

Trajective Art Criticism: Boats (Trains, Planes) and Home in the Era of Retreat from Democracy

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As an academic art historian, I usually aim for tightly reasoned arguments, but on this occasion I'll follow trains of thought where they lead me. Both before and after I retired, my feet, and various forms of transport, took me to art galleries in many countries. Last year I visited about fifty in eight countries, this year slightly less elsewhere. If this is a boast then I will suffer for it by the end.

My first train of thought is about travel and the second is about home. The final section puts 'home and away' together in a bid to explore the implications of anti-democratic popularist movements for art criticism.

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I shall start with a few days in Iceland where the city museum at Reykjavik whets tourists' appetites for their country

Photograph of Exhibition



by reassembling the earliest exhibition of Icelandic art, held in Copenhagen in 1927. It comprises more than two hundred paintings, bright with post-impressionist colour from the art of other countries.

Kjarvell, Svartfell, 1921, 1



Kjarvell, Svartfell, 1921, 2



I was eager to compare this epitomization of Iceland with what I would see on my travels. They were lovely, but not compared to the landscape itself, whose best qualities only appeared on the move.

Iceland Photo 1



It is a disjunctive, paradoxical landscape.

Iceland Photo 2



The heaviest mountain ranges look airborne.

Iceland Photo 3



Industrial slag heaps turn out to be natural scree bordering the chill purity of fluorescent blue rivers promising fat oily fish. Cold life.

Iceland Photos 4-6



Static paintings pale before scenery morphing through car windows. Icelandic sagas do better than paintings in this respect, their place names navigating us through political and geographical terrain on physical and emotional trajectories.¹

At least one painting didn't pale by comparison, however.

Finnur Jonsson, Morning at Sea, 1927



The catalogue talked of its cockleshell boat amongst unruly waves and the mysticism of early morning light. To me what mattered was how the rotary rhythm of swirling waters served the classical equilibrium of effective team work on which the livelihood of local communities depended.

Delacroix, Christ on the Sea of Galilee, 1853



Back in London its memory returned as contrast with Delacroix's *Christ on the Sea of Galilee* (1853), expressing immanent chaos instead of stability. Crucial to this effect was that the dark blue/greys of the disciples' drapery were not quite, but nearly, the same colours as the enveloping waves, while the whites in their clothing echoed surf. Inundation had almost already happened, amplifying the abject terror of hysterical disciples whose oars, by further contrast, made no purchase on the waves. One figure adopts a pose of crucifixion, arms akimbo. But blithely asleep in the bows, Christ couldn't give a monkeys. He will wake soon enough and calm the sea. But if these are the contrasts, what is the analogy with the Icelandic painting? Whether working together as a well-oiled machine or pulled asunder by terror of capsizing, both teams of rowers allegorize the order or chaos of the soul's journey through life, a theme whose antiquity

was impressed on me when I saw this marginal illustration of a boat in the c14 Luttrell psalter in the British Museum.

Luttrell Psalter, C14



The oarsmen row the soul in the direction of sin while waders in shallow water haul it in the direction of virtue.

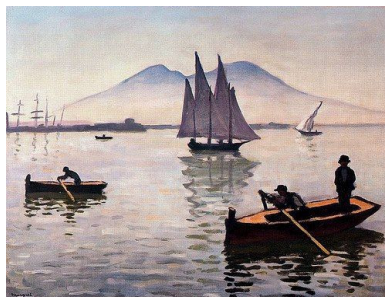
Albert Marquet, La Baie de Naples, 1909



Le Verure; Le Matin, 1909



Naples, Le Voilier, 1909

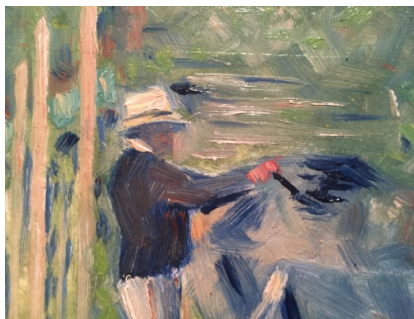


By the time I saw these three views of Naples by the post-Impressionist painter Albert Marquet in the Palais de Tokyo, Paris, a thread was developing about modernist boat paintings. The oar or barge pole is a surrogate for the artist's brush. Men are bent by work except in the second painting where a standing man stares back at us, taking our place as observer. Manual work and aesthetic contemplation drift together and apart, as they do in Seurat's wonderful *Man Painting a Boat*, London, where the artist's brushstrokes turbulently cross those of the boat painter they constitute.

Seurat, *Man Painting a Boat*, 1883



Seurat Detail



Back to Marquet, *La Baie de Naples*, 1909



The Marquet is strategically looser and incomplete. With Vesuvius in the background Marquet is interested in the elements of earth, air and fire NOT interacting but held in suspense across the elasticated, glassy ocean. Artist, rower, bargemen and their implements are the sign of an unrealized, non-explosive, forever immanent relationship.

Herein lies a further theme. A fundamental analogy between boats and paintings is that they both travel, one from a mooring, another from a wall to the next place of display. The aim of galleries is to trap paintings – and consequently visitors – but paintings were made to travel, and part of their valency is to enter into unknown relationship with other paintings that change their meanings, which they continue to do in the travelling gallery of our memories...

Nor is the reflexivity of the parallel really new.

J. Dehoij, Willem Van De Velde Sketching a Sea Battle, 1845



Three weeks ago at time of writing, this painting was the last I saw before closing time at the Hermitage. It is J. Delhoij's depiction of another Belgian artist, *Willem van de Velde Sketching a Sea Battle*. Dated 1845, it belongs to the era of Artist as Genius-Hero, and shows what must happen for an *in situ* drawing to become a fully-fledged studio painting. Is it the most callous battle painting ever painted? The 'punctum' is the facial expression of the right-hand oarsman. Does it signify admiration for the artist's heroic service to military truth, or horror at his indifference to the plight of the mariners desperately clinging to the splintered masthead? The first, probably, though the painting cleverly avoids blame. Since all three survivors would capsize the boat, there's no point in rescuing any of them. Despite insistence on Truth in the face of Danger, do we really

believe Dehoij was in another boat from which he sketched the artist? The actual painting can only be the invention of the studio, not the *cinema verite* it applauds. The artist's heroic imagination of the artist trumps the mariners' terror.

John Singleton Copley, *Watson and the Shark*, 1778



No such heroic detachment in John Singleton Copley's *Watson and the Shark* (1778) at Boston. The old boatswain is in charge, but democracy reigns in his cooperation with younger crew in working to the risk of all their lives at a third attempt at saving young Brook Watson whose leg is lost to a shark in Havana harbour.² A simple story about ill-advised bathing? It is really about the Boston Tea Party and the breakdown of US-UK relations prior to the War of Independence.³

Close Up of the Shark's Eye



This time the artist's surrogate is the shark's eye, threatening viewers with the teeth of war if union between Britain and America sunders. (Take it from an Australian, by the way: sharks don't have nostrils!)

Shark Eye and Teeth



This ushered in three new boat themes: leadership, boat types and global relations.

Leutze, *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, 1851



Nine days ago I stood in front of Emanuel Leutze's *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, 1851, commemorating the American Civil War. With his foot staunchly rooted on the edge of the boat as if he were on land, Washington leaves the practicalities of sailing and transporting heavy canons and unruly horses to others. His visionary gaze is fixed on future victory. No democracy here, only hierarchy, including the subordinated native American in the stern.⁴

Detail of Native American



Lest we think the artist is absent from this hierarchy, Leutze has modelled Washington's face on his friend, the artist Worthington Whittredge.

Sketch of Washington's Face Modelled on Whittredge



The place of women in boat hierarchies would require a separate paper.⁵

Millais, Orphelia, 1851-2



So to vessel type: where do rowing boats go to, apart from enemy river banks? Often to larger vessels bound for longer journeys, this one shuttling a VIP.

J. M. W. Turner, *Van Tromp's Shallop at the Entrance of the Scheldt*, c. 1832



But in Fitz Henry Lane's *Owl's Head, Penobscot Bay, Maine* (1862) the tables are turned.

Fitz Henry Lane, *Owl's Head, Penobscot Bay, Maine* (1862)



The label says: 'A solitary boatman faces the pale, salmon-colored sunrise: is he gazing at the ships in the distance, going places he will not see?'⁶ He is staying behind, then, not globetrotting. It seems my selective filter excludes vessel that travel very far, for the defining condition of most rowing boats is that they must be able to return home.

Russian Painting of Steamboat at Perm
(Find Author And Title)



Hence at Perm the surrealism of home fires in the lamp-lit stern of this extraordinary Romantic painting of a steamship tossed by tempestuous seas. So far from land, the *unheimlich* glowing windowpanes threaten death by fire as well as drowning.

It will not have escaped your attention that most of my examples are nineteenth-century. Just as horses died out as a form of transport across Europe, so boats in art were superseded by more glamorous forms of transport.⁷

Flo Kasearu, Uprising, 2015



Flo Kasearu's jet fighter installation, for example, in an exhibition of contemporary Baltic art in Helsinki, is a sinister update of my home and away theme. A four-metre long tin sculpture folded like an oversized paper dart is set next to a video of the artist removing its materials from the roof of his home in Tallinn. The overscale dart and the tiny drone that films its removal from the roof parody the Russian jets violating air space above Estonian homes.

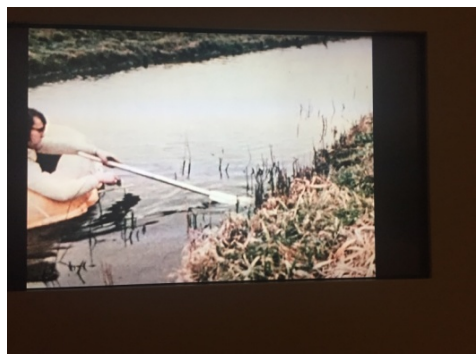
Yet rowing boats persist in contemporary art.

JocJonJosh, Eddy, 2014



JocJonJosh's installation of a triple-bowed rowing boat with three rowlocks under the disused boathouse at Yorkshire Sculpture Park symbolizes the leaderless collaboration of contemporary art making. The three artists can only pull against each other.

Ger Van Elk, Flattening of the Brook's Surface, 1971, 16 mm Film



Equally absurdist is the film I saw in the Rijksmuseum last year: a solitary artist in an isolated canal paddles his rubber dinghy with one oar while painting flat the waves it

causes with a trowel in his other hand. He too is going round in circles. Boats serve New Media as anachronisms that supersede the bankrupt notions of painting and the individual artist but also express nostalgia for their cottage industry in an age of mainstream media.

If you want nostalgia, here is my second train of thought. A couple of years ago I finished a work binge of several weeks in my Australian home and wanted to ‘push the boat out.’ Since I don’t drink alcohol, I visited my local supermarket to buy one whole carton of diet ginger ale. The cashier was a listless young woman bored out of her skull. I noticed something odd about her accent that dimly reminded me of home. On enquiry she revealed she came from Wolverhampton, my home town, then she named my suburb, then my road, then my street number, declaring she still lived there! Consider the scale of this coincidence. There are 24.5 million homes in England and we met in one Australian building.

Author's First Home in Wolverhampton, UK



Later I visited her parents and found my old house stuffed with accomplished paintings of another home I had never seen. They were by John Hampton, the cashier's grandfather, who had been the respected Head of Art at nearby Bilston Community College before his death in 2012. The garden of his home four miles away had been his Giverny.⁸

John Hampton And His Paintings



His Uplands Crescent Home



Over the following months this disconcerting clash of somewhere so strange in a place so familiar slowly developed into a sense of the global relativity of homeliness, whether it be Norwegian ‘hygge,’

Hygge



Finnish ‘Pantsdrunk’ or ‘*kalsarikänni*’

Pantsdrunk or *kalsarikänni* (Finnish)



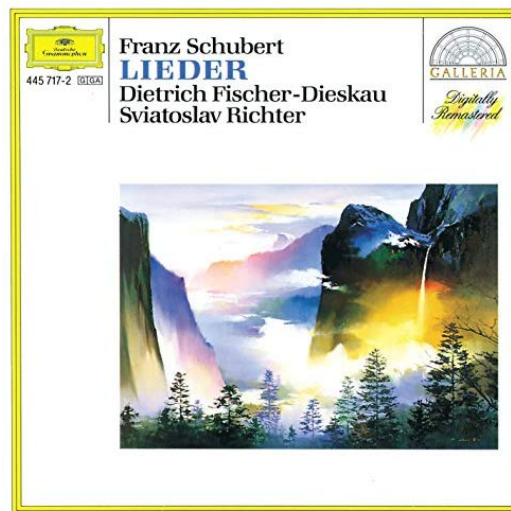
Welsh ‘hiraeth,’

Hiraeth



Swiss 'Heimwehe'

Heimwehe

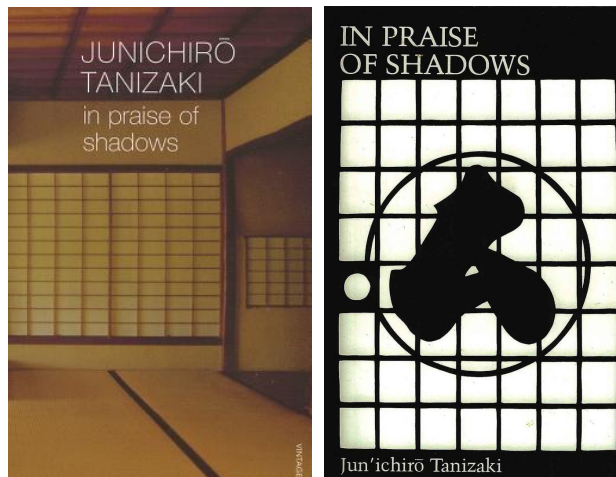


or the view from the garden toilet hailed in that magnificent paean to traditional Japanese homeliness, Jun'ichirō Tanizaki's *In Praise of Shadows* (1933).

Japanese Toilet



In Praise of Shadows Cover



Heart-warming as such nativist imagery may be, it has been ruthlessly exploited in recent times by anti-democratic popularist movements around the world. It also neglects the gruelling conditions of contemporary work from which we slump into these half-imaginary places in order to recover.

It is no surprise that the locally rooted feel their voices have been lost in the battle between mobile wealth and immobile poverty.⁹ The progressive neo-liberalism of Tony

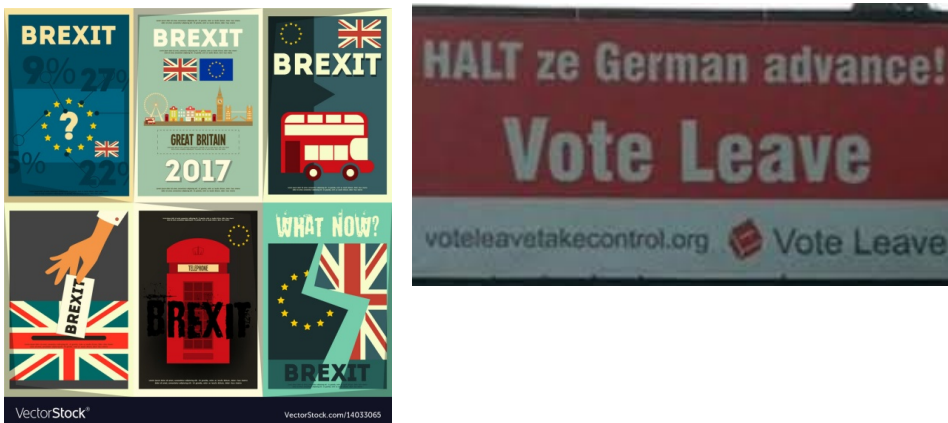
Blair, Bill Clinton and others used the social elevation of highly selected representatives of ethnic and other minorities as an alibi for sinking the majority into the international Precariat.¹⁰ Mistaking the sources of their troubles, these lost voices suffered an unfixing of culturally uniform identity that prompted their withdrawal from the complexity of failing globalism towards the home fires of a parochial past that never existed.¹¹

Tin-Tin And The Exit Plan



Pivoting towards conservative neo-liberalism, global interests invented an iconography of mass nostalgia for an invented past that could even frame Karl Marx as an ancestral medieval warlord.

Brexit Posters, Trump And Jckson, Marx As Feudal Baron





Marxism was intrinsically opposed to the divisions of societies into groups that injure one another and was committed to social enlargement programmes to bring about ‘a new and broader merging of the rising aggressive element with the element it assaults and absorbs. ... In this future the human spirit as represented by the proletariat’ would ‘expand to make the larger unity of which its mind is already compassing the vision.’¹² True, this model of enlargement with all its cruelties also fits imperialist colonisation, global consumerism and world trade agreements, but how could the good things about welfare states everywhere have come about without a vision of greater unities, including the mobility of labour that was Brexit’s chief target?

By the eighties the downside of enlargement became apparent. As one progressive commented: ‘cultural diversity, like ecological diversity’ seemed ‘threatened by technology and travel,’ while in Europe it was ‘feared that political and economic unification will suppress deeply rooted national identities in favour of some nebulous Europeanness.’¹³ Despite its concern for indigenous rights, such well-intentioned rhetoric seems reactionary in the context of the new xenophobias.

Art criticism seems powerless against such forces, but I suppose I am proposing trajective

art criticism as an attitudinal antidote. Derived from Augustin Berque's 'trajective enterprise',¹⁴ the concept of 'trajective energy' has been applied as a necessary consideration in the design of urban parks to reflect the different character of the surrounding neighbourhoods by which they are approached.¹⁵ No doubt there are innumerable precedents for the idea, not all of them benign: the river journeys connecting different scenes in Chinese scroll paintings,

Ma Yung, *A Crisp Autumn in Stream And Mountain*, 1160-1215



the art and literature of the Grand Tour to Italy,

Pier L. Ghezzi, *Dr James Hay As Bear-Leader*, C. 1725



the transition from Cubist passage technique to postmodernist mall architecture,

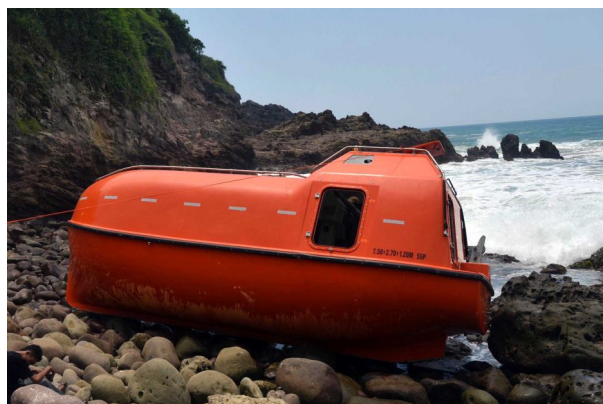
Cubism AND Mall



and the very rationale of international art residences. Indeed hasn't everyone everywhere always searched elsewhere for good ideas? Culture may itself be a means of extending empathy beyond immediate spheres of interest. Despite its *passé* enthusiasm for actual works of art, including old ones, trjective art criticism aspires to an experimental and intuitive form of criticism that channels the interpretative and emotional energy brought from one artefact to another, across international borders. It would take account of crafted Instagram moments in art tourism and the recent work of Emily Apter on 'shareholder existence' and Borys Gros on 'the security principle', in which the currency of the 'experience economy' exceeds property as a source of cultural status.¹⁶ It would use 'mobile' metaphysics to fight 'sedentrist' metaphysics.¹⁷

And so a sobering thought. As the preserve of elite art travellers, such as to a small extent I must class myself, wouldn't trjective art criticism be essentially anti-democratic? Anthony Gardner and Huw Hallam have critiqued the *kudos* of the globe-trotting biennale curator for whom 'auratic presence' has shifted from being immanent to the original work to the privileged viewer, 'whose authority is borne not by experience but by *experiences*.'¹⁸ The target of populist nostalgia for a virginal past is often the intrusive traveller, whether asylum seeker or tourist.¹⁹ Could trjective art criticism counter the insularity that xenophobia feeds on without patronising those excluded from travel - or is such exclusion a predicate of what aesthetic experience has become in the age of 'shareholder existence'? Certainly neo-liberalism has its own effective trjective iconography as ideological tools that warrant commentary and resistance: drones striking Middle Eastern wedding ceremonies,²⁰ for example, or that exquisite inversion of slaveship memory, the Australian supplied disposable lifeboat designed to roll asylum seekers around in their own vomit as they are sent 'back home.'

Australian Supplied Disposals Lifeboat



But how do things look from Taiwan. Got any boat paintings?

References

- ¹ See Emily Lethbridge, 'Saga stead', *Cambridge Alumni Magazine* 80 (Lent 2017), 36-39.
- ² 'Scared not only for my safety but for theirs,' poem in Watson's voice by Charelyn Santana, 2013, quoted on a gallery label, Boston Museum of Fine Arts.
- ³ See Jennifer L. Roberts, 'Failure to Deliver: *Watson and the Shark* and the Boston Tea Party,' *Art History* 34 (September 2011), 674-695.
- ⁴ My thanks to Alan Michelson for this observation.
- ⁵ It would be difficult to find boat paintings this illustrate such examples of female heroism at sea such as Terry Davis gives in *Borth: A Seaborn Village* (Llanrwst: Gwasg Correg Gwalch, 2004), 63: 'In 1946, near Trwyn Cyntaf [Ceredigion, Wales], on a stormy July day, with a gale blowing from the southwest, the ebbing tide created a vicious undertow which swept a bather out to sea. John Arnold Davies, owning the only boat at the southern end of the village, went to the rescue. Having launched the boat in the shallows, he was imploring someone to jump aboard as it was all he could do, even with his experience, to manage the boat in the treacherous conditions. Of the people that had gathered on the beach, only Pamela Richards had the courage to join him. ... Just before boarding the boat she turned to the male bystanders and snapped; "call yourself men"? The rescue was successfully completed by this duo followed by a hazardous return ashore, complicated by the need to row astern through the pounding surf.'
- ⁶ Gallery label, Boston Museum of Fine Arts.
- ⁷ The extinction of one type of boat is eloquently recounted in John R. Stilgoe, *Shallow Water Dictionary: a Grounding in Estuary English* (Cambridge, Mass.: Exact Change, 1990).
- ⁸ See notice of John Hampton, Retrospective Exhibition, Wolverhampton Art Gallery, 15 June – 13 July, 2013: <http://www.wolverhamptonart.org.uk/whats-on/john-hampton/>.
- ⁹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).
- ¹⁰ See Nancy Fraser, interviewed by Shray Mehta, 'Can we Understand Populism without Calling it Fascist?' *Economic & Political Weekly* 53, no. 22, 02 Jun, 2018: <https://www.epw.in/node/151920/pdf>.
- ¹¹ See Paul Arbair, '#Brexit, the populist surge and the crisis of complexity', Paul Arbair Blog, posted 5 July 2016: <https://paularbair.wordpress.com/2016/07/05/brexit-the-populist-surge-and-the-crisis-of-complexity/>.
- ¹² Edmund Wilson, *To the Finland Station: A Study in the Writing and Acting of History*, revised edition (London: Fontana/Collins, 1972), 200.
- ¹³ Nicholas Thomas, *Possession: Indigenous Art/Colonial Culture* (London, Thames and Hudson, 1999), 95.
- ¹⁴ Augustin Berque, *Être humains sure la terre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 46.
- ¹⁵ See John Dixon Hunt, 'Reinventing the Parisian Park,' in *Tradition and innovation in French garden art: chapters of a new history*, ed. John Dixon Hunt and Michel Conan (Philadelphia:

University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 214.

- ¹⁶ Emily Apter, 'Shareholder existence: on the turn to numbers in recent French theory,' *Textual Practice* 28, no. 7 (2014) 1323-1336; Borys Groys, *In the Flow* (London: Verso, 2018).
- ¹⁷ See Tim Cresswell, 'The Metaphysics of Fixity and Flow,' in *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2006), 25-56.
- ¹⁸ Anthony Gardner and Huw Hallam, 'On the contemporary – and contemporary art,' review of Terry Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?*, *Journal of Art Historiography* 4 (2011), 8.
- ¹⁹ See Claudio Milano, Joseph Milano and Marina Novelli, 'Tourism is becoming a major issue for cities across the globe,' *World Economic Forum*, 20 July 2018: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/07/overtourism-a-growing-global-problem>.
- ²⁰ Tom Engelhardt, 'The US Has Bombed at Least Eight Wedding Parties Since 2001,' *The Nation*, December 20, 2013: <https://www.thenation.com/article/us-has-bombed-least-eight-wedding-parties-2001/>.

* Droits réservés: please kindly claim your right with us regarding the graphs in this article.