

## 2.11

# Adrift: The Time and Space of the News in Géricault's *Le Radeau de La Méduse*

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Théodore Géricault's *Le Radeau de La Méduse* has always been an untimely representation. It famously dispenses with the traditional temporal distance with which history painting ennobled its subjects, instead fixing on a recent, and hardly morally instructive, event. Unlike the sword-and-sandal essays of the young David and his followers, this work employs no ancient costume to veil its critique or elevate its figures. The gruesome scene of the survivors of a shipwreck caused by the ineptitude of a captain appointed by a corrupt government is a striking departure from the aesthetic and moral idiom of much painting of the time. Despite this strident contemporaneity, however, Géricault's picture was also a notably belated image, for by the time that the painting was presented at the Salon in August 1819, the painful topicality of the disaster it depicts had undoubtedly been diminished.<sup>1</sup> More than three years had elapsed between the grounding of the *Méduse* on the Banks of Arguin in July 1816 and the appearance of the painting, and in the interim the public had been furnished with two editions of the eyewitness account published by a pair of the tragedy's survivors, as well as two other books on the subject, and a number of prints. Curiously, the painting transgressed the temporal conventions of history painting, even as it emulated the painstaking, elongated process by which such a large-scale oil painting could be realized. Géricault's diligent investment in the minutiae of the event, and the immediacy of the reality effects that they would achieve, stretched the picture's temporal distance from its stimulus in reality. While he was busy breaking with the past, Géricault ran out of the present long before his work was complete.

Nevertheless, *Le Radeau de La Méduse* is a news picture, but not because it took particular advantage of or replicated the instantaneity, or even the great rapidity, of the transit of information. To the contrary, the painting is a milestone of this genre because it takes as its subject the challenges and shortcomings of the transmission of visual information, even in an historical moment of its quickening pace. When the most important eyewitness version of the catastrophe was published in book form fifteen months later, in October 1817, the entire expedition was presented as a series of failures of visual communication, foreshadowing the almost unbearable tension of the moment of the painting. These smaller, premonitory fiascos are attributed, in the narrative, to the incompetence of the captain, a man of high birth and low aptitude who, after the purge of the military of Bonapartists, was unwisely given his commission. Barely

out of French waters, a young sailor is accidentally thrown overboard; the *Méduse* discharges a flag buoy into the sea so that he may be picked up by the trailing ships in the party. These vessels, however, glide obliviously by, condemning the first of the journey's victims to his watery end. A few nights later, an indolent master of the watch cannot be bothered to hang the lantern with which the craft in the convoy kept sight of one another, causing the *Méduse* to lose her sister ships by morning. Soon after, the easily deceived captain of the ship is persuaded that a cloud is in fact a snow-covered mountain peak, sending the frigate further off course.

Géricault's picture commits itself to the problem of visual communication with its very existence, for the canvas makes the particular visual transmission that is its condition of possibility—the successful signaling of the castaways to the rescue ship *Argus*—the center of its narrative conflict. Géricault's image depends, after all, upon the survival of the shipwrecked men to transmit their story, and so their valiant struggle to signal visually their distress to their saviors is an existential matter for the painting. It is this commensurability of the dramatic charge of the painting with the system of information transmission upon which its existence relies that provides Géricault's image with its very particular kind of immediacy.

The communication of visual information is the source of *Le Radeau de La Méduse's* conflict, as the emaciated survivors desperately seek to muster their own visibility, fashioning signals from their tattered clothes and from their vitiated bodies. As Jonathan Crary has noted, "the painting incarnates a vision all but cut off from the possibility of a reciprocal exchange of gazes. For reprieve and deliverance in this image would consist in a mutual exchange of gazes, in being acknowledged by the ship, which is here tragically denied or at least deferred."<sup>2</sup> The impossibility of that reciprocity, of the fundamental visual disconnection of the producers and intended recipients of signals, needs to be understood within the broader context of communication at the beginning of the Restoration. This non-reciprocity of gazes, as well as the formal signaling posture in which Géricault configures his protagonists, are historically specific, reflecting the technological and political dynamic of the news in these consequential years in French history.

When the *Méduse* convoy departed Rochefort in June 1816 with the assignment of receiving the handover from the British of the African colony of Senegal, it had been less than a year since the final banishment of Napoleon from Europe. Any closure that the Emperor's exile provided would have been extraordinarily tenuous, for this was not the first time that he had been sent far away, out of sight. The British iconography of Napoleon in exile on St. Helena—his final port of call—is strikingly consistent. Benjamin Robert Haydon's *Napoleon Bonaparte Musing at St. Helena* (Fig. 2.11a) is representative: the diminished Emperor, who once had the entirety of Europe within his grasp, stares into an oceanic abyss, master not even of the wind-swept rock to which he has been relegated.

This image seems designed to ward off the return of the tyrant, to prevent another debacle like the Hundred Days, when the seeming remoteness of the isle of Elba proved no match for Napoleon's ability to bridge great distances. The power of this imagery comes from imposing upon Napoleon a physical disconnectedness that he had spent his career successfully surmounting. Now he scans the void, waiting, in vain, for his loyal subjects to restore him once again, but unlike at Elba, there are no signs or signals on the horizon, just the relentlessly blank indifference of a sea that stretches forever. Here, amidst the vast vacuum of sea and sky, Napoleon is expelled from the coordinates of space and time, impotent, shipwrecked.

Long-distance communication—rapid and unimpeded—was of course a critical component of Napoleon's military successes and the expansion of his empire.<sup>3</sup> More than that, though, a network over



**Figure 2.11a** Benjamin Robert Haydon, *Napoleon Bonaparte*, oil on canvas, 1795. NPG 6266 Primary Collection. © National Portrait Gallery, London.

which information could flow from the metropole to its far-flung colonial outposts served as a conceptual model for the entire imperial enterprise. As one recent study has aptly put it, “the Empire was nothing but a mirror of [a] perfect system of communication,” in which successfully delivering dispatches became “the defining imperial act.”<sup>4</sup> The particular system upon which this expansive empire relied was a pre-eminently visual one: the optical telegraph or, as its inventor Claude Chappe would christen it, the

semaphore. A network of signal towers were placed at what was, with the aid of a telescope, the maximum visible distance from one another, near the highest point of the terrain. Atop each sat the semaphore, made of moveable wooden arms and operated by two men with a simple system of counterweights. The well-trained operator could signal and discern more than 8,000 distinct words and phrases, and under the right conditions complete messages could travel from Paris to, for instance, the northern border at Lille, in just half an hour.<sup>5</sup> So potent was the semaphore as a symbol of Napoleonic expansionism that the caricaturist James Gillray nervously expressed the widespread fear of a French invasion in a remarkable print, in which the semaphore is anthropomorphized, signaling the fleet with a lantern in one arm, and pointing menacingly towards the dome of St. Paul's with the other (Fig. 2.11b).

But after Waterloo, the Restoration government virtually shut down the network, severing all the links that went beyond France's historical borders. It was an unsurprising symbolic and strategic maneuver, renouncing Napoleon's expansionist vision and occluding its lines of sight.

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The communication—and contestation—of the news of the *Méduse* disaster helps us to see the contours of the information network in the first years of the Restoration clearly, something like a radioactive dye



**Figure 2.11b** James Gillray, *French-telegraph making signals in the dark*, hand-colored etching, 1795. 1868,0808.6406. © Trustees of the British Museum.

moving through the circulatory system. The news initially made its way into the public sphere when an anti-Royalist Prefect of Police leaked the story to a sympathetic paper. The government of Louis XVIII mustered its considerable resources to suppress the story entirely. The authorities ransacked the rooms of the naval engineer Corr  ard, co-author with his fellow survivor, the surgeon Savigny, of the definitive contemporary chronicle of the raft. The functionaries came in search of manuscripts which they deemed "seditious," a scene that was immortalized in a lithograph, possibly based upon a watercolor by G  ricault himself, which illustrated the later editions of the text. Worried not only about outright suppression, but also by the potential publication of scurrilous accounts of the wreck under their names, Corr  ard and Savigny took to hand-signing an *avis* at the beginning of their book.

Such measures seem justified, given the astounding brazenness with which the government, having failed miserably to suppress the narrative, sought to discredit its veracity. A prefatory note to the second edition warned of the imminent appearance of an alternative version of the events penned by a "pretended sea-officer who was partly the cause of our misfortunes." The authors inform us that this ultra-Royalist and inept sailor, having abandoned the raft for the safety of the governor's boat, "remained a stranger to the disasters which he had partly caused, and consequently, knew nothing of what passed."<sup>6</sup> This bit of hackery was to be published by a Mr. Sevigny, whose surname conveniently resembled that of one of the genuine authors. The warning further notes that this Sevigny had achieved some financial success in similar larcenies against the public when, having acted as the front man for the disgraced governor, he founded a company called the "Colonial Philanthropic Society of Senegambia," and bilked Napoleonic military pensioners with promises of parcels in an exotic African paradise.

Yet the uncertainty of the guarantees of the survivors' recollections, and particularly their visual dimensions, are built into the expository prose of the text. After the grounding of the *M  duse* and the haphazard creation of the raft, they report, the pitiful passengers are tormented by a series of mirages. Some of these condemned souls:

pictured delicious fountains, at which they sought to quench their burning thirst. Others, more sensible perhaps to the loss of their friends than to their own sufferings, dreamed they again clasped them in their arms.<sup>7</sup>

But the cruelest of these hallucinations involved the spectres of salvation: appearance of distant fires in the darkness of night, and sightings of land and rescue vessels. These phantasms were ones that G  ricault's own preparatory studies seem to have internalized, for throughout his sketches the *Argus* is continually repositioned, moving from the middle ground to the farthest horizon and then vanishing altogether.<sup>8</sup> Clearly, these exercises allowed G  ricault to modulate the affective potency of the image, experimenting with the impact of a salvational nearness, an unresolved distance, and a despondent disappearance. Indeed, G  ricault began with a scene of the rescue underway, the dinghy of the *Argus* just feet away from the raft.<sup>9</sup> But closure was not to be the aim of the painting, and so the final version shows the *Argus* at its most minute, at the moment of its most tenuous visual linkage to the signals of the survivors.

When the painting traveled to London and Dublin, an accompanying pamphlet announced the moment of the disaster that G  ricault had selected: the survivors are "just descrying the vessel that rescued them from their dreadful situation," a slightly, but crucially, misleading summation.<sup>10</sup> The *Concise Description* goes on to inform the viewer that this instant is in fact *not* the moment of deliverance itself, for the *Argus* does not spot the waterlogged pile of bodies; it is only some time later when, by happy

coincidence, their trajectories cross again. The men have hoisted one of their party atop a barrel, and he strains to attract the eyes of the *Argus* with the red and white scraps he holds twisted in his hand. Those survivors who still harbor hope struggle to aid in the signaling, grasping plaintively at the air as the current pushes them back, away from the direction of redemption. From the tender nearness of the signaling arm of a survivor, Géricault plunges us into a chasm of choppy waters, and then to glimpse the faintest cruciform outline of the *Argus*. This is the final moment of visibility, for in an instant that ship will be gone from sight, the already-weak signal of the survivors fully extinguished by her distance.

The spatial elasticity of France in the years after the fall of Napoleon was the result, in diplomatic terms, of an oddity of the Treaty of Paris. While France was stripped of the European holdings it had acquired after 1792, it was restored a group of colonial territories that had been lost to the superior British navy during the intervening decades.<sup>11</sup> The ironies of this reordering are embodied in the fact that, even as Napoleon was banished to St. Helena, Britain's most remote colony, the Royal Navy restored to the French the island of Réunion which, at the time of its capture, bore the name "Île Bonaparte." If the semaphore and its network of visual communication had shrunk the strategic terrain of Europe to the benefit of Napoleonic expansion, the newly restored portfolio of colonial bases remained astonishingly distant. The transmission of information from these colonies to the metropole still relied upon oceanic navigation, a realm in which speeds had remained relatively stagnant for decades.<sup>12</sup> The signature accomplishment of the semaphore network—to liberate communication from transportation—was largely irrelevant to the new, circumscribed map upon which France's expansion could now unfold.<sup>13</sup> It was on the return from one such outpost—Senegal—that the survivor Savigny would pen the first brief manuscript of the harrowing history of the *Méduse*, carrying with him the news of the disaster.<sup>14</sup> Lodged together below deck, the news, its author, and its material embodiment as a manuscript, sailed slowly for home. The drama of transmission is a double one, for even if the castaways' signal is glimpsed by the *Argus*, the story of the wreck must overcome its own distances to reach the public. And this distance was, in a very marked way, the defining metaphorical feature of a newly royal France and its global position.

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If the "moment" of *Le Radeau de La Méduse* locates its inhabitants at the absolute outer marker of the visibility of signals, the completion of the canvas itself also occupied an extreme position in the historical development of visual modes of telegraphic communication. The many experimenters across Europe who had been working feverishly towards faster and more reliable telegraphy announced a series of major breakthroughs, the first just a year after the arrival of Géricault's painting. In 1820 the Danish physicist Hans Christian Oersted published the principles of electromagnetism, the conceptual foundation upon which the electrical telegraph would be constructed. The impact on the time and space of the news of this emerging mode of transmission would be truly epochal. The electrical telegraph excelled in precisely those dimensions that had hamstrung its optical predecessors. Chappe's system could operate only during daylight hours and under favorable climatic conditions, which in wintry France might be as little as three hours per day. By contrast, the electrical telegraph could transmit messages regardless of the conditions of visibility.<sup>15</sup> The crucial function of visually discerning the meaning of a communication was rendered obsolete, and a variety of ingenious mechanisms for receiving and translating messages sent electrically quickly assumed this responsibility. In Munich, incoming communications passed through a clockwork apparatus that maneuvered a paper ribbon under a needle that punched dots in the shape

of the letters of the alphabet; in New York, the job was taken up by a modified piano-forte keyboard.<sup>16</sup> In these and other centers of communication around the globe, the new registration devices did not simply extend human sensory capacities, as a telescope might; rather, they helped to decode messages transmitted along channels that had ceased to have any direct relationship to the abilities or experience of the human perceiver. The visual pathway of communication, which Chappe had created and Napoleon had harnessed, was, in short order, supplanted by the fundamentally non-visual signals of the new electrical telegraph. Within two decades, this variety of telegraphy would become indispensable to the world's news agencies, restructuring radically the temporal implications of the news.<sup>17</sup>

If, as Norton Wise has argued, “much of the history of science could be written in terms of making new things visible—or familiar things visible in a new way,” then Géricault’s painting stands at the threshold of a new chapter in this history.<sup>18</sup> The frailties of the human capacity to discern visual signals—embodied in the unaware searchers of the *Argus* failing to see their marooned comrades’ contorted signs—was the source of the picture’s drama. This was a mode of communication already on the verge of obsolescence, whose feebleness is memorably condemned by the momentary abandonment of the poor souls, who cling to their wooden raft and to quickly-vanishing hope. *Le Radeau de La Méduse* is as much a picture about the particular spatio-temporality of the news in 1819 as it is a representation of a newsworthy event. It is this narrative and conceptual accord that imbued *Le Radeau de La Méduse* with its peculiarly untimely timeliness.

## Notes

- 1 Paul Joannides, “The Raft of the Medusa.” Review of *Géricault’s Raft of the Medusa*, by Lorenz Eitner. *Burlington Magazine* 117.864 (1975): 171.
- 2 Jonathan Crary, “Géricault, the Panorama, and Sites of Reality in the Early Nineteenth Century,” *Grey Room* 9 (2002): 16.
- 3 Frank Hellems, “Napoleon and Internet. A Historical and Anthropological View on the Culture of Punctuality and Instantaneity,” *Telematics and Informatics* 15.3 (1998): 127–33.
- 4 Andy Martin, “Mentioned in Dispatches: Napoleon, Chappe and Chateaubriand,” *Modern & Contemporary France* 8.4 (2000): 446.
- 5 Patrice Flichy, “The Birth of Long Distance Communication. Semaphore Telegraphs in Europe (1790–1840),” *Réseaux. The French Journal of Communication* 1.1 (1993): 81–101.
- 6 Jean Baptiste Henri Savigny, and Alexandre Corréard, *Narrative of a Voyage to Senegal in 1816: Undertaken by Order of the French Government, Comprising an Account of the Shipwreck of the Medusa, the Sufferings of the Crew, and the Various Occurrences on Board the Raft, in the Desert of Zaara, at St. Louis, and at the Camp of Daccard. To which are Subjoined Observations Respecting the Agriculture of the Western Coast of Africa, from Cape Blanco to the Mouth of the Gambia.* (London: H. Colburn, 1818): v, vi.
- 7 *A Concise Description of Monsieur Jerricault’s Great picture . . . representing the surviving crew of the Medusa French frigate, open for public inspection at The Roman Gallery, Egyptian hall, Piccadilly* (London: W. Smith, 1820): 11.
- 8 These preparatory endeavors are conveniently collected in Bruno Chenique, *Géricault, au coeur de la création romantique: études pour le Radeau de la Méduse* (Clermont-Ferrand: Musée d’art Roger-Quilliot, 2012).
- 9 Lorenz Eitner, *Géricault’s Raft of the Medusa* (London: Phaidon, 1972).
- 10 *A Concise Description of Monsieur Jerricault’s Great picture . . . representing the surviving crew of the Medusa French frigate, open for public inspection at The Roman Gallery, Egyptian hall, Piccadilly* (London: W. Smith, 1820).

- 11 Guillaume Bertier de Sauvigny, *La Restauration* (Paris: Flammarion, 1963). For an impressive art historical study of France's colonial ventures in this period, see Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, *Extremities: Painting Empire in Post-Revolutionary France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).
- 12 Yrjö Kaukiainen, "Shrinking the World: Improvements in the Speed of Information Transmission, c. 1820–1870," *European Review of Economic History* 5.1 (2001): 1–28.
- 13 On this separation and its consequences, see James W. Carey, "Technology and Ideology: The Case of the Telegraph," *Prospects* 8.1 (1983): 303–25.
- 14 A short version of the account was initially published 13 September 1816 in the anti-Bourbon *Journal des Débats*, and in English translation very soon thereafter. The full narrative was published the following year in Alexandre Corréard and Jean B. H. Savigny, *Naufrage De La Frégate La Méduse: Faisant Partie De L'expédition Du Sénégal En 1816*. (Paris: Eymery, 1817).
- 15 Daniel Headrick, "Electricity Creates the Wired World," in David Crowley and Paul Heyer, eds, *Communication in History* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2010): 127.
- 16 Charles F. Briggs and Augustus Maverick, *The Story of the Telegraph and a History of the Great Atlantic Cable* (New York: Rudd and Carleton, 1858): 24–6.
- 17 Roland Wenzlhuemer, *Connecting the Nineteenth-Century World: The Telegraph and Globalization* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013): 90.
- 18 M. Norton Wise, "Making Visible," *Isis* 97, 1 (2006): 75–82.