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The Interest in the Imaginary

Printed images produced in the Dutch Republic during the second half of the seventeenth century made violence into a theme in its own right. The sheer number, diversity, and quality of these prints all contributed to this cultural-historical process. Ever since the onset of the Reformation and the Religious Wars of the sixteenth century, violence had been central to printed images expanding on political and religious polemics, and this was no different for the Dutch Republic throughout the seventeenth century. Plenty of prints explored the violence central to domestic and foreign politics, religious conflict, and the many wars that plagued the European continent. Yet Dutch publishers and printmakers went beyond the issue of immediacy by broadening their interpretation and usage of violent images, focusing on issues that were distant in time, practice, and place. They reimagined and restructured the violence of the Eighty Years’ War through the production of new images for old texts. In doing so, they put particular personal, wondrous, and condensed episodes of violence into the spotlight while dismissing the old and tested atrocity propaganda that proliferated in popular print. Publishers and printmakers reimagined executions by shifting from broadsheet to book illustration, making judicial violence a thematic rather than a topical issue, while simultaneously blurring the boundaries between martyrdom and secular justice. And finally, they painted violence as an attribute of an imagined European borderland, where all warring parties succumbed to the unrestrained exercise of violence. In all cases studied here, violence was positioned as something that was distant from the contemporary
Dutch Republic: it was found in its past and across its borders as something that could become imaginable through the medium of printed images.¹

Fundamentally, what all case studies show is that the printed images of violence discussed here were not a product of a violent society. This was the case not because there was no violence to be found in the Dutch Republic (there most certainly was), but because these images were so explicitly invested in presenting violence as something that was in one way or another ‘distant’. In this sense, images of violence worked actively on a collective imagination of violence: they made imaginable things that could not be seen, and went beyond descriptions in a textual format. Importantly, images also spoke with one another, creating a web of meaning in which violence became abstracted from specific topical events and was made into a broader issue. This is not only the case in books in which many different images follow one another (martyr books for instance), but also in the case of successful and often reprinted book series like the ‘Tragic Histories’. In the medium of news prints, triumphalia, and satire exploited by Romeyn de Hooghe, the long scope of the Great Turkish War (16 years) and the preceding Second Polish-Ottoman War (1672-1676) allowed the Dutch printmaker to create a strong thematic thread in the great variety of works he produced over the course of three decades. In many cases, the gratuitous violence shown in the prints by De Hooghe of the Great Turkish War was more invested in the establishment and reframing of violent visual tropes than it was about providing detailed information on the realities of the Southeast European front.

In all case studies discussed here, the thematic nature of violence did not necessarily preclude a topical reading. Indeed, these two modes could exist at the same time, as is the case with, for instance, the explicit images of the beheading of the Duke of Monmouth, as well as with De Hooghe’s prints on the Austrian-Ottoman front. In both examples, the prints connected to topical issues in terms

¹ This is not to claim that interest in violence closer to everyday life was not present in other forms of media. Novels on the imagination of life in Dutch cities, which involved plenty of sex and violence, were a distinct and new product of the late seventeenth-century print industry. Yet these were not the type of works that stood out for their inclusion of printed images. See: Leemans, Het woord is aan de onderkant, 70-78; Roeland Harms, ‘Ter lering, maar vooral ter vermaak: Een vergelijking tussen de functie van het anekdoteenboek en de zeventiende-eeuwse roman “De Labourlotten”, De Zeventiende Eeuw 19.2 (2003), 154-168: 156-158.
of news and propaganda, yet they also spoke to a wider visual culture in which graphic violence was something to be explored through the medium of the printed image. In this way, both a topical issue like Monmouth’s botched beheading, and a complete non-topical issue like the gruesome execution of Talleyrand-Périgord, could be captured through the same explicit imagination of violence.

Another conclusion that is underlined by this dissertation is that the culture of the Dutch Republic truly was a visual culture in the spirit of Alpers’ use of the term, that is, ‘a culture in which images, as distinguished from texts, were central to the representation [...] of the world’. In the period studied here, the Republic was a place where text was turned into image. Many of the prints discussed here adorned new editions of older texts and translations from other European languages. Within this context, images were not simply illustrations, but intricate cultural products that actively created meaning. They allowed for new interpretations of violence even as texts remained unchanged. And, from the viewpoint of publishers, they were also supposed to turn books into attractive and expensive market products. Indeed, as the case studies of the Revolt and judicial violence show, many of the unique aspects of Dutch violent imagery were found in the more expensive segment of illustrated books. In the literature on the Revolt, changes in the imagination of violence were in fact almost exclusively found in expensive folio books, whereas the cheaper popular works on the ‘Spanish’ (and later ‘French’) tyranny focused on visual continuity. In the case of judicial violence, both martyrologies and the compendia of tragic histories followed a trajectory in the course of the seventeenth century from simple, poorly illustrated books to lavishly decorated works. Anabaptist martyr books did so in the most dramatic fashion, changing from a small concealable format in the sixteenth century, to the large folio format of the 1685 edition of Het bloedig tooneel, which overflowed with explicit prints by the hand of Luyken.

The collective imagination that these violent images worked on was thus always a restricted one, focused on those groups in society wealthy enough to afford extensively illustrated works. In this sense, the growing socio-economic divide that marked the course of the seventeenth-century in the Dutch Republic was reflected in the character of illustrated books. Violence, then, was never a vulgar theme left to popular ‘pulp’, but something that proliferated specifically in works aimed at a

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3. Lowry, The Martyrs’ Mirror Made Plain, 68; Gregory, Salvation at Stake, 244-245.
wealthy clientele — not in the least because high-quality images had more room to emphasize the explicit details of violent acts. Thus, the format and material qualities of the prints in question here, in particular that of the book illustration, had a decisive impact on the way in which they ‘imagineered’ violence as a distinctly visual and printed phenomenon. Simultaneously, ‘imagineering’ was also partly an economic phenomenon, as the production of images at large was dependent on a thriving publishing industry. The definite economic downturn of the Dutch Republic in the first half of the eighteenth century saw the country slowly losing its leading position in the printing business to other European countries. While the book trade itself survived the worst of the economic onslaught, the production of new high-quality printed images for the genres discussed here ground to a halt — with books on, for instance, the Revolt and martyrdom relying on copies from luxurious late seventeenth-century editions. The change in economic favour might, for example, explain why the sudden surge in executions in the first decades of the eighteenth century, partly triggered by economic unrest and moral hysteria, actually coincided with a break in the production of the inventive execution prints so characteristic of the second half of the seventeenth century. Again, actual violence can hardly be linked one-on-one to the creation of violent imagery. Rather, violence was part of an imaginary that thrived on the basis of printed images.

In comparison to the niche of expensive illustrated books, De Hooghe’s works on the Great Turkish War were somewhat of a mixed bag. They ranged from festival books that might very well have been commissioned as gifts for Europe’s elite circuit to cheap ephemeral satirical prints. Somewhere in-between these two poles is the news print: De Hooghe’s etchings on the capture of Buda and Belgrade were exquisite works of craftsmanship, but as single sheet prints they were in all likelihood affordable to a wide public — with translations in French and German extending their reach to a broader European market. Yet similar to the other two case studies discussed here, the work of De Hooghe positioned the Dutch Republic

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as a place where textual material, such as news reports and victory declarations, were turned into high-quality and violent images. Indeed, the output of the Dutch Republic with regard to the Great Turkish War was trendsetting on a European level, largely because of the tireless work of Romeyn de Hooghe. However, despite the prominent Dutch print output, the conflict between the Holy League and the Ottoman Empire was effectively a politically distant affair, taking place in a vaguely defined and violent borderland, and with the Dutch authorities trying to establish a mediating diplomatic role between the warring factions. In this vein, De Hooghe did not only extoll the victories of the Holy League, but also painted a more ambiguous image of Europe’s borderland as a distant place endlessly plagued by unrestrained violence.

The relationship between violence and the printed image thus went beyond both the presence of actual violence and its more narrow instrumental polemical employment. Execution prints showed a strong concern with diverse and explicit scenes of violence, regardless of religious or political context — as shown strikingly in the spectacular works of Jan Luyken and the printmakers that influenced him. These aspects are underlined by the publication histories of the Van Haemstede and Van Braght martyrologies, with Mennonite publishers producing an illustrated Reformed martyrology, and Calvinist publishers pooling their resources to produce the first ever illustrated Mennonite martyr book. In new illustrated works on the Revolt, the traditional atrocity propaganda steadily lost ground, discarded in favour of prints that showed a more diverse understanding of the violence of the Eighty Years’ War. In De Hooghe’s case, a diverse understanding of violence translated in the imagination of Southeast Europe as a region where all parties — especially the Christian ones — were associated with excessive and violent behaviour.

The different forms of distance that were characteristic of printed images of violence can be approached from various angles. These images were undoubtedly part of a particular voyeuristic impulse to see ‘exotic’ forms of violence or spectacular execution methods unknown to the late seventeenth-century Dutch Republic. Yet they also reflected, more than ever, on the nature of capital punishment as an institution, and the impact of violence in physical and personal terms. They

8. For the transformation of the Dutch Republic from an aggressive trading power to a (less-powerful) diplomatic mediator, see: Olnon, ‘Nederland-Turkije, 1675-1678’.
personalized the Republic’s past and its violence, and, as a result, forged a more varied and nuanced image of the old Spanish enemy in relation to the visualization of violence. At the same time, the images discussed here consequently distanced violence from the contemporary Dutch Republic. They were invested in a collective imagination that situated violence as a phenomenon that could become visible primarily through the medium of printed images. In the end, such images actively reproduced an image of the Dutch Republic as a place where violence was only incidental in nature — as in the case of the Disaster Year, brought in by the French, or the outbursts of Orangist mobs — and not a structural part of its intricate workings and the realities of everyday life. It also suggests that the intended audience would have been interested in violence that went beyond their possible lived experiences and connected to an imagination that safely positioned violence as a distinctly foreign or purely historical phenomenon.

In conclusion, then, the violent prints that are so characteristic of the Dutch Republic in the second half of the seventeenth century did not just reflect, but actively worked on a collective imagination of violence, articulated in the various forms of distance discussed in this study. In all three case studies, this distance allowed for violence to become a theme in its own right: a theme that did not always necessarily supersede, but most certainly coexisted with, partisan, religious, and political discourses on violence. In a broader context, the conclusions of this study raise new questions with regard to the extremely diverse corpus of printed images produced in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic. Even when it comes to the most famous printmakers from the second half of the seventeenth century, Romeyn de Hooghe and Jan Luyken, only a very small fraction of their output has been the object of academic analysis. In the case of lesser-known or anonymous printmakers, the scope of research has been even smaller. Yet as shown here, these type of visual sources all provide incredibly rich material in cultural-historical terms. These images often superseded the books that they were supposed to illustrate, and could easily survive any accompanying text in the form of picture books. They were a typically Dutch addition to a European cultural output — illustrating translated works that would otherwise remain unillustrated in their original languages. More than anything, these printed images constituted and propelled a unique late seventeenth-century violent Dutch imagination.