

Materiality and the Dialectic in the Lithographs of Honore Daumier

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France, during the July Monarchy of 1830, was marked by divisiveness. Republicans clashed with the monarchy of Charles X to protect what was left of a limited constitution. The Industrial Revolution too, affected crafts people from country-side and cities alike. Dissent was rampant as people clamored for an endowment of rights both political and economic. Enfranchisement and suffrage, necessary for the creation of a strong middle class a century previous, was now viewed as an evident right. In the arts, history painting was in decline. A Davidean sense of loyalty to the state was replaced with personal and expressive painting style. Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*, for example eschews an academic form for a personal one. The July Revolution, pictured as a creation of the classes of Paris acting in solidarity. "It was one thing for Delacroix to embrace... comforting homilies of solidarity, but quite another to see Liberty herself wearing the disheveled costume of the proletariat. 'Was there only this rabble...,' asked Dumas, 'at those famous days in July?'"¹ The painting, not accepted to the Salon in 1830, instead was bought for a modest amount of money and hidden from the largesse of the French public. Lithography, a relatively new technology at the time, introduced methods of getting the latest news to a French public hungry for information. In 1831, Charles Phillipon's journal *La Caricature* showed a caricature of the citizen-king Louis-Philippe drawn by Honoré Daumier. *Gargantua*, (figure 1), as the lithograph was named, showed the king as an automaton, a machine of the state. The periodicals at this time enjoyed large sway with censorship laws and the caricaturists used their crayons with effective results. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the historical context of the lithographic image as critique. These

¹Stephen F. Eisenman, *Nineteenth Century Art, A Critical History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994) p. 207.

lithographs represent a Hegelian engagement between the artist and the viewer. I would also like to look at the images themselves and give a Marxist reading of Daumier as a man influenced by the politics and technology of the Industrial Revolution.

To understand the way in which Daumier saw the Parisian world of the 19th century, a look at his life is in order. Daumier was born in Marseilles in 1808. His father was a mason by trade, but a poet at heart, "...he quit Marseilles for Paris in (an) effort to exchange putty for pen; a year later his family joined him there."² In fact, the senior Daumier moved his family around quite often, listing as many as ten residences between the years of 1815 through 1832.³ These humble beginnings brought out a sympathy for the working class of which Daumier belonged. The historian and critic Oliver Larkin says of the young Daumier's political leanings:

We have his own word that he (Daumier) loved the simple cadences of Béranger who said that he had descended from the heights of Pindar to turn song into joys, the sorrows and the patriotism of the most numerous classes, the lowest of the low. And we can suspect that Daumier came early to realize that his generation had inherited a task left unfinished by the Great Revolution.⁴

Patriotism, democracy and moral conscience affected Daumier greatly. And it was sympathy for his comrades, even at the expense of a celebrated career in a more viable, historic and academic media, that drove his aesthetics. "What a great artist Daumier just missed being," Roger Fry laments a century later, "by his too precipitate moral indignation!"⁵ Daumier's artist studies began when his father obtained an art instructor, one of ardent classicist leanings, named Alexandre

²Oliver W. Larkin, *Daumier, Man of His Time* (New York, Toronto, London: McGraw Hill, 1966) p. 3.

³Larkin, p. 3.

⁴Larkin, p. 5.

⁵Larkin, pp. 215.

Lenoir. At Lenoir’s studio, the fourteen year-old Daumier was taught to “...draw from plaster casts and from engravings of Hellenistic sculpture... .”⁶ These academically inclined skills were important to Daumier’s instruction as an artist. Lenoir also had students draw at the Louvre, and had a large collection of copies of Rubens and Rembrandt . But above all, Lenoir admired the art of Michelangelo. These three artists influenced Daumier the most at this time.⁷ Basic skills of copying and rendering, although necessary for fundamental instruction, couldn’t have prepared Paris and Daumier for a serendipitous

encounter. Aloys Senefelder, a German actor-playright, discovered lithography in 1798 while looking for an inexpensive way to print his work. The English professor, Howard Vincent relates, “A rapid, convenient, and inexpensive

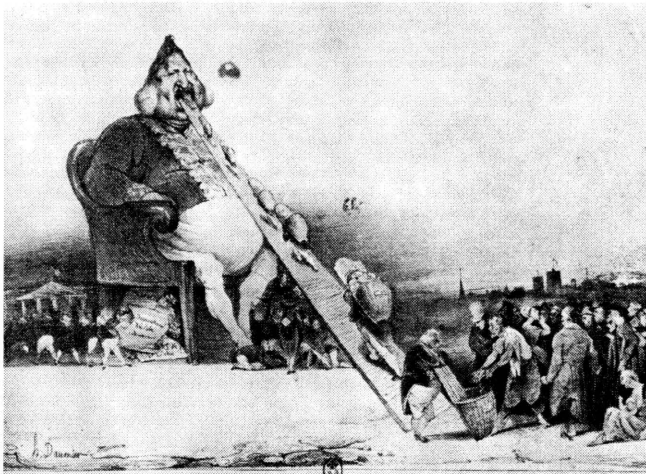


Figure 1:
Gargantua, 1831
Lithograph,
9.5 x 12 in.

pictorial technique, lithography was a godsend for the future development of illustration in a democratic, cheap press, for almost half a century was to pass before an easy means of reproducing photographs through the halftone process came to the scene.”⁸ The nature of lithographs thus, abandoned veracity for style and wit to criticize public establishments. In Daumier’s case, this was to focus on politicians, the working poor and inequality.

⁶Larkin, p. 3

⁷Howard P. Vincent, *Daumier and His World* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968) p. 6

⁸Vincent, p. 8

Previous to the July Monarchy, the French government was under a divisive siege. Bourbon and Republican interests swelled. Wars, launched upon France by her neighbors furthered the schism between the classes and brought about a nationalistic fervor. The short-lived Republic of 1792, which championed the rights of free men, used Rousseau's social contract as an ideal for governance. Napoleon, seized power in 1799 and declares himself "first consul" in 1801. This government based itself on a contrary point of view between social classes; namely, a few wealthy persons believed in freedom for themselves, but denied it to others. Napoleon, was exiled to St. Helena in 1815, after the Battle of Waterloo, reestablishing the Bourbon monarchy . The same year, a charter was established qualifying wealth and social ranking as the only eligible qualifications for political leaders.⁹ Louis XVII dies in 1824, and his brother Charles X, "...a feeble old man infatuated with the trappings rather than with the true responsibilities of kingship..." inherit(s) the throne.¹⁰ In July of 1830, Charles' ministers pass strict ordinances that censored the press and called for new elections. The press, "...issued a defiant manifesto; then (put up) posters urging all to reject the new tyranny."¹¹

The three days of the July Revolution forced Charles X and his ministers to flee for their lives. This marked the ambition of the french people to come together and revolt against the government. They hoped to forge a government based on rights awarded from

⁹Larkin, p. 3

¹⁰Vincent, p. 10

¹¹ibid., p.11



Figure 2:
Thi...(Thiers)
c. 1834, Lithograph.

the Great revolution and slowly eroded by the Bourbon monarchy. The initial joys and freedoms were to be limited and anti-climactic. France was divided into three distinct political factions: the disorganized Republicans, the Monarchists and the propertied and powerful bourgeoisie.¹² This last group, most notable among them Adolphe Thiers, (figure 2), was a lawyer and politician caricatured by Daumier many times. Theirs, “...had no faith whatever in popular suffrage...” and figured that the new government’s “...leading figures were to be bourgeois citizens of substance who were more concerned with the acquisition of property for exploitation than for its wider and more equitable distribution.”¹³

Daumier showed *Gargantua* in the illustrated journal *La Caricature* (figure 3) in 1831. The journal, founded by Charles Phillipon and his brother-in-law in 1830, enjoyed relative freedom from state censorship. The *juste milieu* that characterized the reign of Louis-Philippe in the end, brought about its own downfall. The government ignored rampant poverty and widespread unemployment. Unrest escalated in Lyons in April, 1834 as the government passed laws forbidding all secret societies.¹⁴ Barricades were erected in the streets to stop entry of the troops into the proletarian district. Government soldiers killed dozens of these people. Stephen Eisenman writes, “The tactic (barricading the streets) was unsuccessful, ... and within a short



Figure 3:
page from *La Caricature* c.1834,

¹²Vincent, p. 11

¹³Stephen F. Eisenman, *Nineteenth Century Art, A Critical History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994) pp. 191-192.

¹⁴Vincent, p. 58.

time, dozens of workers were dead on the streets or in their homes.”¹⁵ Daumier captures a scene from this event in *Rue Transnonain April 15th, 1834*. (figure 4)

Soon afterward, the September laws, censoring political caricatures were passed, and art in general was limited to a “bourgeois historicism”.¹⁶ All masks of a Republic were dropped.



Figure 4:
Rue Transnonain
April 14, 1834,
1834, Lithograph,
11.5 x 17.625 in.

Gargantua, printed three years prior was a harbinger for the dreary days ahead for French workers and Republicans. Lithography was unique. Prints were viewed by the literate and non-literate alike, and were widely disseminated. The technology was cheap, commercial Paris dailies, “...could claim sales of 235,000 copies. (And) By 1870, those sales had expanded to one million, and by 1880 they had reached two million.”¹⁷ The press formed a common culture. Not only were journals prolific, but they were, “...urban and insistently up to the minute, with specific emphasis on the inventions and events of modern life.”¹⁸ *Gargantua*, for instance, pictures modern life as divisive. Louis-Philippe is the central figure in the composition and parts the masses of people into the corners of the picture. Louis-Philippe is seated “...on a toilet, and defecates rewards to the tiny ministers of his government gathered beneath the chair. Others... collect tribute from the destitute and crippled populace... then march up the gangplank to feed...the

¹⁵Eisenman, p. 193.

¹⁶ibid.

¹⁷Dean de la Motte & Jeannene M. Przyblyski introduction to *Making the News, Modernity and the Mass Press in 19th Century France*, ed. by Dean de la Motte & Jeannene M. Przyblyski (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999.) p. 2

¹⁸ibid., p. 3.

ravenous king.”¹⁹ Daumier was tried in a court of law along with the publisher, Phillipon and the printer of the lithograph. The three were found guilty of arousing hatred and contempt for the king’s government and for personal offense to Louis-Philippe himself. They were sentenced to six months in prison and suffered a heavy fine. Daumier was the only one to serve any time, for he had “traced the guilty image.”²⁰ The most offensive act, according to the government, were its scatological associations, which were particularly offensive to the king. The plunder of the poor was masked with humor. Laughter, it seemed, was the most simple and direct means to show the peoples plight. “As a consensus-building strategy,” Elizabeth Childs writes, “laughter is one of the most powerful tools of propaganda, precisely because it may seem so innocuous, spontaneous, and natural (and therefore truthful).”²¹ Daumier divides the picture plane into spheres of opposites. The human subject is seen estranged from the land, only to work in utility for the government. A surplus value is evident between the differences in value of the laborers efforts and what the bourgeoisie receives. In this case, it is shit; waist is created for ministers as reward. Daumier, thus, is engaged in a dialectical critique.

Hegel, the chief practitioner of the above methodology, founds his dialecticism in the notion of a synthesis with what he called world spirit. Man is a detached form from the universal. It is only within a dialectic that change can occur and that man can be connected back to God. Dialectics, a form of rhetorics, posits information based on a conclusion reached by stating a thesis, stating an opposite and valid antithesis in order to form a new synthesis would bring man back to world spirit.

¹⁹Elizabeth C. Childs, “*The Body Impolitic*”, in *Making the News, Modernity and the Mass Press in 19th Century France*, ed. by Dean de la Motte & Jeannene M. Przyblyski (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999.) p. 54.

²⁰Childs, p. 45.

²¹Childs, p. 55.

For Hegel, aesthetics would be codified in terms of the arts ability to communicate in the form of artifacts in purely symbolic terms. As Paul de Man says of Hegelian aesthetics, “The symbol is the mediation between the mind and the physical world of which art manifestly partakes, be it as stone, as color, as sound or as language.”²² This “mediation” between the noumenal and the physical world is precisely what Daumier is getting at. Daumier posits his caricatures in the realm of the physical world. He also takes liberty with that world by showing Louis-Philippe in *Gargantua* as a machine, incapable of doing nothing but create waste. The Industrial Revolution, with its machines are shown separating man from his labor. This creates an unjust society. The physical world is represented as a ludicrous place in which the slave works for the state, in a world not dissimilar to the feudal state from previous generations. Constitutional rights, as well as economic rights, could be read as passing through. The noumenal however, is left to be grasped by the French public, not only ready to laugh but to read the periodicals and take heed of the economic and political climate.

In Germany, however, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels and Ludwig Feuerbach sublate Hegel’s model of idealism to one structured on materialist terms. Feuerbach criticized Hegel for his reduction of man into essence of self-consciousness and emphasized the physical and social presence of man, advocating a materialist stance of culture.²³ The Germans and their French neighbors like Rousseau and Voltaire argued for a rationalist society based on equality.²⁴ *Rue Transnonain*, as well as *Gargantua*, appeals to a moral conscience. *Gargantua* uses humor, to make a point

²²*Aesthetic Ideology*, (Minneapolis, London: University of Minneapolis Press, 1996), p. 93.

²³<http://www.marxists.org/glossary/people/f/e.htm>

²⁴Larkin, p. 10.

about autocratic political regimes and the resulting imbalance of the social strata in economics and representation. *Rue Transnonain*, however, represents an appeal to the sublime. Paul de Man traces when he says that:

The free, empirical reaction of the imagination, when confronted with the power and might of nature, is to indulge, to enjoy the terror of this very magnitude. Taming this delectable, because imaginary, terror – the assumption always being that the person is not directly threatened, or at the very least separated from the immediate threat by a reflexive moment – and preferring it to the tranquil satisfaction of superiority, is to submit the imagination to the power of reason.²⁵

The main figure in *Rue Transnonain*, lays to on a diagonal, an almost peacefulness across his face. The formal use of this figure is important because it draws the viewers attention to the darkly-drawn composition. The surrounding bodiless victims are spread about the room, furniture is upturned, the main figure rests on a young child as it bleeds from its head. The terror of the situation is consuming. People could see and feel for themselves the veracity of government brutality. Injustice and violence were documented for the French citizens.

The historical and philosophical background are important to see what it was that informed a man of Daumier's talents, his affective sensibilities and capacities. But in order to understand what Daumier's legacy is to art, we should look to Walter Benjamin. In *The Work of Art in the Age of the Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin says that, "During long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity's entire mode of existence."²⁶ He argues that art, previous to mechanical reproduction was in a single arena of the venerated cult object. The cult object contained an aura that was made manifest by its originality

²⁶Benjamin, Walter, *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Incorporated, 1955). p. 224.

²⁵de Man, pp. 85-86.

and singularity. Once artwork, such as the lithograph, is reproduced over and over again, art functions in the sphere of the political and economic. Art is a vehicle for social change. “The adjustment of the reality to the masses and of the masses to reality is a process of unlimited scope, as much for thinking as for perception.”²⁷ The orientation of viewer to art, in this case political caricatures, posits the viewer as force, as a force of social change. Aesthetics is changed into a vehicle of politic and economic division. That division is done through the use of technology created during the Industrial Revolution. At the time that *Gargantua* was printed for public viewing, history painting was declining. Delacroix submitted *The 28th of July, Liberty Leading the People*, for the Salon of 1831. The picture was purchased for a small amount of money, and “...secreted from sight out of fear that it would incite sedition.”²⁸ Louis-Philippe and the French academy were concerned about pictures, as opposed to words, due to their wide dissemination to the French public. Academic art was thus circumscribed by governmental policies. Institutional art had nowhere to maneuver. It lost its ability to describe modern life. Artists either had to work with the system, work outside of the academy, or work in commercial institutions. The art of the Academie could not change in order to accommodate the experiences of the people that would view it. As Benjamin says, “...the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice – politics.”²⁹ And, “...for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual.”³⁰ What seems important here is that the work of art creates

²⁷Benjamin, p. 225.

²⁸Eisenman, p. 191.

²⁹p. 226.

³⁰ibid.

the conditions of possibilities for the emancipation of not only the proletariat, but the emancipation of humanity as a whole. For Daumier's part one can see his wish to participate on this level. He shows the caustic ritual of a corrupt government. *Rue Transnonain* too, is a broadside for the present. It explains unnecessary force of a fascist regime. Romanticism was capable of communicating these abstract and ethical statements, but it was the press that could reach a wide and non-localized audience. The press connected literate and the non-literate alike to the plights and events of the day. And the Industrial Revolution could make printing rapid and inexpensive.³¹ Technology made this art a language to be delivered and synthesized.



Figure 5:
*Third-Class
Carriage*, ca. 1862,
Oil Painting, 25.75
x 35.5 in.

At certain times in history, one person makes an impact upon the society in which she or he lives. It could be argued that Daumier is that person for his time period. Born of modest means, with the talents he possessed, he created art that was uniquely his. He affected an entire society as to the injustices of the economics which ruled at the



Figure 6:
*First-Class
Carriage*, ca. 1862,
Oil Painting, app.
25.75 x 35.5 in.

³¹Childs, p. 55.

time. Daumier, in his retirement from the journal *Le Charivari*, lived only seven more years. He lived in a house that Corot had given him. His eyes were bad, he was poverty stricken, but he enjoyed his friends and his successes.³² The success of his life is found in those he cared about, the working poor and the destitute. The Industrial Revolution displaced thousands of people. The mechanization of traditional labor furthered peoples alienation from themselves and their work. Capitalism arrives with steam power early to mid century. *Third Class Carriage* (figure 5), and *First Class Carriage* (figure 6), shows the difference in class and thereby economic structure. The bourgeois have room to ponder and look out the windows. They are drawn in light and clean conditions. The proletariat, drawn with tenderness and simplicity, are overcrowded in their car. Daumier renders them in a crowded and dingy light, but shows a group conversing about local events. The train, is pictured as a vehicle of separation. It, like *Gargantua*, creates division of economics through political structure. The alienating machine *Gargantua*, separates people into classes just as the train does in both *Carriages*. Daumier, situated himself as a proletarian worker, creates political cartoons, caricatures and oil paintings. This art creates fulcrums between the bourgeois and the working poor. He is not creating class conflict, he is reporting it. Similar to the realist movement, these artists influence art by drawing it. What makes the art modern is the pictorial establishment of people trapped by economic hardship. Instead of looking away, these artists report exactly what they see. Academic art, prescribed by the government, would decline as Impressionism and later, Symbolism lead to the avant garde. Daumier stands at the brink of modernism and straddles the divide

³²Vincent, p. 228.

between personal vision and social stratification. The dialectic that takes place may have been abstract, but Daumier handled the message intricately with an awareness of his own personal beliefs in rationalism and equality. In his own way, he paved a way in which modernism could grow from dialectics of 19th century modern life using inexpensive technology of the Industrial Revolution to inform the masses.

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