence and forgetting after the Terror. And indeed, for a long time, this was the policy of the many regimes that succeeded each other at a dizzying pace in the late 1790s and early 1800s. Between 1799 and 1814, the Napoleonic regime censored any public references to the Terror, specifically, and to revolutionary violence, more generally, for fear that it might reawaken the seeds of civil war. In 1816, the restored monarchy, under the leadership of Louis XVIII, instituted an official policy of *oubli*, that is, forgetting, with regard to the revolutionary past (Kroen 2000). Novels that recalled the violence of the Terror in graphic detail were censored (Douthwaite 2012). Monuments to victims of the Terror and other commemorative initiatives were openly discouraged, and

sometimes repressed downright. Certainly, the idea that talking about traumatic pasts is essential for the healing of individuals and societies was quite foreign to the culture of the time.[2]

Yet Quinet's arguments call our attention to another aspect of this issue: as lamentable as he might have found it, the fact is that, despite the policies and the preferences, the aftermath of the Terror saw not forgetting but memory, not silence but many ways of talking about this difficult past. Relatives of victims sent numerous petitions to revolutionary authorities, demanding some form of redress. They formed associations that purchased the sites of mass graves of victims and built commemorative chapels (Fureix 2009). Key functionaries in the apparatus of the Terror were put on trial and their cases attracted enormous public attention. Men of letters published accounts of the Terror and, in one instance, even a dictionary of its victims, organised alphabetically and including such details as their age, locale, profession and alleged crimes (Prudhomme 1796-7). Indeed, the aftermath of the Terror saw not silencing, but a general albeit diffuse effort to account for revolutionary violence (Steinberg 2014). Try as they might, revolutionary authorities and subsequent regimes could not suppress an active public engagement with the legacies of the Terror.

Quinet's major insight was that this represented something new on the stage of history. He noted that we find no similar public discussion of retribution, redress and remembrance in the aftermath of earlier episodes of state brutality. Referring to disparate historical cases such as the massacre of the indigenous population of the Americas under the Spanish monarchy in the sixteenth century, the religious violence of the Saint-Bartholomew's Day Massacre in 1572, and the persecution of the Huguenots – French protestants – following Louis XIV's revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, Quinet noted that they were all shrouded by the same silence. This, he implied, was because Kings know how to institute amnesia. Not so with revolutionary France: "once it had committed barbarities, it denounces them itself; once they have been denounced, they must be expiated." (Quinet 1987: 2, 834).

So what we have in the aftermath of the Terror is an ambivalent situation. On the one hand, there was an active encouragement of forgetting and silence, and this was in line with a long history of instituting amnesia in the aftermath of episodes of massive violence and repression. On the other, and despite the

---

2   It is perhaps pertinent to point out that the concept of trauma and the entire medical-philosophical baggage that envelops it were not part of the intellectual landscape in the late eighteenth century. Indeed, physicians of the revolutionary era often argued that the experience of terror had a constructive, even therapeutic effect on certain patients and on the public. On the understanding of the effects of terror on self and society before the advent of modern trauma-talk, see Steinberg 2013.

expressed desire of the authorities, French society in the late 1790s and early 1800s found many ways to talk about the legacies of the Terror and to engage in its commemoration. What Quinet put his finger on – without being aware of it, I think – is that this was one of the unpredictable consequences of the democratising impulses of the French Revolution. The revolutionaries did not set out to transform France from a monarchy to a democracy; yet the Revolution unleashed a democratising dynamic that was unstoppable. As historian Lynn Hunt reminds us, the French Revolution "enormously increased the points from which power could be exercised, and multiplied the strategies and tactics for wielding that power" (Hunt 1984: 56). The democratising thrust of the Revolution made it difficult to control memory's speech: silencing and forgetting became virtually impossible.

2. Spectres and images: the phantasmagoria

Against this background, let me turn to the phantasmagoria and to the role of visual culture in dealing with the legacies of the Terror in France. The phantasmagoria was a new type of lantern show that debuted in Paris several years after the fall of Robespierre. Its creator was the physicist, balloonist, and showbiz entrepreneur, Etienne Gaspard Robert, or, as he was more commonly known, Robertson. The word itself is composed of the Greek words *phantasma*, meaning ghost, and *agora*, referring to the public spaces in Greek city states (Mannoni 2000). The shows of the phantasmagoria consisted in the projection of images of spirits rising from the dead, a spectral gathering of sorts. These were mostly ghosts of celebrated men, such as Voltaire and Rousseau, but also, significantly, Robespierre and Jean-Paul Marat, the Jacobin martyr whose assassination in July 1793 was a major catalyst for the Terror. The shows usually opened with a demonstration of scientific experiments. They were a great success, attracting such figures of Parisian high society as the future empress Josephine and Madame Tallien, who ran a famous literary salon and whose husband, Jean-Lambert Tallien, was among the prominent leaders of the Thermidorian Reaction, the period of conservative backlash that followed the Reign of Terror. The shows took place in an appropriately gothic setting, the abandoned convent of the Capucin Order in Paris, whose former inhabitants had been driven out by the revolutionaries, and whose chapel housed the mortal remains of, among others, the Marquise de Pompadour, Louis XV's mistress.

What shall we make of the appearance of this curious apparatus for the projection of images of the dead coming back to life several years after one of the most emblematic events of mass death in modern history? The story practically lends itself to discourses of trauma and "coming to terms with the

past" (Torpey 2006: 5, Hartman 1996). Moreover, it brings to mind recent efforts to theorise the intimate links between terror and visuality. As Hoffman (2006) observed, terrorism is inherently theatrical: its effectiveness depends on its ability to produce dramatic spectacles.[3] Allen Feldman's (1997) ethnographic study of terror in Northern Ireland found that violence creates new perceptual possibilities, that is, it redefines what can and cannot be seen at a given moment. More recently, Mitchell (2011: 57) analysed the images produced in the context of America's so-called War on Terror and found that they take on a life of their own, reproducing and spreading terror, "often in the very act of trying to destroy it". The ubiquity of images in the digital age, and the unprecedented proliferation of technologies for their reproduction, dissemination, and alteration create a strangely contradictory effect with regard to Terror: it is simultaneously more tangible and more amorphous, everywhere and thus nowhere.

Current theories of visual culture are relevant for thinking about the aftermath of the Terror in France, as they draw our attention to the fact that the Reign of Terror was a profoundly visual and visible event. Unlike modern totalitarian regimes, which tend to carry out the business of political repression in secret, the violence of the French revolutionaries took place in broad daylight, in the full gaze of the public. The names of suspects were posted on the walls of the towns, and the hearings of the revolutionary tribunal were open to the citizens. Executions by guillotine were carefully staged performances, and images of the decapitating machine were disseminated widely in and beyond France (Arrase 1991). Moreover, in the aftermath of the Terror, the authorities in revolutionary France engaged in, what could be described as, a process of erasure with regard to the Terror. Thus, the guillotine was removed from its central location in Paris to the outskirts of the city, where it was less visible. The names of public spaces that were identified with some of the most famous scenes of revolutionary repression were changed to reflect a new atmosphere of stability or reconciliation. The *Place de la Révolution,* for example, where the execution of Louis XVI took place in January 1793, was renamed to *Place de la Concorde* (Baczko 2004). Mass graves of victims of the Terror were covered up and surrounded by high walls, thus removed from public view and access (Lambeau 1922). Current theories of visual culture suggest that dealing with the legacies of the Terror in late eighteenth-century France meant, among other things, creating new ocular realities.

---

3   There is a complex relationship between the Reign of Terror and the modern practice of terrorism. It is beyond the scope of this article, but suffice it to point out that the French Revolution is the origin of the term 'terrorism', which appeared for the first time in the dictionary of the French Academy in 1798, four years after the end of the Terror. See Jourdan 2013.

The phantasmagoria is particularly interesting here because of the combination it created between the supernatural and modern visual technology. The novelty of the phantasmagoria, in terms of visual culture, was that the images moved and that the projecting apparatus was hidden from view, thus creating the impression that the images appeared, literally, out of thin air. Early newspaper reports about the phantasmagoria, such as the following one from London in 1801, drew attention repeatedly to this technological aspect of the experience: "these images appear without any surrounding circle of illumination and the spectators, having no previous knowledge or view of the screen [...] are each left to imagine the distance according to their own respective fancy [...] this part of the exhibition [...] appeared to be much the most impressive".[4]
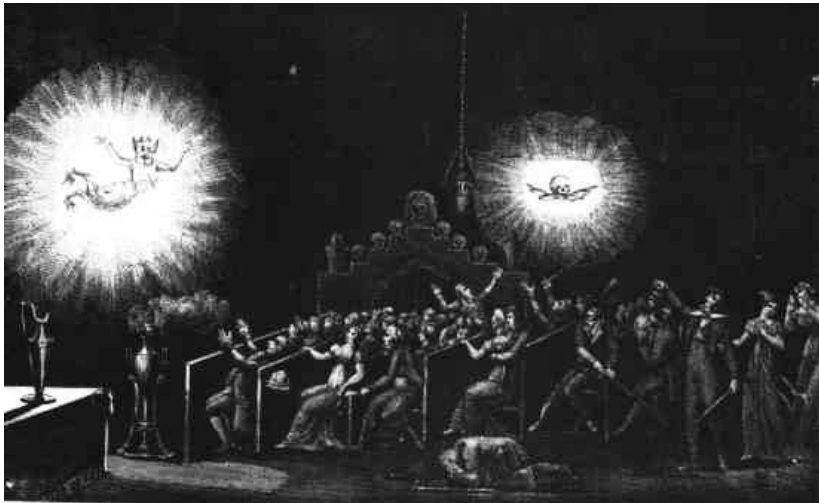
The Phantasmagoria at the *Couvent des Capucins*

Of course, one should be cautious when applying current theories of visual culture to late eighteenth-century France. Images and image-making were extremely important during the French Revolution; yet most French men and women probably never saw them (Censer & Hunt 2005). Moreover, explicit representations of the Terror were discouraged and sometimes censored in its immediate aftermath. Nevertheless, the phantasmagoria was a new visual medium that constituted a sight for dealing with the legacies of the Terror. It

4   Journal of Natural Philosophy, Chemistry & The Arts 1: 147-51. <https://archive.org/stream/journalofnatural01lond#page/148/mode/2up>

emerged from the intellectual traditions of the enlightenment, with their emphasis on modern values such as reason, science, and technology, on the one hand, and from much older cultural beliefs in the occult and the supernatural, on the other. The phantasmagoria embodied and played on these tensions between contrasting forces. As cultural critic Terry Castle (1988: 30) wrote about the shows, "one knew ghosts did not exist, yet one saw them anyway, without precisely knowing how". I see the phantasmagoria as marking a new way for imagining and, indeed, imaging the effects of the Terror on self and society. The images that it produced occupied an ambiguous space, between speech and silence, giving visual expression to the notion that French society after the Terror was spectral in some sense, conflicted, illegible to itself, haunted by the past that the Revolution destroyed (McCorristine 2010).

In the remainder of this article, I elaborate on these claims by closely examining three fields that the phantasmagoria brought into play, namely science, the gothic and visual culture. First, a few words about the creator of this spectacle, Robertson. Etienne-Gaspard Robert was born in Liège in 1763. He had been destined for a career in the priesthood, but was distracted by other, more fashionable pursuits, namely art and the sciences. Robertson combined these two passions by focusing on optics, a field of physics concerned with the properties of light. He published his first scientific essay in 1789, on electrical experiments (Levie 1990).

According to his memoirs, published in 1831, Robertson developed an interest in spectres, apparitions and natural magic early on in life: "I must confess that I believed in the devil, in invocations, in infernal pacts [...] I believed that an old woman, my neighbor, had regular exchanges with Lucifer" (Robertson 1831: 1, 144). It was modern science that disabused the young Robertson of such notions. As we shall see, one of the goals of the phantasmagoria was to use science in order to prove that all beliefs in supernatural forces were rooted in ignorance and irrationality. The point here is that, in his autobiographical tale of a conversion from superstition to enlightenment, Robertson embodied in a sense the discrediting of early modern popular beliefs in occult forces by modern scientific and rational thought (Delumeau 1978, Thomas 1971).

There is another reason for talking about Robertson's biography, namely that he had experienced the Terror personally. Robertson arrived in Paris in 1791 to pursue his studies and to make his name and fortune. At this stage, the Revolution, which had begun two years earlier, was still in its moderate phase. He found employment as a tutor for the children of a noble family. This association with a family of the high French nobility put Robertson in a dangerous position once the Jacobins took power. In his memoirs, he recounts how his employer's

conduct during the execution of Marie-Antoinette, in October 1793, put them both at risk. Apparently, the lady of the house fainted upon seeing the tumbrel that carried the queen to her death passing in the streets, and in general carried on in a manner that attracted unwanted attention from the Parisian militants, who were suspicious of any behaviour that suggested royalist sympathies. Years later, Robertson wrote that it seemed to him as if this incident, "present in my imagination ever since, was but yesterday" (Robertson 1831: 1, 87). He had to flee Paris subsequently and returned only after the fall of Robespierre. Robertson described the scene that he found in Paris after the Terror as one of a cautious revival: "order, sincerity, liberty re-emerged gradually; family members and friends that have been dispersed were being reunited; society, so to speak, was reconstituting itself" (Roberston 1831: 1, 106). Robertson then created the phantasmagoria at a time when the memories of the Terror must have been particularly immediate and visceral, for him as well as for many others in France.

But it was probably science rather than terror that was on Robertson's mind when he inaugurated the phantasmagoria in January 1798. In his memoirs, Robertson insisted that the goal of the phantasmagoria was to combat superstition and spread enlightenment (Robertson 1831: 1, 150). It would provide spectators with a scientific explanation for apparitions and ghosts by showing how these could be produced through simple optical means. Newspaper reports indicate that people were aware of the scientific aspects of Robertson's shows. One account heralded this "spectacle of a new kind that should destroy once and for all the strange effect of an imagination influenced by absurd tales that one hears in childhood" (*Affiches, annonces et avis divers* (1798)). The shows were thus described as being an experiment in the education of the senses.

Reality, however, was somewhat more complex. A newspaper report about one of the earliest shows described the opening monologue in which Robertson presented himself as a man of science and promised those present that "I am not among those charlatans, those adventurers who promise what they cannot deliver", but went on to declare "I have promised to resurrect the dead, and I shall resurrect them" (L'*ami des lois* 1798). Advertisements for the show placed spectres and science side by side: "apparition of specters, phantoms and *revenants*, as they should have and did appear in all times and places. Experiments with the new fluid known by the name of galvanism, whose application can introduce brief movements in dead bodies". Robertson thus played deliberately on the ambiguity between credulity and reason, superstition and science.

The reference to galvanism is particularly interesting here. The term referred to the theories developed by the Italian physician and man of science, Luigi Galvani (1737-1798). Galvani maintained that the principle of life was an invisible

"electric fluid" that existed in living things (Pera 1992). He was particularly famous for an experiment in which he connected the nerves and the legs of a dead frog through an electric conductor and showed that he could produce movement in that way. Galvanic theories became intertwined with the legacies of the Terror around the debate on decapitation. This medical debate, which began around 1795, was about whether the victims of the guillotine died instantaneously or whether life persisted in them for some time after decapitation, suggesting that they had experienced unspeakable suffering (Barras 2003, Gerould 1992). In 1801, Giovanni Aldini, the son-in-law of Galvani, conducted a series of experiments in which he connected the severed heads of guillotined convicts to their bodies by way of a metallic conductor. In his book, Aldini (1804: 124) described the "terrible grimaces" that he was able to obtain in the faces of these victims, which for him were proof that vital forces persisted for some time in the bodies of the guillotined.
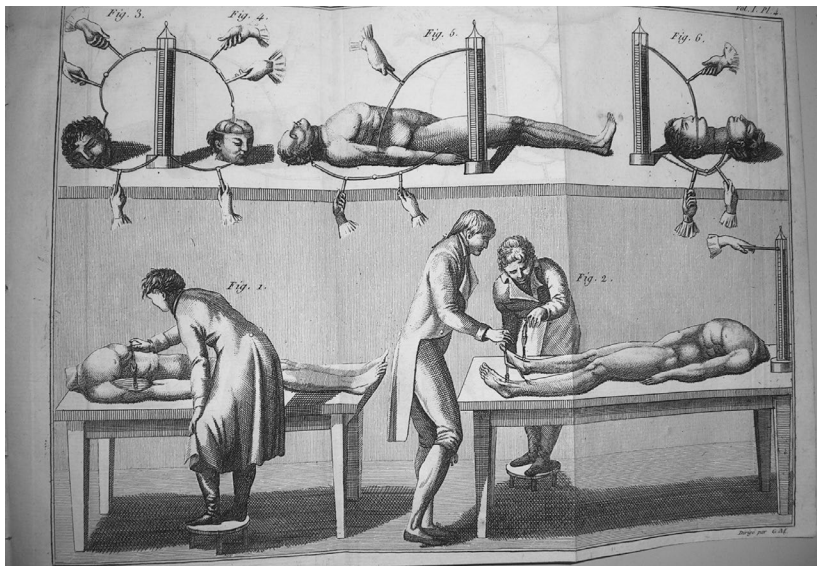
Giovanni Aldini, Essai théorique et expérimental sur le galvanisme, 1804

One implication of theories of electricity such as galvanism was that invisible, yet very real forces connected things and events, even those distant from each other in time and space. Emotions and sensations could spread in a manner akin to contagion, even to those far from the originating event.

Robertson was steeped in this scientific culture. He was a member of the *société galvanique* and repeated many of Galvani's experiments in his shows. This connection between the phantasmagoria and galvanism suggests the following

point: Robertson's shows took place in the context of a scientific culture that sought to make the invisible, intangible forces, which connected all things, visible and tangible (Benz 1989). Furthermore, the phantasmagoria emerged at a particular juncture when the notion of the afterlife, just for a moment, was a real scientific possibility.

The subject of the afterlife brings me to the second cultural field that Robertson's shows engaged, namely, the gothic. The 1790s saw the explosion of gothic literature in the market place. Literary critics have commonly identified this explosion as "collateral damage of the French Revolution" (Miles 2002). While it is difficult to define the genre of the gothic, two of its most persistent characteristics were that the plots usually took place in antiquated spaces and that they often involved figures from the past that re-emerged to haunt the present (Hogle 2002). On both counts, the phantasmagoria had clear affinities with the gothic: it took place in an abandoned convent and it obviously involved ghosts. But the affinities were even deeper and more explicit. One of the scenes created by the phantasmagoria depicted the poet Edward Young burying his daughter. Young was a founding figure of the gothic genre. This particular scene was a reference to his well-known poem, *Night thoughts on life, death and immortality* (1742). Even more tellingly, Robertson (1831: 1, 276) explained his choice of the abandoned convent as an appropriate site for his shows by referring to the "religious terror", which the place inspired in visitors.

The ghosts that Robertson chose to conjure tell us something about the connections between the phantasmagoria and the aftermath of the Terror. They included such celebrated figures as Mirabeau, Rousseau, Voltaire and the great scientist Lavoisier, who was guillotined in 1794. But they also included figures more directly identified with revolutionary violence. The description of one such show, involving the 'resurrection' of Marat is particularly interesting. Robertson often invited members of the audience to request the appearance of spirits of specific people that were dear to them. On one such occasion, a man in the audience, described as being "in a state of disorder, with dishevelled hair and sad eyes", got up and declared that "since I cannot reestablish the cult of Marat in an official journal, I would at least like to see his apparition" (L'*ami des lois* 1798). In a scene reminiscent of sorcery, Robertson then threw blood, sulphuric acid, and some documents into a flame, and a figure appeared in the air. The man who made the request identified the apparition as Marat, but as he tried to get near and hug it, the figure's face contorted hideously and it disappeared.

As this scene suggests, Robertson's shows often flirted with politically sensitive issues. In one of the shows, a man described as an "amnestied rebel [*chouan*]" apparently asked whether Robertson could resurrect Louis XVI.

Robertson replied tactfully to this indiscrete request: "I had the recipe for this before 18 Fructidor, but I am afraid I lost it. I'll probably never find it again, and so from now on, it will be impossible to resurrect the kings of France" (L'*ami des lois* 1798). The mention of 18 Fructidor in this quote refers to an internal seizure of power within the republican government of France in 1797, in response to a perceived threat of a royalist revival. By referring to this event, Robertson was trying to distance himself from any association with royalism, but his wit did not help him in this instance: several days after this incident, the police halted his shows and confiscated his equipment temporarily.

We learn several things from Robertson's ghosts. First, the phantasmagoria sometimes referred explicitly to figures that were identified with revolutionary violence, whether as its victims or perpetrators. Secondly, ghosts signify the persistence of the past in the present. They are a disruption of linear temporality; the return of what should have been gone forever, as captured so well in the French term *revenants*, literally, those that have come back (Buse & Stott 1999). As literary critic Leslie Fiedler (1966) argued, their popularity in the 1790s was related to the guilt of revolutionaries haunted by the past, which they had destroyed, but which, they sensed, would return to haunt them. The phantasmagoria suggested in visual form that the past had not passed, that it would return to haunt the future. Finally, and most importantly, Robertson's ghosts embodied the ambivalence regarding the legacies of the Terror in late eighteenth-century France. They were a way of talking and not talking about a difficult past that many in France would have preferred to, but could not leave behind. Spectres offered a way for talking around official silences, saying in visual form what was forbidden and dangerous to say in words. In other words, Robertson's shows occupied a middle ground between silence and speech, marking the persistence of the memory of loss. As Borneman (2011: 33) put it, in the aftermath of political brutality, "we need interlocutors – imagined and real spirits, ghosts, djins, therapists, even anthropologists – who might provide access to memory's speech, a speech about our duty to address loss".

The third cultural field that Robertson's shows engaged was visual culture. The phantasmagoria was an innovation. Magic lanterns have been used for the projection of images on a screen since the seventeenth century (Mannoni 2000, Waddell 2006). But the phantasmagoria was an improvement on magic lantern shows in several ways. First, the images moved. Robertson obtained this by placing the *fantascope* – the name he gave his projection apparatus – on rails. When the device moved backwards, away from the screen, the image grew in size, and when the device moved nearer, the image decreased in size, creating the illusion that it was coming nearer or farther away from the spectators.
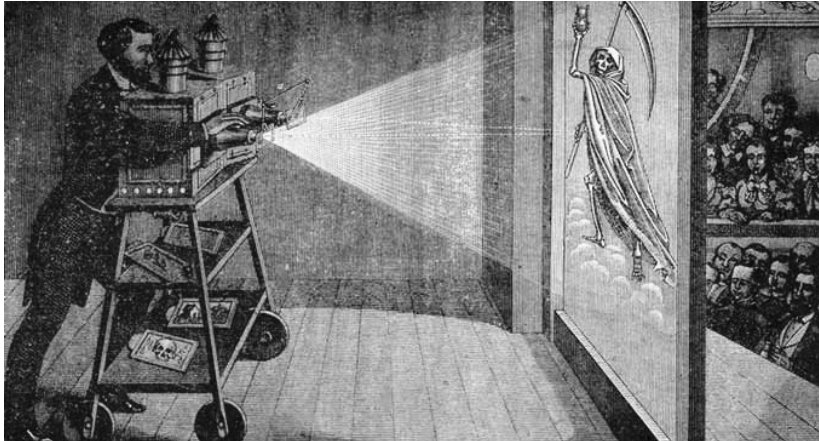
Robertson's *fantascope*

Secondly, the phantasmagoria shows were truly multimedia events. Visitors entered the venue through the darkened corridors of the convent. On their way, they passed through rooms that displayed scientific curiosities and wonders. Once inside the actual room used for the phantasmagoria, they sat in rows, in the dark. The doors were locked behind them. The images were projected to the accompaniment of the eerie sounds of a glass harmonica, a musical instrument invented by Benjamin Franklin, which was believed to have curious effects on the nerves of listeners (Benz 1989: 19-21). Everything was done to increase the effect of horror. Finally, whereas in earlier lantern shows the device itself was at the centre of interest, here the projecting apparatus was hidden from spectators, creating the impression that the images appeared by themselves, out of thin air. In the words of historian of cinema Laurent Mannoni, the impression created by the phantasmagoria was of an assault of images (Mannoni 2001: 136).

It is difficult to know what this assault of images meant to those who experienced it. Examples of audience reception in the eighteenth century are hard to come by, especially for the shows created by Robertson. Nevertheless, anecdotal evidence suggests that, at times, the links between the phantasmagoria and the Reign of Terror were quite explicit. Consider the following description of one of the scenes created by Robertson. This time, he threw into the flames a series of objects that connoted various moments of revolutionary violence: the proceedings of the National Convention's session of 31 May 1793, when the Jacobins purged the moderate faction of the Girondins from the leadership of the Revolution; scenes of prison massacres from the White Terror, which was a wave of revenge killings that swept through the south of France after the Reign of Terror;

collections of denunciations or judgements passed by revolutionary tribunals; a list of suspects; several issues of 'a demagogic and aristocratic journal', and an exemplar of the *Réveil du peuple*, a popular song that protested revolutionary excess. Robertson then pronounced the following words, in a manner akin to the incantation of witches: "*conspirators, humanity, terrorist, justice, Jacobin, public safety, alarmists, exagéré, girondin, moderate, orleaniste* ... whereupon a group of shadowy figures appeared, covered in bloody shrouds (L'*ami des lois* 1798).

Obviously, Robertson was not a stickler for political coherence. The reference to revolutionary violence in his shows drew on all sides of the political spectrum. This is not surprising: the phantasmagoria was, after all, a form of entertainment first and foremost (Barber 1989). Nevertheless, and perhaps precisely because of that, it had the capacity to sanitise, or maybe even exorcise memories of revolutionary violence by transforming them into aesthetic objects.

Contemporaries were well aware of the connections between the phantasmagoria and revolutionary violence. According to reports in the papers, the scene described above involved two members of the Committee of Public Safety who were present in the audience that day: Barère and Cambon, both identified with Jacobin repression. Apparently, Robertson directed the images at them, so that the two appeared to be encircled by the blood-drenched apparitions of victims of revolutionary violence. The two then left the venue angrily to the sounds of insults hurled at them by other spectators. I have my doubts about the truth of this story. Nevertheless, it suggests that in the aftermath of the Terror, the shows of the phantasmagoria could amount at times to an indictment of sorts.

3. Conclusion

In the aftermath of the Reign of Terror, an official desire for forgetting and silence clashed with the practical impossibility of doing so. This impossibility derived from the democratising impulses of the French Revolution, which greatly enlarged the sphere of politics, thus making it virtually impossible to control memory's speech. In this ambivalent situation, ghosts provided a way of talking and not talking about a difficult past, a past that many in France preferred to, but could not leave behind. By providing a tantalizing series of spectral images, the phantasmagoria constituted a site for dealing with the legacies of the Terror. Its combination of traditional cultural beliefs in spectres, apparitions and the supernatural with central values of the modern age – reason, science, technology – gave a unique, tangible expression to the notion that the past, which the revolutionaries destroyed, would return to haunt them in the future. The phantasmagoria did this in a way that was neither speech nor silence, but rather in between, embodying in visual form the ambivalence toward the legacies of the Terror in late eighteenth-century France.

The aftermath of the Reign of Terror provides a case study of how a society dealt with the challenges that arise after periods of brutality well before the advent of modern mechanisms for addressing the legacies of mass violence. In the last third of the twentieth century, there has been an unprecedented proliferation of discourses, institutions and legal mechanisms aimed at dealing with difficult pasts in one way or another (Barkan 2000, Minow 1998, Torpey 2006). Transitional justice, international courts, truth commissions, and even trauma studies all offer a way of conceptualising and responding to the effects of mass violence on self and society, effects of which we are perfectly aware, but which we do not always understand. This article shows how contemporaries of the revolutionary era grappled with similar difficulties in the means available to them at the time. The revolutionary period is particularly interesting here, because it marks the transition from the early modern to the modern world, at least in the European and North American context. The phantasmagoria brought together elements that were anchored deeply in early modern beliefs with quintessential modern notions, such as science and mass entertainment. The deployment and manipulation of disturbing images of violence that is characteristic of the present, whether at the hand of terrorist organisations or the governments that make war on them, was not part of the visual culture in the late eighteenth century. Yet the case of the phantasmagoria does suggest that the French Revolution transformed the manner in which individuals and societies grappled with the legacies left in the wake of massive violence. In this sense, this article invites us to consider how and why the mechanisms for dealing with tragic pasts, pasts identified with terror and violence, change through time.

Bibliography

Affiches, annonces et avis divers, 1 and 17 Pluviôse, an 6 (20 January and 5 February 1798).

L'ami des lois, 8 Germinal, an 6 (28 March 1798).

Aldini G (1804) *Essai théorique et expérimental sur le galvanisme, avec une série d'expériences.* Paris: Imprimerie de Fournier Fils.

Andress D (2006) *The terror: civil war in the French Revolution.* London: Little & Brown.

Baczko B (2004) Briser la guillotine. Une amnistie thermidorienne. *Crimes, histoire et sociétés* 8(2): 5-31.

Barber T (1989) Phantasmagorical wonders: the magic lantern ghost show in nineteenth-century America. *Film History* 3(2): 73-86.

Barkan E (2000) *The guilt of nations: restitution and negotiating historical injustices.* New York: Norton.

Barras V (2003) Le laboratoire de la décapitation. In: R Bertrand and A Carol (eds) *L'exécution capitale, une mort donnée en spectacle XVI-XX siècle.* Aix-en-Provence: Publications de l'Université de Provence, pp. 59-70.

Benz E (1989) *The theology of electricity: on the encounter and explanation of theology and science in the 17th and 18th centuries.* Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications.

Borneman J (2011) *Political crime and the memory of loss.* Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Buse P and Stott A (eds) (1999) *Ghosts: deconstruction, psychoanalysis, history.* New York: St Martin's Press.

Castle T (1988) Phantasmagoria: spectral technology and the metaphorics of modern reverie. *Critical Inquiry* 15(1): 26-61.

Censer J and Hunt L (2005) Imaging the French Revolution: depictions of the French Revolutionary crowd. *American Historical Review* 110(1): 38-45.

Delumeau J (1978) *La peur en Occident (XIV-XVIIIe siècle). Une cité assiégée.* Paris: Fayard.

Douthwaite J (2012) *The Frankenstein of 1790 and the other lost chapters from Revolutionary France.* Chicago, ILL: University of Chicago Press.

Feldman A (1997) Violence and vision: the prosthetics and aesthetics of terror. *Public Culture* 10(1): 24-60.

Fiedler L (1966) *Love and death in the American novel.* New York: Stein and Day.

Fureix E (2009) *La France des larmes. Deuils politiques à l'âge romantique (1814- 1840).* Seyssel: Champ-Vallon.

Gerould D (1992) *Guillotine: its legend and lore.* New York: Blast Books.

Greer D (1935) *The incidence of the terror during the French Revolution: a statistical interpretation.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Gunning T (2004) Phantasmagoria and the manufacturing of illusions and wonder: towards a cultural optics of the cinematic apparatus. In: A Gaudreault, G Lacasse and I Raynauld (eds) *The cinema: a new technology for the 20th century*. Lausanne: Payot, pp. 31-44.

Hartman G (1996) *The longest shadow: in the aftermath of the Holocaust.* Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Hoffman B (2006) *Inside terrorism.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Hogle J (2002) The gothic in Western culture. In: J Hogle (ed) *The Cambridge companion to gothic fiction.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1-20.

Hunt L (1984) P*olitics, culture, and class in the French Revolution*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Jourdan A (2013) Le discours de la terreur à l'époque révolutionnaire (1776-1798): étude comparative sur une notion ambiguë. *French Historical Studies* 36(1): 51-81.

Kroen S (2000) *Politics and theater: the crisis of legitimacy in restoration France, 1815-1830*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Lambeau L (1922) *Le cimetière de Picpus, 1794-1921.* Paris: Imprimerie Municipale.

Levie F (1990) *Étienne-Gaspard Robertson: la vie d'un phantasmagore.* Longeuil: Le Préambule.

Lindet R (1794) *Rapport fait à la Convention nationale dans la séance du 4ème des Sans culottides de l'an 2ème, au nom des Comités de salut public, de sûretè générale et de législation, réunis, sur la situation interieure de la république, par Robert Lindet, Représentant du peuple, et membre du comité de salut public.* Montauban: Chez Fontanel, imprimeur de la société populaire.

Mannoni L (2000) *The great art of light and shadow: an archaeology of the cinema.* Exeter: University of Exeter Press.

Martin J-C (2006) *Violence et révolution. Essai sur la naissance d'un mythe national.* Paris: Seuil.

McCorristine S (2010) *Specters of the self: thinking about ghosts and ghost-seeing in England, 1750-1920.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Miles R (2002) The 1790s: the effulgence of the gothic. In: J Hogle (ed) *The Cambridge companion to gothic fiction.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 41-62.

Minow M (1998) *Between vengeance and forgiveness: facing history after genocide and mass violence.* Boston, MA: Beacon.

Mitchell W J T (2004) *What do pictures want: the lives and loves of images.* Chicago, ILL: University of Chicago Press.

MITCHELL W J T (2011) *Cloning terror: the war of images, 9/11 to the present.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

PERA M (1992) *The ambiguous frog: the Galvani-Volta controversy on animal electricity.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

PRUDHOMME L-M (1796-1797) *Histoire générale et impartiale des erreurs, des fautes et des crimes commis pendant la révolution française, à dater du 24 août 1787; contenant le nombre des individus qui ont péri par la révolution, de ceux qui ont émigré, et les intrigues des factions qui pendant ce tems ont désolé la France, 7 vols.* Paris: Publisher unknown.

QUINET E (1987) *La Révolution, 2 vols.* Paris: Perrin.

ROBERTSON E-G (1831) *Mémoires récréatifs, scientifiques, et anecdotiques du physicien aéronaute, 2 vols.* Paris: Chez l'auteur et à la librairie Wurtz.

STEINBERG R (2014) Reckoning with terror: retribution, redress, and remembrance in post-revolutionary France. In: D. Andress (ed) *The Oxford handbook of the French Revolution.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 487-502.

THOMAS K (1971) *Religion and the decline of magic.* London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson.

TORPEY J (2006) *Making whole what has been smashed: on reparation politics.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

WADDELL M (2006) The World, as it might be: iconography and probabilism in the Mundus Subterraneus of Athanasius Kircher. *Centaurus* 48(1): 3-23.