

The Raft of the Medusa

An Analysis of Géricault's Portrayal of Race, Politics and Class



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The Thematic Approach ~

Few paintings have provoked as varied and enduring a response as Theodore Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa*. The debate surrounding this piece is perhaps best analyzed thematically in terms of race and immigration, artistic style and breakthroughs, realism and regime. While a thorough exploration of any one of these topics would require a novel and in fact, many have been written about the painting (each a testament to the depth of meaning latent in it), a cursory discussion of several of these issues illuminates the significance of the piece within historical and contemporary discussions of class, and, more generally, within art history.

The Shipwreck of the *Medusa* ~

For his contemporaries, Géricault's painting represented one scene of the terrible story of a shipwreck caused by an inept captain appointed through the favouritism of the Bourbon monarchy:

The *Medusa* had outrun its convoy on its way to Senegal to reinstate French colonial interests, there when Captain Duroys de Chaumareys ran the ship aground. With lifeboats for only two hundred and fifty of the four hundred passengers on board, the remaining soldiers, sailors, officers and civilians were forced onto a makeshift raft. The captain, aristocrats, officers and their families, who occupied the lifeboats, after agreeing to tow the raft, promptly severed the ropes attaching it to their boats, abandoning its occupants to the elements without provisions. Many died the first night, July 5th, 1816. Some starved, some died of exposure and exhaustion and some fell overboard. Eventually, the soldiers and sailors on board, in a variety of states of intoxication and insanity, attempted mutiny and by the end of the second night, sixty five more men were dead.¹ By the fourth day, all had resorted to cannibalism and the sick were thrown overboard to preserve rations. On the 17th of July, only fifteen men were alive to sight one of the ships from their convoy. The aptly named *Argus*² was searching for the remains of the *Medusa* in the hope of recovering its bullion. At first it appeared and then disappeared over the horizon (this

¹ Many perished at the hands of the few officers onboard who defended the civilians with their sabers.

² "That the rescuing ship, the *Argus*, was actually named after a mythological creature with a hundred eyes has struck many as an extraordinary coincidence. Savigny and Corréard report that 'One, among us said, joking, 'If the brig is sent to look for us, let us pray to God that she may have the eyes of Argus,' alluding to the name of the vessel, which we presumed would be sent after us.' Savigny and Corréard, *Narrative of a Voyage*, 132-133 cited in Jonathan Crary, "Géricault, the Panorama, and Sites of Reality in the Early Nineteenth Century," *Grey Room*, 09 (MIT: 2002) 25.

The captain of the *Argus* described the site he beheld upon approaching the raft, "those miserable wretches were forced to fight and kill a large number of their shipmates...Others had been swept to sea or died of hunger, or had lost their sanity. Those whom I rescued had been feeding themselves on human flesh for several days and, when I found them, the ropes [that held the raft together] were covered with human meat set out to dry. The raft was also strewn with scraps [of flesh], vivid testimony to the nourishment these men had been obliged to serve themselves. Captain Parnajon's report of 19 July 1816 to Colonel Julien Schmaltz as cited in Albert Alhadeff, *The Raft of the Medusa: Géricault, Art and Race* (New York: Prestel, 2002): 17.

'sighting' was to be the subject of Géricault's painting),³ to appear again hours later to rescue the ravaged castaways.⁴

Only ten men survived the ordeal which caused a scandal to tear through Louis XVII's dynasty.

Bourbon Restoration vs. Napoleonic Empire ~

Repressed by the monarchy for their incriminating story, (which had been severely censored) the *Medusa's* surgeon and its engineer/ geographer, Henry Savigny and Alexandre Corréard, pushed for compensation. Faced with fines and imprisonment, they published their story as a book to great acclaim and it is based on this book that Géricault decided to paint *The Raft*.⁵ The friendship and book were the beginning of Géricault's journey in search of the true meaning of the shipwreck, and of an intrinsic way to capture and reveal it.

While not necessarily the most important theme for Géricault, the power of *The Raft* as a political tool of propaganda was immediately apparent and has been its most enduring historical facet. As the story of the *Medusa* "became a cause célèbre, embroiled in the complexities of Bourbon-restoration politics and tensions between the Liberal and Royalist factions...and, as events progressed, with the highly emotive subject of the slave trade," the *The Raft of the Medusa* itself became a symbol these debates.⁶ "Critics of the time, like some commentators since, took it for granted that the *Medusa* reflected a general, partisan attitude; that it spoke for the Opposition." Their responses predictably and largely, followed political affiliations and the painting provoked "either revulsion or admiration according to respective Bourbon or Liberal sympathies."⁷ The

³ The lines from Corréard and Savigny's book that inspired Géricault's work are telling as they describe a man supported by all those left alive, waving a makeshift flag as he hangs from the mast: "For about half an hour we were suspended between hope and fear...From the delirium of joy, we fell into profound despondency." As cited in Lorenz Eitner who describes the *Sighting* as "the ultimate ordeal of the shipwrecked," involving anxiety, disappointment and resignation." Géricault's Raft of the Medusa (London: Phaidon, 1972): 7,

Crary 24-25,

Alhadeff 17,

Christine Riding, "The Fatal Raft," History Today, v53 i2 (2003): 26.

⁴ Eitner 38.

⁵ He later befriended the castaways, hearing their stories first hand, and applying their portraits to two of the men standing near the mast of the *Raft*. Eitner 11, 22.

⁶ In the words of Julian Barnes, "The *Medusa* was a shipwreck, a news story and a painting; it was also a cause. Bonapartists attacked Monarchists. The behaviour of the frigate's captain illuminated a) the incompetence and corruption of the Royalist Navy; b) the general callousness of the ruling class towards those beneath them. Parallels with the ship of state running aground would have been both obvious and heavy-handed." A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters, (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989):127.

⁷ Riding 39.

painting's political significance, however, would resonate long after the Bourbon dynasty was laid to rest and Napoleon's nephew assumed control of the nation.

This stamina is due to Géricault's representation of class conflict in timeless Romantic brushstrokes. Political opponents of the monarchy used the shipwreck as an "illustration of the danger to which France was exposed by a regime which put dynastic over national interests, gave the command of ships to political favorites and allowed aristocratic officers to abandon their men in times of crisis," thereby infuriating those who were once again suppressed by the aristocratic entourage of the Bourbon dynasty.⁸ For Napoleon's veterans, having been replaced by courtiers such as the captain, and for all those deposed from their hard-won positions, "the catastrophe of the *Medusa* summed up the plight of France under the Bourbons" representing the aristocracy's oppression and their incompetence.⁹

Both the castaways' narrative and their friend Géricault's painting of the shipwreck compared and contrasted the Napoleonic and Bourbon regimes, played on past glory and present defeat, on meritocracy and on the rule of privilege.¹⁰ Yet only the painting retains a place in the annals of symbolic history due to Géricault's ability to capture realistically the plight of the castaways, in a timeless form that did not make reference to details tying them to the *Medusa*. Instead, through his depiction of men struggling against the impossible oppression of a natural world, Géricault would eventually supercede the immediate controversy¹¹ and create a work of art that would come to represent class conflict on a broader level.¹²

Censorship and Political Controversy ~

Louis XVII's Salon of 1819 was intended as a literal exhibition of the greatness and liberalness of the Bourbon dynasty through a celebration of its patronage of the arts. In contrast with the classical subjects of David's French School which preceded it, the Restorationist Louvre was filled

⁸ Géricault was coloured by the political militancy of his circle of friends: "He lived among outspoken enemies of the monarchy who saw the shipwreck as an opportunity for harassing the conservative ministers." Eitner 10.

⁹ Eitner 10.

¹⁰ Riding 40.

¹¹ The internecine struggle between the supporters of the Bourbon and Bonaparte regimes.

¹² Eitner 52.

with images of piety and religiosity, medieval depictions fit for a church and monarchy invested by God. Few artists had the money for the massive canvasses displayed so most were forced to rely on patrons, usually associated with the monarchy. This temporarily created a more subtle form of censorship than had existed under the previous two French dynasties, as the regime moderated the artistic milieu through rewards instead of repression.¹³ While financially able to escape the confines of patronage, Géricault's massive canvas (sixteen by twenty-four feet), which had been prepared for this exhibition, depicted a far too easily recognizable and controversial subject at a time of political turmoil. It was nevertheless surprisingly exhibited at the Louvre and hung at the painter's discretion in its most grand salon on the condition that its title be modified. As a result, the caption under Géricault's painting was changed for the exhibition to "Scene of Shipwreck" (*Scène de Naufrage*) removing the direct reference to the politically calamitous *Medusa*.

Though not immune from the Bourbon's censors, his work was immediately seen as unique and its influence could not be suppressed:

The Raft of Medusa was [undeniably, and] in every way, exceptional. In an exhibition filled with obsequious expressions of loyalty, it affronted the government, spurned official piety, and offered nothing to national pride. It blotted out the pallid fictions which covered the walls around it by the energy with which it concentrated on a horrible fact taken from modern reality. The work of an artist whose private fortune enabled him to dispense with patronage, it was the only large painting in the Salon which expressed a strongly personal view.

This, at a time when, "to mention the *Medusa* was to embarrass the monarchy."¹⁴

Classicism + Modernism = French Romanticism ~

Géricault first practiced in the same style as the French School at a time when "Napoleon's patronage provided the material base [and] his victories the subject matter which sustained a large number of artists." By Napoleon's fall, however, "both the patronage and the subject matter disappeared." So the aspiring artist traveled to Rome to see and emulate the Classicists first hand. While struck by their skill, he yearned for an alternative to the "boredom" of Antiquity, Piety or

¹³ Eitner 1,3.

¹⁴ Eitner 5-6.

Monarchy.¹⁵ Géricault found this alternative in the harsh realities of modernity.¹⁶ Géricault wanted to maintain the eternal appeal of the high body epitomized by the likes of Michelangelo as well as the universal allure of a subject that touched the general public.

His problem was how to give classical form to everyday reality, how "to translate an actual, contemporary event, fresh as the morning's news, into an image of superhuman scale and energy" worthy of standing next to Rome's masters, how to choose, that is, between modernity and monumentality.¹⁷ Instead of deciding upon one at the cost of the other, Géricault came up with "an entirely new form of modern history painting" which would eventually come to be called French Romanticism and which resulted in *The Raft's* historical significance as he "forced his content and its discursive substructure back within the rhetorical terms of a classical model of representation." Thus, Géricault's artistic significance, particularly as seen in *The Raft*, was tied to his ability to combine the monumentality of classicism with the nationalism and heroism of modernity while at the same time depicting realistically the un-heroic nature of life.¹⁸ The result were paintings of the people and which appealed to the people but which were painted in a style grand enough for the Louvre.

Géricault's radical use of perspective in forming his unorthodox composition similarly privileges both the viewer and the lower class person depicted in his painting. By bringing the raft close to the foreground, Géricault involved the viewer as a participant. His eye follows the occupants', straining towards that speck in the distance, the *Argus*.¹⁹ His eyes, "filled with the Raft's wide spread vision, channeled by the gestures of the men before him, his attention

¹⁵ While paintings in Géricault's time, and of *The Raft's* grandeur, were generally "reserved for representations of events of great national interest," from victories to martyrdom, "Géricault departed from the norms of national history painting." A contemporary critic asked "what public building, what royal palace or private collection will receive this painting?" speaking to the patronage and ideology that underlay much of the Salon's exhibition. Had Géricault lived more than five years after completing his masterpiece he might have been able to explain that French Romanticism needed no patronage to accomplish its ends, making it truly modern. Eitner 52.

¹⁶ Noticing his friend, neighbour and childhood tutor's son, Horace Vernet's artistic success despite his lack of skill, Géricault soon discovered it was his subject matter, taken from contemporary news events that attracted and retained his audience.

¹⁷ Eitner 18-19.

¹⁸ "The challenge he faced was to make ordinary reality grand, by cleansing it of trivial detail, and to do this without falling into lifelessness and boredom, despite the lack of an 'interesting' subject." Eitner 17.

¹⁹ "The Raft with its straining figures and the distant boat are the opposite poles of a directed force which spans the space between them...the disproportion between the overpowering nearness of the figures on the Raft and the infinitesimal spot on the far horizon toward which they gesticulate produces an almost unbearable sense of strain." Eitner 26-7.

irresistibly drawn to the point on which all motions converge, was to be made to share the experience of the shipwrecked men."²⁰ The artist's use of the high body to depict forms which were clearly grotesque has a parallel purpose to this placement of the viewer in the position of the castaways and his subjection of the viewer to their strain. All three devices "draw the beholder into a close, empathetic participation" by forming an emotive link to those pictured while simultaneously abstracting the subject matter to fit ideal forms of the human body. "He has expressed the might and vastness of nature in a painting filled with human bodies [and] removed much of [his subject's] topicality [while giving] it a larger significance." This significance has extended far beyond the frequent allusions to *The Raft* in the art of the last hundred years and even beyond Géricault's impressive influence on the history of art, thrusting the story of the *Medusa* into the realm of socio-political myth.

Reality: A Dossier, severed limbs, Barthes and Bakhtin ~

"Géricault did not invent with ease," always requiring new inspiration from life so "he would occasionally expose himself to the sting of a fresh experience to sharpen his flagging sense of the reality of his subject" from his trips to the coast to



observe marine skies, to his visits to Parisian hospitals to look into and sketch the faces of the dying.²¹ In his exhaustive search for information on the shipwreck he had the *Medusa's* carpenter make a scale model of the raft for him²² and collected "a veritable dossier crammed with authentic proofs and documents."²³ Géricault went further in attempting to recreate the castaways' reality: after shaving off his hair and moving to a new studio to ensure his isolation, he examined death by having corpses and body parts delivered to his studio "in order to live with the sights and smells of decaying human bodies, just as the survivors of the raft who kept parts of the dead on board

²⁰ Géricault's use of this device is described as being "of a vehemence unparalleled in the art of [his] time." Eitner 31.

²¹ Eitner 22.

²² "Géricault commissioned the surviving carpenter of the *Medusa* to build him a small-scale model of the raft, which he tested out in water to see how it floated and maneuvered" and on which he placed clay models, which he lit to realistically recreate shadows. Cray 14.

²³ Here Eitner is citing Clement p129,136, his major source in these sections: Charles Clement, *Géricault, etude*

for their own sustenance.”²⁴

By gathering all of the details to recreate the direct experience of that which he was depicting, Géricault added, to use Roland Barthes’s phrase, a “referential plenitude” to his work.²⁵ This “multilayered informational existence” which tied the act and product of his painting in hundreds of ways to the realistic details of the raft, paradoxically resulted in an image free of any references to it and which instead spoke to a more universal human deprivation.²⁶ *The Raft*’s timelessness, its “historical significance,” is linked to what Bakhtin would describe as the “private chamber” or “peep-show” method of description which involved “an intensification of visuality and also an isolation of the subject from a lived embeddedness in a given social milieu.”²⁷

Race and Immigrants: Slave Trade, Boat People, F.O.B.s and Life of Pi ~

Géricault’s painting associates the question of race to that of class by including three black men amongst the castaways and by elevating one black man above the rest of the raft’s occupants to act as a beacon of hope. These racial implications were once again brought to the forefront of France’s national opinion in 1997 in the form of a canvas covering the first two stories of its École de Beaux-Arts. This massive painting includes a loose replica of Géricault’s castaways surrounded by the naufragés (castaways) of our society, those immigrants of every race and colour who have flooded the cities of the industrial world. The castaways of *The Raft* clearly echo these “boat people” who, seeking asylum in foreign lands, face insurmountable odds and are “manacled by ingrained habits, by laws [and] by delusions” of a society both afraid and disdainful of the presence.²⁸

In this way the disaster of the Medusa resonates in our lives as well, from its striking parallels to Yann Martel’s now-famous Life of Pi and the latter’s account of shipwreck and savagery, to the denigrating use of the term FOB. Our Fresh-Off-the-Boat immigrants are referred

biographique et critique, Paris, 1867. 22.

²⁴ Crary 14.

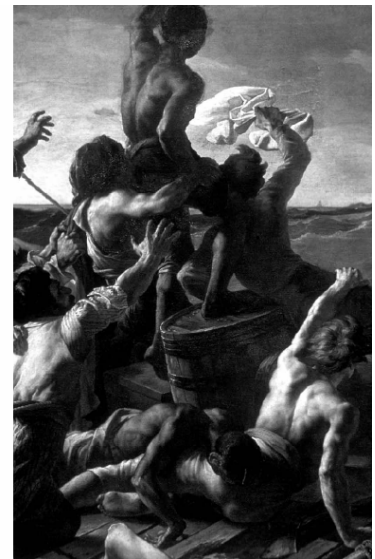
²⁵ Cited in Crary 14.

²⁶ Crary 13.

²⁷ Crary 15.

to, if not always treated, in much the same way as the dark skinned “mules” of the slave trade that the *Medusa* was sailing to promote: they are second-class citizens.

In Géricault's time, with a monarchy that viewed “la traite (the slave trade) as a viable economic tool,” his positioning of a black man as the pinnacle of hope in his painting begged the questions, “How could he set him atop the pyramidal rise of his great canvas? Was he [color] blind?”²⁹ On the contrary, Géricault was embroiled in a controversy that had been sparked by the discovery that slavery was an ulterior motive for the *Medusa's* voyage.³⁰ Thus, Géricault was not only supporting those who were persecuted and abandoned by the officers and aristocrats of the *Medusa* and French society, but was also arguing against slavery in a painting depicting the castaways of a ship whose unofficial mission was to reconstitute the French slave trade on an island off Senegal.



The Raft for all time ~

From his use of perspective to *The Raft's* abolitionist connotations and from his pioneering of Romanticism to the enduring socio-political implications of his representation of the story of the *Medusa*, Géricault's masterpiece demonstrates a profound impact on the discourses of his and our times. The themes addressed above, however, from class to reality to colour, are far from exhaustive and are complexly interconnected. Géricault's implied criticism of the Bourbon dynasty is tied to his co-opting and blending of the French School's heroic classicism with the more realistic style being used by his contemporaries to depict monarchic subjects. The artist portrayed a specific and scandalous maritime catastrophe in a timeless and modern form that would come to define the French Romantic movement and had it hung (at least temporarily) in the king's own Salon. Similarly, Géricault's friendship with two of the surviving castaways (whose

²⁸ Alhadeff 12.

²⁹ Alhadeff 12.

³⁰ The answer is again tied to the narrative of his two castaway friends and more specifically the abolitionist leanings of Corréard. The enlarged second edition of the *Medusa's* tale, contains an impassioned argument by Corréard for the future of France's colonial ambitions in Africa based on the abolition of slavery.³⁰ “Géricault, who was then painting the *Raft* and who was well aware of Corréard's views on the slave trade, was necessarily...affected by [them].” Alhadeff 25.

story inspired his painting) influenced his political views and instilled his abolitionist sentiments both of which are evidenced in his placement of a black man at the apex of his piece, an ambiguous sign of hope for those on the raft as well as all castaways, literal and actual. Géricault's extensive search for details of the disaster led him to surround himself with dismembered limbs, artifacts of gore and death that mirrored those which confronted the raft's survivors. Thus the artist attempted to experience their reality in order to reproduce it just as he had taken up the castaways' cause in a visual protest. From the very roots of the scandal itself, tied to aristocratic discrimination; to the paintings racial implications, only recently explored in depth, conflicts of class pervade discussions of Géricault's masterpiece. Yet it is impossible to isolate one theme as paramount for *The Raft of Medusa* was a monumental recreation of a disaster with historical, cultural and social significance.

Works Cited

Alhadeff, Albert. The Raft of the Medusa: Géricault, Art and Race. (New York: Prestel, 2002).

This extensive book is the most recent scholarly analysis of Géricault's painting published in the English language. Its emphasis is on the scandal over the slave trade that resulted from the shipwreck and on the various abolitionist influences on Géricault's painting. Both have often been overlooked due to the massive political fallout and its affect on art critics past and present. I used this for background on the painter and painting and specifically for its lengthy analysis of race in the *The Raft*.

Barnes, Julian. A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters. (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989).

This postmodern "history" book offers a humorous look at various classic works of art, myths and stories. Its in depth 'analysis' or review of Géricault's piece offers a refreshing, if at times fictional, point of view. Due to its lack of hard credibility I did not cite it extensively, instead drawing ideas from the many topics Barnes raises.

Crary, Jonathan. "Géricault, the Panorama, and Sites of Reality in the Early Nineteenth Century," Grey Room, 09 (MIT: 2002) 25.

This article examines Modernism's basis in the 19th century's development of a new way of viewing "reality" through several European works of art and exhibitions. Its analysis of *The Raft* was useful for its references to established post-modern authors and concepts.

Eitner, Lorenz. Géricault's Raft of the Medusa. (London: Phaidon, 1972).

This is the authoritative analysis of Géricault's masterpiece. It formed the foundation of my research, is referenced in every source I've seen on the subject and offers a thorough picture of the socio-political setting for, and details of, Géricault's creation of *The Raft*. I used its analysis of his process (from artistic influences to friends and habits) and its description of France at the time.

Riding, Christine. "The Fatal Raft." History Today. v53 i2 (2003) 38-44.

While limitations on our paper's length (which were taken liberally) prevented me from including the focus of this article, I had originally hoped to discuss the influence of *The Raft* in England (where it was universally acclaimed and the disaster was viewed as representing French moral and political inferiority). Nevertheless, Riding's succinct language was used in several instances (she just said it right).