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Visualizing Violence in the Early Modern Spanish Port City

This project interrogates representations and manifestations of violence in the early modern Spanish port city, whether imagined, depicted, or enacted. It is conceived as a comparative study of arts and attitudes in four major port cities under Spanish rule: Naples, Seville, Antwerp, and Lima. These cities have been chosen to expand the definition of “violence” beyond human action, to encompass systemic, governmental, and environmental crisis. Analyzing the external and internal mythologizing of the city, its culture and society, the project questions the extent to which societal events catalyzed depictions of violence, and deconstructs the Black Legend of a violent Spanish temperament. The project promotes a global perspective of these individual port cities, offering a reconsideration of the place of violent images in pre-modern societies. It endeavours to connect previously disparate discourses with a view to formulating an overarching theoretical approach.

As symbols of Spanish imperial and colonial power, all four cities were strategically significant in both military and religious terms, and they are selected for their respective positions in Italy, Peninsular Spain, Northern Europe, and Viceregal America. At once central coordinates of human interaction, these cities were also extensions of an empire based in Madrid, and the violent episodes that took place there may be seen in relation to conflicting geographical powers and varying degrees of political control. Yet how violent were these cities during this period of Spanish rule? Did their inhabitants perceive their culture and society as violent, or was this predominantly an external view? What were the shifting perceptions of violence in (and of) the early modern Spanish port city, and how did they intersect with empire? How can the pre-modern experience of violence—its sights, sounds, and affect—be reconstructed? These questions, which ultimately concern the space, place, and interpretation of violence in society, resonate beyond the early modern world.

Taking Naples as my starting point, I will address three particular contexts in which violent imagery may be situated: fairy tales, contemporary crisis, and artistic rivalry. While painting may be “mute poetry,” violent images are often loud: Ribera’s flayed Marsyas and Azzolino’s damned souls in hell portray figures screaming in pain. The open mouth evokes sound and elicits an emotive response in the viewer. Exploring the auditory dimension of such images, this project will aim to situate these works within their contemporary, multi-sensory contexts, questioning how we reconstruct not only the visual cultures, but also the soundscapes of the early modern era.