

## Bi-Centennial Literature on Art and the French Revolution

This review will take the form of a survey of a wide range of materials produced over the last year or two in response to the Bicentennial of the French Revolution. It aims at a general synthesis rather than a detailed examination of any one text. I feel that this approach is justified because, despite the enormous quantity of stuff that has been published, and, at least in the sample I have looked at, the Bicentennial has certainly not been the occasion of a revolution in art history, or even of any major methodological development. One only has to cast one's mind back to Mona Ozouf's *La Fête révolutionnaire* (1976) or Tom Crow's *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (1985) to realise that the very best work on a subject is not necessarily timed to come out for a centennial, and that much of the new groundwork of detailed scholarship, such as the books of Philippe Bordes, has also been around for some time.<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that there has not been some very good work indeed. But, for example, as far as the question of gender is concerned, art history has been quite regressive. And the detailed study of changes in the institutions or conditions of cultural production has largely taken back seat in favour of iconology or ideology critique. In a recent article I suggested that 'the tenth anniversary of *Block* is probably more important than the Bicentennial'.<sup>2</sup> As far as the history of art is concerned, I now feel able to take my partisan tongue out of my cheek.

In the end, the honours for a fundamental rewriting and repicturing of history probably still have to go to Jean-Paul Goude. In designing the Bastille Day parade in the style of the adverts for *United Colours of Benetton*, marching to the postmodern euphorics of world music, Goude managed to do as much for the commodification of the Great Revolution as the whole century of capitalist sales pitches that has elapsed since the Eiffel Tower flashed its white, red and blue message through the Parisian sky. It formed a perfect culmination for the week of those phoney and megalomaniac inaugurations of Mitterrand's

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1 Ozouf 1976; Crow 1985.

2 See *Block*, No. 15, 1989. It was the final issue to appear.

architectural ‘revolution’, the Opéra Bastille and the Arc at la Défense, where the heads of all the ‘advanced’ states were carted round to marvel and envy at the health of the French form of their system. Game, set and match to social democracy, with the new right coming in a good loser for filling the nicer class of newsagents’ windows with sentimental *récits* about Louis Capet and other *tutti quanti* of the old régime. Even so, as a professional francophile, I was deeply shocked by the choice of the pure kitsch of Folon’s three-bird drawing as the official symbol of the anniversary. Rocksinger Renaud’s sinister T-shirt version of it as three bombers with the caption ‘*saigneurs du tiers monde*’ (bloodsuckers of the Third World) was one of the few reminders of the vigour of the images of the long-gone revolutionary decade.

Speaking of iconography, it is as well to remember that most of the newly published images and *récits* of the Revolution were not aimed at us *savants*. The shelves at the FNAC were groaning under comic strips that, at a superficial glance, seemed to get everywhere from the most lurid of adventure stories to a well-meaning moralism that could have come straight out of a primary school in the 1880s. Michel Vovelle brought out his five-volume illustrated history, in the Livre Club Diderot/Editions Messidor coffee table series of revolutionary histories for the faithful of the PCF.<sup>3</sup> This appeared over two years ago, and so made available a unique combination of modern scholarship and extensive iconographical research that may escape the circuit of some art historians. The more the pity, as he starts by drawing attention to the problem of trying to make too much sense of any particular few images drawn from a corpus that numbers up to 50,000 items – a problem that cultural critique is ever anxious to avoid, as we will see. At the same time he sets out to use some thousands of them to produce a complex and original visual narrative. Inevitably this results in a more stimulating publication than some of the work devoted specifically to caricature, such as the two volumes published by the CNRS, de Baecque and Langlois’ *Caricature Révolutionnaire* and *Contre-Révolutionnaire* respectively,<sup>4</sup> even though these do open up an entirely new stage in the serious interpretation of revolutionary caricature and the study of its modes of production and circulation on a scale not envisaged in Agulhon’s *Marianne into Battle*.<sup>5</sup> For another public again, the museum-going weekend family, the exhibition *Les Savants et la Révolution Française* at the Villette museum was a different kind of offering altogether. This really quite fascinating display of documents and objects

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3 Vovelle 1989.

4 Baecque 1988; Langlois 1988.

5 Agulhon 1981.