Rossini’s Le Siège: an archaeology of the senses

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INTRO

The First Restoration government in 1814 was guided by a spirit of oubli, or forgetting: reinstating symbols and ceremonies of the Old Regime, but without directly confronting the revolutionary and imperial emblems and rituals that had replaced them. But the return of Napoleon and the Hundred Days proved that this conciliatory policy was too dangerous, and following the second Restoration in 1815 (after Napoleon’s defeat at Waterloo), the government embarked on a more vigorous campaign. It became illegal to sing revolutionary songs or carry a tricolour flag in public places, and the statues, portraits and flags of the past 25 years were destroyed in public spectacles to efface them not only from the landscape, but also from public memory.

Nevertheless, operas and plays of the Restoration bear witness to the public’s need to remember – across the political spectrum – whether to keep the fires of revolution alive, to punish those responsible, or to try to understand what had happened. There is also a striking continuity of artistic practice with works of the revolutionary decade and Empire. In this paper, I argue that Rossini’s Le Siège de Corinthe, which premiered at the Paris Opéra in 1826, can be understood on the one hand as an important link between staging practices and the political climate of the 1790s, and the emergence of grand opera in the late 1820s; and on the other hand as evidence of the ways in which audiences were coming to terms with the legacy of the Revolution and Empire.

The ending of Le Siège was very different from those of contemporary operas: the besieged fifteenth-century Corinthians refuse to surrender to Ottoman invaders and are massacred as the city burns around them in a final uncompromising tableau of destruction. Anselm Gerhard and Benjamin Walton have each emphasised the new sound-world in this unusually horrific scene: the Greek heroine’s suicide is marginalised, subsumed by the incessant, machine-like orchestra, standing for the hordes of marauding Turkish soldiers that we see invading the stage. I am interested in the multisensory nature of the scene: how visual and musical tropes forged in the 1790s were combined with a direct assault on the senses to stir up powerful memories and
emotions.¹ In what follows, I shall examine the final scene of *Le Siège* in the light of theories of trauma and sense memory deriving from literary and art historians, and argue that the opera provided a ‘safe’ vehicle with which to revisit French revolutionary experiences, accessed through a variety of modes of sensory engagement.

**TRAUMA**

In recent years, literary production of the revolutionary period has been reconsidered in the light of trauma and testimony.² Although the word ‘traumatique’ did not appear in French dictionaries until 1835, and medical practitioners extended the concept to include psychic as well as physical wounds only towards the end of the nineteenth century, French literary scholars such as Kate Astbury have demonstrated how novelists of the 1790s took their personal experiences of the Revolution and turned them into verbal constructs that lay somewhere between compulsion repetition and cure. As another literary scholar Suzette Henke has claimed, ‘Through the process of rehearsing and re-enacting a drama of mental survival … the trauma narrative effects psychological catharsis’.³

I extend this idea into the restoration, specifically the 1820s, and into opera, and expand it to embrace the sensory experiences of audiences. The art historian Gabriel Koureas has argued that reconceiving a sensory environment can be a profoundly political act, especially when sense experience in the present is layered with the sense memory of traumatic events from the past.⁴ Some memories can be integrated into narrative frames, formed by the cultural stock we carry, but some events are so horrific that we lack the necessary framework in which to experience our recollections.⁵ Charlotte Delbo has coined the term ‘sense memory’, for emotions and sense-experiences that are compulsively repeated as raw and chaotic rather than being integrated into the verbal narratives of ‘thinking memory’.⁶

**SENSORY PERCEPTION**

Scientific writing during the 1820s points to a fascination with the interplay of the senses on one hand, and the connections between smell and memory on the other. The anatomist Hippolyte Cloquet, for example, who devoted an 1815 dissertation and an 1821 book to smell, declared ‘who
is the man for whom odours have not stirred the imagination, or awoken memories? … odours seem to change the nature of ideas, enliven thought', a sentiment that weaves through literature of the period too.

But how might we theorise this sort of experience? The early nineteenth-century philosopher Maine de Biran distinguished between passive and active sensory experiences: smells and sounds require little coordination or mediation from the brain, but the acts of looking and listening demand more complex mental operations. Instinctive, primitive, sensations are different from those that are processed through more reflective means. But he also identified how repetition through habit can release acts of looking and listening from conscious control. Thus humans actively construct their experience of the world, but different sensory triggers are processed in different ways – instinctively, automatically and through reflection.

In what follows I emphasise a distinction in French opera between visual and musical tropes that acquired symbolic connotations, and sensory triggers that acted more directly on the brain, stimulating more instinctive associations. Audiences frequently reported ‘an assault on the senses’, ‘confusion’, ‘bewilderment’ and ‘mental chaos’ in this period, and appreciation of the nature of such experiences will in turn help us to understand grand opera’s signifying possibilities in relation to the trauma of the Revolution and its aftermath.

**LE SIEGE DE CORINTHE**

First, the symbolic associations. The libretto for *Le Siège* contains explicit references to two significant moments from ancient Greek history that underscore the heroic actions of the characters by association. First, the battle at Thermopylae, during which Greek forces under King Leonidas held off a vast Persian army under Xerxes; and second, the battle at Marathon, where the Greeks overpowered the Persians for the first time. In the opera’s key scene of the oath and blessing of the flags, Hiéros, the guardian of the tombs (where the Greeks have all taken refuge), recalls ancient Greece to nourish the *patrie* of the future. [SLIDE here we see the chorus echoing the words Marathon and Leonidas]
Reviewers highlighted these evocations, and in so doing alluded to the ongoing Greek war of independence that had captured the attention of all Europe. Just a couple of months earlier, the Greeks had been defeated by the Turks at Missolonghi following a long siege. Parallels with the plot of the opera were clear. Moral support in France for the Greek cause was almost universal (for the left: it was a war against tyranny; for the right: it was a religious war of Christian against Muslim), and so Hiéros channelled ancient and modern Greek leaders, eliding temporal and political difference in a hero around whom all could gather.

But in the opera’s theme of foreign invasion and occupation, audiences would also have recognised resonances with recent French experiences (though these were not made explicit in reviews, owing to censorship) – the revolution of 1789 and the following decades, as well as the 1814/15 defeats of Napoleon by the allies, which had included two invasions and occupations of Paris by foreign troops. Moreover, the Restoration had inherited an image of Leonidas laden with republican and Bonapartist allusions, as symbolised by Jacques-Louis David’s painting [SLIDE – Léonidas], displayed at an exhibition organised by the liberals in aid of the Greeks that year. Such paintings forged a link between Greek and French heroism, and thus added a veiled French dimension to the opera.

There were other allusions to the 1790s. Elizabeth Bartlet has described the ubiquity of oath scenes in revolutionary festivals and operas: they captured the new emphasis on group action and heroism that was sealed with the establishment of the republic in 1792. Cherubini’s Lodoiska at the Théâtre Feydeau contained an early example, as did Lemoyne’s Miltiade à Marathon and Toute la Grèce for the Opéra. ‘Nous le jurons’ (or ‘we swear’) becomes the key phrase in declamatory martial numbers with fanfare-like melodies and dotted brass accompaniments, as the chorus becomes an independent character in the drama. The same formula returns in Le Siège (and subsequent works, including Guillaume Tell three years later): these politically laden echoes from the 1790s underscore the visual resonances of Leonidas in a modern setting.

As I’ll demonstrate in the final section of my paper, Le Siège offered an opportunity for audiences to revisit traumatic experiences of their recent national history through the prism of Greece. People
of all political persuasions were still coming to terms with feelings of confusion, terror and powerlessness in the face of violence, and despite the official policy of oubli, it is clear from a number of operas and plays during these years that many felt the need to remember the Revolution in order to look to the future. I suggest that sensory cues combined with the symbolic cues I’ve been describing, and in the final tableau triggered remembered and imagined memories of personal and collective experiences. In other words, sense experience in the present is layered with the sense memory of traumatic events from the past.

**Final destruction**

Following the oath and blessing of the flags, the Greek heroine Pamira’s prayer is cut short by the arrival of the noisy Turkish troops. [SLIDE – stage directions] Sounds of offstage fighting are heard, and the soldiers invade the stage. Half way through the final scene we hear a heavy rumble and ‘flames are seen playing across the walls, which begin to teeter and crash to the ground’. When the singing has been overtaken by the orchestra, ‘the back wall falls to reveal a blazing Corinth. Across the flames and the rubble, we see Muslims pursuing Greeks and butchering them with rage. The women fall to their knees. The whole stage is on fire. The curtain falls on this horrible tableau’.

This *visual* chaos borrows from operas of the 1790s [SLIDE – scenery for the final tableau, unpeopled]. Bartlet explains the formula: to the sound of canons we see patrols of soldiers and a burning city in the background; there is confusion, fleeing figures, small pantomimes enacting individual stories; the drama is conveyed with concision through gestures, offstage choruses and the orchestra; solo airs are cut or dropped altogether. We find most of these features in *Le Siège* (and again in subsequent grand operas). There are also striking similarities between the final 100 bars of orchestral music that conclude *Le Siège*, and those of similar tableaux from the 1790s. As we’ll hear in a moment, the frenetic surface energy of relentlessly repeating scalar and arpeggiated figures is contained within a slow-moving harmonic framework, which mirrors and intensifies the struggle playing out onstage *between* individuals and *against* inexorable forces, thus magnifying the moral message of the drama. As Gerhard and Walton have both observed, the repeating eight-
bar unison figure in the orchestra seems to stand principally for the marauding Turks – but the symbolic ancient/modern, Greek/French status of the war also evokes the greater forces of history or destiny, in this sublime tableau.

The following year, Victor Hugo was to publish his Préface de Cromwell, in which he offered a definition of modern drama that depended on a combination of the sublime and the grotesque:

[SLIDE - quote] ‘the real results from the wholly natural combination of two types, the sublime and the grotesque, which meet in drama, as they meet in life and in creation. For true poetry, complete poetry, consists in the harmony of contraries’. ¹⁰ Le Siège was the first French opera to offer such an uncompromisingly tragic conclusion (the 1790s operas mentioned all ended well, as did the tragédies lyriques of the 1820s): human suffering – the physical and bloody horror of war – was here juxtaposed with the spiritual, moral dimension, each heightening the impact of the other. Thus, spectators were both confronted with and reminded of the horror of war, an experience that was still very raw, and offered a broader historical and spiritual context in which to try to make sense of it.

[SLIDE – image of the scenery again, with the words you’ll hear at the beginning of the clip]

Musical example: CD2 track 9, 0.30—2.00m or CLIP 1m30 [Orch and chorus of Teatro Felice Di Genova, and Prague Philharmonic Choir, cond Paolo Olmi, 1992]

Although it is the musical and visual spectacle that 1820s reviewers and modern scholars have tended to comment on, the sheer noise, smoke, heat and smells associated with the special effects would certainly have intensified the experience further, not only triggering the ‘sense memory’ of fighting perhaps, but also the very real fear that the theatre itself was on fire – firemen and buckets of water were stationed in the wings to deal with precisely this eventuality. Georges Moynet, in his history of theatre effects published in 1874 recalls several occasions when audiences flooded out of theatres in the belief that they were burning down. ¹¹
An important contributing factor to this atmosphere of fear would have been the introduction of gas lighting to the auditorium and then the stage of the Opéra in 1822. The technology was controversial: it came from England…, the gas gave off toxic vapours and smells that infiltrated public and social spaces,¹² and of course there was the risk of explosion – nine had been reported in London and Paris between 1819 and 23. Many believed that the explosion of a gasometer could level Paris. At stake in the mid-20s was the future of the enormous gasometer in the fashionable rue du Faubourg-Poissonnière – ten times bigger than the largest in London, and according to one opponent the 200,000 cubic feet of gas was equivalent to 1,038 barrels of gunpowder – a comparison which brought to mind the spectacular explosions of gunpowder factories, such the Grenelle factory (in southwest Paris) in 1794, which had killed more than 1000 [SLIDE – Grenelle].¹³

Other technologies at the Opéra contributed to the toxic atmosphere. Special effects were created with clouds of ammonia hydrochloride, which gave simulated flames some vitality; lycopodium powder, which mingled with coloured flares to produce large flames; spark powder added to create black smoke; lumps of gun-cotton soaked in strontium nitrate (which were thrown onto the stage) to produce red flames. Such olfactory cues surely merged with distant and more recent memories of danger in the streets.

Philip Mansell has painted a vivid picture of the chaos and fear following the defeat of Napoleon, when allied troops invaded and occupied Paris [SLIDE – Russian troops in action]. In March 1814, news had arrived of Napoleon rushing back across the plains east of Paris at the head of his army, trying to block the torrent of advancing allies; the Russians were keen to avenge the French invasion of Moscow in 1812, and burn Paris. Peasants fled the fighting, bringing their carts and cattle into the city, arriving with wounded soldiers who were dying in the streets. At the end of March the allies began to attack the city, and even during the occupation there were threats to raze Paris – Napoleon ordered the main powder store to be blown up – before peace was negotiated. A year later, following Napoleon’s defeat at Waterloo after the Hundred Days, allied troops again descended on Paris, and it was placed under a state of siege. Fear of massacres, starvation and widespread destruction again ran through the city.
Given the implicit associations with the period of revolution and empire suggested by the musical and visual tropes running through Rossini's opera, it seems likely that the assault on the senses offered in the final scene of destruction would have triggered real and imagined, personal and collective sense memories [SLIDE – blank].

Shakespearean scholars have been trying to recover the sensory experiences of English audiences around 1600, in order to better understand the political and cultural resonances of the plays. Jonathan Gil Harris, for example, has noted that smell in particular tends to generate polychronic experiences, palimpsests of diverse moments in time. He suggests that the fireworks used in performances of Macbeth would (by olfactory association) have invited audiences both to contemplate ‘real’ recent horror (namely the Gunpowder Plot – the plan to blow up the Houses of Parliament) and to distance themselves from it by recalling festive antecedents.\textsuperscript{14} I suggest that there is a similar process of oscillation at work in grand opera. The final tableau of Le Siège demonstrates on the one hand visual and musical tropes that had acquired specific political connotations, and on the other, sensory triggers that acted more directly on the brain, stimulating more instinctive reactions; the environment offered by the first helped to condition the associations created by the second, and enjoyment of the fictional spectacle was intensified.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion: audiences reported being ‘terrified by the horrors’: ‘transported into the mêlée: we feel ourselves animated by the ferocity of the assailants, the courage of the defenders of Corinth’. Freely mixing real and imagined sensory cues, spectators actively willed themselves into the drama as if it were real, while simultaneously enjoying its artifice. The ‘horror’ experienced was an important trope of the reviews, and it was rooted in the imaginary interplay between representation and self that was crucial to the aesthetic of 1790s drama.\textsuperscript{15}

\textit{Le Siège}, Auber’s \textit{La Muette de Portici}, and other dramas of the mid-1820s that alluded to revolutionary experience can be understood as effecting psychological catharsis through a layering of sense experiences. They offered a safe space in which to re-live and contemplate events that had officially been wiped from history, with which the country had not yet come to terms.
Ultimately, building sensory engagement more explicitly into our understanding of grand opera can help us recover the genre’s signifying possibilities, at a time when the revolution was never far from the surface.
proposed a new kind of media taxonomy that acknowledges on one hand that media are 

Lighting Controversy: Techno 

Berry in 1821 at the Opéra 

and it met with opposition from the new ultra 

upheaval caused by the changes brought about by revolution.

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Katherine Astbury, Narrative responses to the Trauma of the French revolution (Legenda, 2012). KT makes the more specific link with Fr Rev lit – it has more often been made with post-WW2 fiction and autobiography) Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman, Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History (London: Routledge, 2002).

Modern sensory ethnographers have turned their attention to the multisensorality of experience, perception, knowing and practice, though focusing on the present. Modern clinicians have explained how collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so that it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with trauma. But it is a form of shock all the same, a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an affective source of support, and that an important part of the self has disappeared. Restoring a sense of trust is an important part of restoring the social bonds, and typically takes the form of: establishing safety, remembrance and mourning, reconnection with ordinary life.

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1 Article XI of the new Charte Constitutionnelle of 1814 prohibited all research of former political convictions. See Pierre Rosanvallon, La Monarchie impossible: Les Charte de 1814 et de 1830 (Paris: Fayard, 1994), 15–89. One part of Louis XVIII’s new political programme consisted of the concept of “Oubli.” This meant forgetting the nation’s recent revolutionary and imperial past and, in particular, the political sympathies one shared before the restoration of the monarchy. Liberals welcomed the Oubli, since it guaranteed they would neither be judged for their past wrongdoings, nor suppressed or discriminated against in the present. The future was open, never mind the past. The Ultra-Royalists, for their part, “refused to forget” as Stanley Mellon once pointedly stated. They wanted to discuss what happened during the Revolution, the Consulate, and the Empire, and believed that the guilty needed to be found and punished.


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2 Katherine Astbury, Narrative responses to the Trauma of the French revolution (Legenda, 2012). KT makes the more specific link with Fr Rev lit – it has more often been made with post-WW2 fiction and autobiography) Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman, Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History (London: Routledge, 2002).

3 Suzette A. Henke, Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women’s Life Writing (London: Macmillan, 1998), xix. Modern clinicians have explained how collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so that it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with trauma. But it is a form of shock all the same, a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an affective source of support, and that an important part of the self has disappeared. Restoring a sense of trust is an important part of restoring the social bonds, and typically takes the form of: establishing safety, remembrance and mourning, reconnection with ordinary life.

4 Patrizia Di Bello and Gabriel Koureas, Introduction: Other than the visual: art, history and the senses’, in Art, History and the Senses: 1830 to the Present (Ashgate, 2010), 1–17, 13 [ie a description of his chapter]

5 M. Bal, ‘Narrative Inside Out: Louise Bourgeois’s Spider as Theoretical Object’, Oxford Art Journal, 22 (1999), 103–26,

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6 on Delbo.

In her Holocaust work – she survived Auschwitz. See Jill Bennett, Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contem

porary Art, pp. 25–6 on Delbo.

7 Modern sensory ethnographers have turned their attention to the multisensorality of experience, perception, knowing and practice, though focusing on the present.

8 A major stronghold of the Greek rebels that had resisted a siege in 1822, its admiral Markos Botsaris who died in the siege was hailed as the ‘new Leonidas’. But Missolonghi succumbed to another siege in 1826: the inhabitants decided to escape, but were betrayed and most of them killed by the Turks

9 Censors (before) and critics (after the premiere) noted that although the French bishop Joseph of Rogous did not bless the flags and Ibrahim Pasha did not lead the Greeks’ executioners, allusions to Missolonghi were not far below the surface, and would assure an enthusiastic reception.

10 We have now reached the poetic culmination of modern times. Shakespeare is the drama; and the drama, which with the same breadth moulds the grotesque and the sublime, the terrible and the absurd, tragedy and comedy—the drama is the distinguishing characteristic of the third epoch of poetry, of the literature of the present day, […] Thus we see that the only two poets of modern times who are of Shakespeare’s stature follow him in unity of design. They coincide with him in imparting a dramatic tinge to all our poetry; like him, they blend the grotesque with the sublime; and, far from standing by themselves in the great literary ensemble that rests upon Shakespeare, Dante and Milton are, in some sort, the two supporting abutments of the edifice of which he is the central pillar, the buttresses of the arch of which he is the keystone. […] The poetry born of Christianity, the poetry of our time, is, therefore, the drama; the real results from the wholly natural combination of two types, the sublime and the grotesque, which meet in the drama, as they meet in life and in creation. For true poetry, complete poetry, consists in the harmony of contraries.

11 Myonnet, 153–6 – though he does not say when this happened (may have been later in the century?).

12 Nodier and Pichat co-authored a pamphlet against gas in which they imagined the panic that would ensue if the supply of gas were to stop suddenly – for example plunging an auditorium into sudden darkness (the murder of the Duc de Berry in 1821 at the Opéra was in every memory).


34.htm

14 WJT Mitchell has interrogated the notion of spectatorship, arguing that no visual experience is purely visual, and proposed a new kind of media taxonomy that acknowledges on one hand that media are extensions of the senses, and
on the other that they are symbolic operators. Building on Marshall McLuhan and Charles Pierce, he proposes a complex of sensory-semiotic ratios that encourage us to explore a more multifaceted notion of spectatorship. For example, in addition to basic relationships of dominance/subordination, one sense might activate or nest within another, they might be braided together or sutured, or they may run on parallel lines, forcing the observer to jump the tracks and forge connections subjectively.

The brutal actions of the Turks, set against the courage of the Greeks, the horror of the destruction set against the awe-inspiring spectacle of fire and smoke, seems to demonstrate Victor Hugo's idea of the sublime in action, in which the sublime and the grotesque intersect in the drama as they intersect in life. For Victor Hugo, the grotesque is conceived as a principle of opposition in conjunction with the sublime: the 'real' results from 'the completely natural combination of two types, the sublime and the grotesque, which intersect in the drame as they intersect in life' (Hugo, Preface).

{15} Shocking scenes of destruction and confusion on a grand scale that assaulted the senses were accompanied by powerful orchestral passages driven by incessant, small-scale repetition within a static harmonic framework. The effect created was one of individual struggle against overpowering forces that awakened real and imagined memories associated with the revolution.