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The English Bugaboo – Cruikshank to Talbot

BY JAMES BAKER ON JULY 25TH, 2011 3 COMMENTS



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Talbot B. (2007) *Alice in Sunderland* (London: Jonathan Cape, p. 295)

Alice in Sunderland, Bryan Talbot's 2007 graphic novel, presents a disconcerting commentary on poverty and xenophobia in modern Britain where immigration is the imagined Other, the bugaboo against which communities define themselves. Talbot gives this bugaboo – 'a fancied object of terror; a bogey; a bugbear' 1 – visual form in a conscious authorial reference to John Tenniel's illustration to "The Jabberwocky", the nonsense poem Alice reads in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871).



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Jeff Albertson (1)

As both Talbot's bugaboo and Tenniel's Jabberwocky contribute to a lineage of bugaboos traceable to Georgian graphic satire, this essay will examine some aspects of this British diachronic illustrative tradition. In what follows I shall contend that a particular theme which binds together the bugaboos of Talbot, Tenniel and the Georgian satirists is how they speak to the idea of foreign threat. [2](#)

Having stumbled across *AiS* at [The Cartoon Museum](#), London, I was drawn to how Talbot's bugaboo lovingly captures every dreamlike gothic detail of the Jabberwocky; retaining the verses "jaws that bite [...] claws that catch!", twisted and elongated neck, hide of scales, and three-buttoned waistcoat. Emblazoned across this waistcoat we find 'THE OTHER', yet Talbot's bugaboo is not a universal Other rather one constructed by political parties on the extreme right who, we read, 'ruthlessly take advantage of ordinary people's natural anxiety, cranked up to fever pitch by the tabloids, to spread blatant lies and gross exaggeration, appealing to the lowest human instinct...intolerance of The Other'.

For a scholar of Georgian communication (like me), such management of popular consciousness recalls the pamphlet war surrounding Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* (1791), and the censorship trials brought by the government against William Hone in 1817. Moreover it recalls Linda Colley's seminal *Britons* (1992), which posited that from the eighteenth century onwards external threat and extra-national referents constructed the British national character. Three manifestations of this statement emerge from page 295 of *AiS* and provide potential tools for studying the diachronic bugaboo. First, those who construct Others/bugaboos by legitimising prejudice can also be themselves considered as Others/bugaboos (see panel 2).



Cruikshank I., *The French Bugaboo Frightening the Royal Commanders* (14 April 1797, S W Fores) BM 9005 271 x 499" © The Trustees of the British Museum.

These themes are certainly observable in Georgian bugaboos. Reading back from Talbot and Tenniel we may expect the bugaboo in Cruikshank's *The French Bugaboo Frightening the Royal Commanders* to be the roaring and scaled beast dominating the design. However for Cruikshank the national bugaboo is 'BUONAPARTE', the archetypal bonnet-rouge revolutionary – emaciated (see the ridiculous girth of his boots), ragged, and manic. Napoleon reaches beyond the ordinary by taming a rampaging steed overcoming European Christianity and symbols of monarchy whilst exhaling an army of soldiers, canons, and demons. "Vive la liberté" these fog shrouded apparitions cry, driving away in terror the hapless Archduke Charles and Duke of York. [3](#)

For [Richard Newton](#), threat and foreignness are found in George III, the monstrous and reactionary steed whose wide, bulging eyes provide a visual foci. By the 1790s the King had largely shaken off anti-Hanoverian ire, but his proclamation of 21 May 1792 against seditious writings drafted by his Prime Minister (and here rider) William Pitt the Younger, bestowed back to George his hereditary un-English aura in the eyes of many radical commentators [4](#)

The bugaboo is then a powerful diachronic satiric device, articulating grand narratives of fear, xenophobia and Otherness. Yet I suspect the more inquisitive reader will find this reading too blunt and too simplistic. You may ask what of the cowardly (and uncaricatured) commanders fleeing in Cruikshank's design? How does the ridiculous sartorial and biological jumble that is Tenniel's bugaboo reflect the nonsense of its literary source? And to what extent does Talbot ask his reader to marginalise those who construct bugaboos? Such ambiguities surround most bugaboos, and can be fruitfully analysed by deploying theoretical, philosophical, and social scientific discussions of difference. This literature is extensive and diffuse, yet the classic

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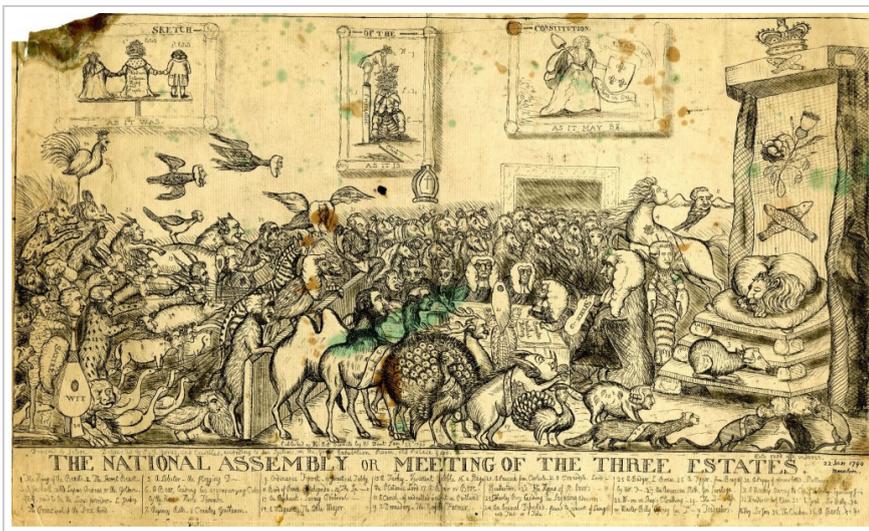
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remarks remain those found in David Hume's formidable *A Treatise of Human Nature*:

A fourth unphilosophical species of probability is that deriv'd from general rules, which are the source of what we properly call PREJUDICE. An Irishman cannot have wit, and a Frenchman cannot have solidarity; for which reason, though the conversation of the former in any instance be visibly agreeable, and of the latter very judicious, we have entertained such a prejudice against them, that they must be dunces or fops in spite of sense and reason. Human nature is very subject to envy of this kind; and perhaps this nation as much as any other.

Hume, p. 4.

This 'prejudice' (Hume, Book 1, Part III, Sect XIII, pp. 146-7) constructs counter-experiential 'stereotypes' (coined in Walter Lippmann's 1922 classic *Public Opinion*), ⁵ as a willing social fabric powerfully fixates abstract types within their arts for use as referents to define individuals or groups encountered in lived experience (so the miser is 'Jewish' and the fop is 'Frenchified'). ⁶ What this foregrounds is the ignorance inherent within stereotyping, demanding that we, like Talbot, turn our attentions upon those constructing anti-types, for what *Alice in Sunderland* makes explicit is the ambiguity central to the bugaboo – that it is constructed by another bugaboo.



Dent W., "The National Assembly or meeting of the three Estates" (22 January 1790) BM7623 253 x 423" © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Second, jealousy has agency in capitulating prejudice and stereotyping into public acceptance (see panels 7-8). For example, jealous of Scots startling success as inventors, thinkers, medical innovators and empire builders, Dent in his 1790 *THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OR MEETING OF THE THREE ESTATES* places a Scotch 'Secret Beast' behind the English throne, referencing fears of a disproportionate and furtive highland influence suffocating Englishness ⁷

Third, the xenophobia which constructs bugaboos (Talbot's 'intolerance of the Other') is a marketable commodity. This is evident in panel 3 of *AiS* where the *DAILY BILGE* attracts readers with willingly false and implicitly racist headlines such as 'ASYLUM SEEKERS SWAMP BRITAIN!'. Interestingly scholarly orthodoxy maintains that xenophobia was equally marketable to audiences of Georgian graphic satire. ⁸ But what differs between tabloids and graphic satire is that whilst the bugaboos in the latter are satiric and consciously ambiguous, those in the former are only ambiguous when read from a vantage point outside of their (potential/likely) audience. Talbot's bugaboo then forces us to reconsider the audience of past mediums which invoked the bugaboo, and to consider potential duality in the bugaboo's marketability – as at one and the same time xenophobic and comically ambiguous.

This essay has shown that the bugaboo in English graphic satire speaks to discourses of foreign threat by pointing to the manifest ambiguity within such discourses – namely that those making threatening bugaboos are themselves threatening bugaboos. As these bugaboos have formed part of the 'cartoonists armoury' (as Ernst Gombrich famously called it) of the British illustrative tradition for over two and a half centuries, it behoves us then to explore when and where the bugaboo problematises orthodoxies regarding English society, culture, and communication.

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Academic Diary

- April 11, 2012** – PCA/ACA National Conference, 11-12 April 2012, Boston
- April 13, 2012** – The 9th University of Florida Comics Conference, "Monsters in the Margins" 13-15 April 2012, Florida
- April 27, 2012** – Cradled in Caricature 2012, 27 April 2012, University of Kent, UK
- May 10, 2012** – 2nd Annual Conference of the Popular Culture Association of Canada, May 10th-12th, 2012, Niagara Falls, Ontario
- May 12, 2012** – Twenty-First Century British Fiction – A Symposium Saturday 12 May 2012, Birkbeck, University of London
- May 17, 2012** – Contemporary Screen Narratives: Storytelling's Digital and Industrial Contexts, 17 May 2012, University of Nottingham, UK
- May 19, 2012** – Symposium: Popular Media Cultures - Writing in the Margins and Reading Between the Lines, 19 May 2012, London
- June 15, 2012** – Rocky Mountain Conference on Comics and Graphic Novels, 15-16 June 2012, Denver, Colorado
- June 28, 2012** – The Third International Comics Conference: Comics Rock, 28-29 June 2012, Bournemouth University, UK
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- July 11, 2012** – EUPOP 2012, 11-13 July 2012, University of the Arts, London, UK
- July 16, 2012** – Digital Humanities 2012, 16-22 July 2012, University of Hamburg, Germany
- July 22, 2012** – Comics & Medicine: Navigating the Margins 22-24 July 2012 Toronto, Canada
- September 7, 2012** – The Graphic Novel. An At the Interface Project, 7-9 September 2012, Mansfield College, Oxford, UK
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June 24, 2013 – Joint International Graphic Novel and International Bande Dessinée Conferences, 24-28 June 2013, Universities of Glasgow and Dundee, UK

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1. *OED* ↪
2. This is not to say that the 1790s single sheet graphic satire performed the same social function as the late-twentieth century graphic novel. For although the two may display outward similarities and share the same representational chronology, the technological processes of production and the audiences they reached vastly differ. As scholars we await a thorough analysis of the relationship between technology, business exigencies, and consumption with respect to graphic satire across the last three centuries, and in its absence we must confine our diachronic analyses to representation. ↪
3. The former being the Austrian Commander who was defeated by Napoleon during the Italian campaign of 1796-7; the latter had been commander of the British Army since 1795, and due to his inexperience (and suspected incompetence) was widely expected by satirists to be defeated by Napoleon ↪
4. see Richard Newton, *A BUGABOO!!!* (2 June 1792, William Holland) ↪
5. Meaning in this context 'to prepossess with unexamined opinions', see Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) ↪
6. see Lippmann W. (1922) *A Public Opinion* (76-100) ↪
7. See Echeruo (1978) and Felsenstein (1995) ↪
8. A suspicion of Scottish profiteering from England's foreign endeavours is observable during the American conflict of 1775-83, see Conway pp. 178-9. ↪

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About the author

James Baker has published 4 articles on this journal. I am an Associate Lecturer in School of History at the University of Kent, Canterbury, Project Manager of the ESRC funded 'City and Region, 1400-1914' project, collaborator with the British Cartoon Archive, and lead investigator of 'Cradled in Caricature' (symposium June 2011; conference Spring 2012). In September 2010 I completed a PhD in Cartoons and Caricature at the University of Kent, Canterbury, the title of which was 'Isaac Cruikshank and the notion of British Liberty, 1783-1811'. My thesis explored liberty through fashion, gender and custom, and sought to apply economic and technological exigencies to our understanding of the processes of print production. My interests include Georgian visual satire, the Covent Garden old price riots of September 1809 to January 1810, diachronic themes with respect to the construction and communication of humour in graphic discourses between the seventeenth and late-nineteenth centuries, and the digital humanities. In what spare time is left I moonlight as a neurohumanities skeptic.

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[Ernesto Priego](#) - July 26, 2011

Thank you very much for this insightful post, James. I love how you have set Talbot's work in a historical context, reconnecting it not only to cartooning in general but to British cartooning in specific. I always liked this page, for both aesthetic and political reasons. I particularly like how each panel emphasises the extra-textual referentiality of the subject matter by being represented as pages torn out of a notebook. The page shows a finished work which wants to evoke the unfinishedness or work-in-progress-ness of the sketch. Moreover, the whole page suggests translations or transferences of different orders (notebook to page, page to book, sketch to drawing, notes to essay), and perhaps importantly denotes the importance of the grid (panel layout) and how different it is, in terms of the depiction of time passing, than, say, the sequential page-after-page of a notebook. I, of course, also liked very much how you have mapped-out a thematic genealogy or logic singled out in the motif of the Bugaboo.

Reply



[James Baker](#) - July 26, 2011

I'd actually never put much thought into the notebook aesthetic. I guess I'd always assumed there was something to do with reporting going on here, as the designs in each panel remind me of the sorts of shots one might see on a news report (the talking head; the 'reporter' strolling towards/across camera shot).

Reply



[Mary Branscombe](#) - March 23, 2012

It might be interesting to note that Talbot is a fan of Hogarth and his political cartoons...

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