Georgian projections of French Revolutionary madness

BY JAMES BAKER ON JANUARY 9TH, 2012 NO COMMENTS

During the 1790s London's graphic artists used madness as a tool (among many) with which to explain away the purported rationality of the French revolutionary agenda (Porter, 'Reason, Madness, and the French Revolution', 1991) [1] By erecting counter-spectacles which confirmed Edmund Burke’s reading of the French Revolution as a false-sublime, [2] these designs allowed ideological engagement to be efficiently sidestepped in favour of exaggerated and ridiculous expressions of displeasure. [3]  

Gillray J., Petit souper, a la Parisienne; -or- a family of sans-culotts refreshing, after the fatigues of the day (20 September 1792, Hannah Humphrey) BM 8122 250 x 352" © The Trustees of the British Museum.

It was James Gillray (1756-1815) who engraved the classic image of revolutionary madness. Indeed his gruesome Une petit Souper a la Parisienne or A Family of Sans Culotts refreshing after the fatigues of the day was still being printed into the 1830s. Here French revolutionaries, male and female, young and old, gorge upon human limbs, organs and entrails. They degrade humanity and property alike by using them for seating and warmth. They preach liberty and equality as a barbarous creed.

Madness of course was embedded in Georgian visual culture. Popular classics such as Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress depicted the madness of consumerism in Vanity Fair; Gulliver’s encounters with Laputan scientific mania in Book III of Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels were well known; and Shakespeare’s construction of madness in Hamlet and through the weird sisters in Macbeth played across the nation. Yet these traditions never reached the level of cannibalistic mania Gillray explores. Rather cannibalism was a novelty ‘discovered’ by Captain Cook during his first South Sea Voyage (from 1768 to 1771) if only described as socially dangerous by the third edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica (1788-1797).
Cruikshank I., A republican beau. A picture of Paris for 1794 (10 March 1794, S. W. Fores) BM 8435 303 x 198” © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Cruikshank I., A republican belle. A picture of Paris for 1794 (10 March 1794, S. W. Fores) BM 8436 289 x 196” © The Trustees of the British Museum.
This same edition also described cannibalism as a disease peculiar to feminine physiology. Thus while Isaac Cruikshank’s A Republican Beau [BM 8435, 10 March 1794] indulges in infantilistic and cannibalistic tendencies (see the infant foot marked ‘for stow’), it is his partner, A Republican Belle [BM 8436, 10 March 1794], who represents a more striking exploration of cannibalistic madness. She stands, her clothes ragged and torn, her shoes worn through, as Liberty – indeed she is not dissimilar to the statue bequeathed by the French to New York City in 1886.

Despite her appearance, she walks proudly, baring her gruesome animalistic teeth and worn features. Unlike her male counterpart, she carries the symbol of the Terror around her neck and as an earring. She wears three daggers as a crest, en aigrette, the band of her makeshift crown inscribed ‘War War Eternal War’. And she holds a dagger in her left hand whilst with her other she carelessly fires a pistol at a passing man.

Madness is thus personified in the Belle in a multitude of ways. First, in an aesthetic sense, she is a barbarous but calm murderer, who has replaced the cross with the chop. Second, in a metaphorical sense, she exemplifies the perversion of power caused by the revolution. She strolls the streets, openly parading her politicisation and her power over men – her latest homicidal act a direct affront to accepted notions of patriarchy. And third, in an allegorical sense, she is Liberty (ironically here the anti-thesis of Britannia), the ruler of a society built around her which, if we look to the background of the image, delights in playing boules with skulls, leaving their dead to openly rot, and using images of regicidal decapitation to demarcate places of pleasure.

In short, much like the revolution which made her, she cannibalisles reason, structure and morality.

NOTES

[1] Porter’s essay offers a classic account of revolutionary madness.
[3] Steve Poole has recently argued that extreme and unrealistic caricature is more politically ambiguous than the overt ambiguity generally attributed to the designs of James Gillray. He argues that these former images we so ridiculous that they were mostly likely to have courted ridicule of those propagating reactionary counter-revolutionary rhetoric. See Poole 2011.

REFERENCES


