Violence and the Art of the Middle Ages

From the central icon of Christ on the Cross, images of suffering martyrs and the torments of the damned in Hell along with ferocious attacking beasts and monsters, the glorification of knightly prowess inspired by saints such as Santiago Matamoros and George killing the Dragon, even mock battles of love in courtly art- altogether there is much violence represented in medieval art. This is calling attention in representation to what Žižec notes is just the most visible subjective violence; one should not neglect underlying systemic violence. For example, the way that so many precious objects in medieval churches were actually donated as a result of war booty gained in battles spurred on by penitential regimes and threats of eternal torment in Hell. Some might assume the prevalence of violence is just a direct result of the society itself, characterized by much violence and dominated by a warrior class. But then how can one articulate the link between real life social violence and that in representation? What in fact is the role of the display of violence in representation as opposed to that in society? Of course, not all violence is the same. Even within distinctive categories of "sacred violence" and "secular violence" there are differences in the nature of violence and the purpose. Violence can be connoted evil, terrifying or on the contrary, glorifying. This seminar will set out to explore some of these issues through the consideration of visual representations, theoretical writings, both modern and medieval and through the consideration of art historical texts that have taken up the theme of violence in medieval art.

Chauvigny, France

Les Belles Heures du Duc De Berry, Martyrdom of St. Bartholomew, fol. 161r

For a discussion about violence in this manuscript see:
http://blog.metmuseum.org/artofillumination/2010/05/12/suffrages-ii-is-the-belles-heures-a-violent-book/

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