2.19

Horace Vernet's *Capture of the Smalah*: Reportage and Actuality in the Early French Illustrated Press

Katie Hornstein

The pages of the 15 March 1845 edition of the illustrated newspaper *L'Illustration* featured a novel visual form of the newspaper picture. Instead of the standard *vignettes* that were confined within the borders of a single newspaper page, this particular edition featured an image that spanned the entire width of two newspaper pages (Fig. 2.19b).

The subject of these unprecedented honors of horizontality concerned a contemporary armed encounter that had taken place in the Algerian desert in May of 1843: the capture of the itinerant military encampment, or *smalah*, of the Algerian commander Abd-el-Kader, the spiritual and military leader of the resistance against France's military, which was at the time engaged in a bloody struggle to bring Algeria under its complete control. Newspaper accounts celebrated the proliferation of objects captured by the French military: "four flags, one canon, two gun carriages, [Abd-el-Kader's] correspondence, the family members of his most important lieutenants, an immense booty: such are the trophies of this memorable day."[1] Conspicuously absent from this list was Abd-el-Kader himself, who had fled to Morocco during the scuffle with the French army and would not be captured until 1847. The capture of Abd-el-Kader's *smalah* merited a lengthy article in the 17 June 1843 edition of *L'Illustration* (Fig. 2.19a) as well as a large illustration that took up nearly one half of a page.

The image of this event that appeared in the newspaper two years later was not in fact connected to a story about France's ongoing struggle to colonize Algeria. Rather, this representation of the capture of Abd-el-Kader's *smalah* accompanied an article devoted to works of art on display at the Salon exhibition of 1845, and was a reproduction of the most important battle painting on view that year, Horace Vernet's (1789–1863) *Capture of the Smalah of Abd-el-Kader*. The publication of Vernet's battle painting as a woodblock engraving within the pages of an illustrated newspaper is an example of what Walter Benjamin calls a "mighty recasting" and a process of "melting down" between cultural forms that have been conceptualized as opposites.[2] For Benjamin, it was the newspaper in particular that challenged traditional
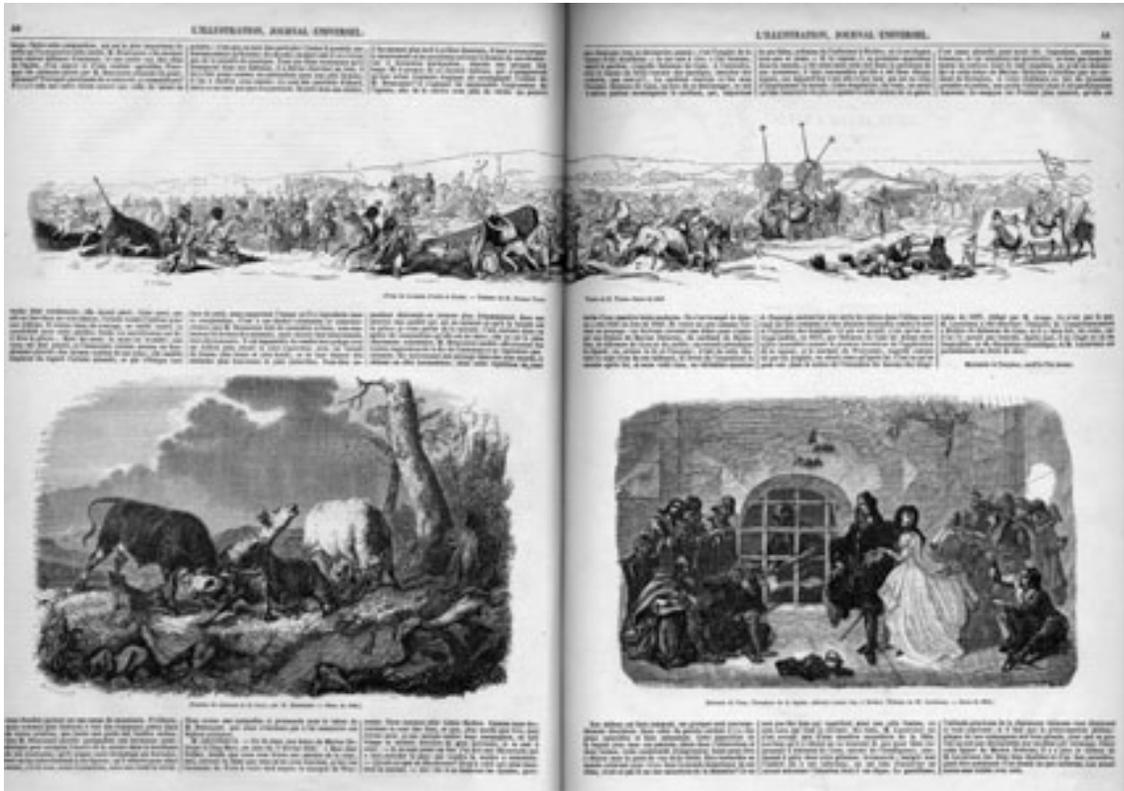
Figure 2.19a "The Capture of the Smalah of Abd-el Kader, after Horace Vernet," *L'Illustration*, 15 March 1845. Courtesy of Dartmouth College Library.

boundaries between genres, audiences, and cultural forms. The appearance of Vernet's *Capture of the Smalah* in the pages of *L'Illustration* constituted one instance of this melting down. It revealed the contours of a distinctly mid-nineteenth-century phenomenon that emerged when the illustrated mass press brought fine art and journalism together as never before, blurring the relationship between the production of information and the production of art.

The expansive format of the newspaper illustration of Vernet's *Smalah* mimicked the unusual (and indeed, unprecedented) format of Horace Vernet's monumental painting: a staggering 66 feet wide × 16 feet tall. Its bombastic scale was a function of the work's importance for the July Monarchy government, and for the legitimacy of the Algerian campaign in the eyes of the French public. Since its inception in 1830, the French effort to colonize Algeria had been dogged by an active resistance movement that the French countered with brutal tactics against civilians and soldiers alike. The conquest faced lukewarm support among certain sectors of the French public, including the Republican and Bonapartist opposition, who regarded it as "a box at the Opera,"—less illustrious than Napoleon's wars of European conquest waged decades earlier.[3] King Louis-Philippe, who inherited the conflict from his predecessors, viewed Algeria as a means of restoring the prestige of France's military without disturbing the peace that had existed among the European powers since Waterloo. Official battle paintings were

Figure 2.19b "The Capture of the Smalah of Abd-el Kader," *L'Illustration*, 17 June 1843. Courtesy of Dartmouth College Library.

therefore tasked with convincing the French public that Algeria was a worthy object of French colonial ambition.

Horace Vernet's status as the most important battle painter of the period (1789–1863) was confirmed by King Louis-Philippe's decision to award him with a series of important government commissions for battle

paintings to hang in the galleries of the *Musée historique de Versailles*—a massive arts project personally overseen by Louis-Philippe that transformed the dilapidated chateau into a didactic museum of French history narrated by paintings of France's past and present.[4] The *Smalah* was installed in a specially designed section of the museum that honored the Algerian campaign, the *Salles d'Afrique*. After being painted in a remarkably quick eight months, the painting was exhibited at the Salon of 1845—the longest, most horizontally expansive, battle painting to ever appear.

Vernet's *Smalah* provoked an immediate sensation in the press. "In front of the infinite canvas of M. Horace Vernet," wrote one critic, "everything else is erased, everything disappears . . . You are seized on your approach by a group of cavalry who stop you. Impossible to escape them! M. Vernet thrusts them, at a gallop, upon you, and there you are, captured."[5] The *Smalah* reportedly attracted huge crowds, causing another critic to note that "no painting has ever been the object of such enthusism."[6] While such effusive reactions dominated the critical reception of the painting, there was nevertheless a vocal minority who objected to what they saw as Vernet's overreliance on a descriptive rhetoric, which they negatively associated with newspapers, official military bulletins, and published eyewitness accounts of battles. This particular criticism had been routinely leveled at Vernet's battle paintings since the Bourbon Restoration and proposes that Vernet's artistic practice was unto itself a form of Benjamin's "melting down" process. Critics took him to task for his apparent rejection of the aggrandizing rhetoric associated with French classical tradition of history painting.[7] In the early nineteenth century, battle painting had grown in scale and importance under the exigencies of Napoleonic propaganda. The so-called *grandes machines* of Jacques-Louis David and his students, including Antoine-Jean Gros and François Gérard, were intended to edify and instruct using metaphor, idealization, and a focus on a single, culminating action—what the academic theorist Quatremère de Quincy called "transposition."[8] Though Vernet's *Smalah* is also an ambitious, large-scale history painting in the tradition of these *grandes machines*, it could not be more different than the kind of battle painting practiced by David and his contemporaries during the First Empire.

Instead of focusing on a singular heroic action, Vernet's painting spreads dozens of different, yet interrelated, groups of figures across a horizontal expanse and places these figures and their actions within a precise moment in time (as opposed to the transcendent timelessness that Napoleonic military painting sought to depict). The title of the painting is somewhat misleading, since it does not actually represent the capture of the 15,000 person encampment, but rather depicts a scene of flight, right after the French army commenced its surprise attack, or *razzia*—a brutal, scorched-Earth raid that had become a standard tactic in the French army by 1841.[9] Across the entire composition, the inhabitants of the *smalah* run out toward the space of the viewer; some of Abd-el-Kader's soldiers hold their ground to fire at the French cavalry, who are depicted by Vernet in mid-gallop, the horses with nostrils flared, advancing toward the foreground. A group of charging oxen in the middle-right foreground similarly threatens to run out of the picture. Steam wafts off a bowl of couscous in the middle foreground; a baby tumbles out of a mother's arms as she falls to the ground. Next to her, one of many racist caricatures in a painting replete with them, depicts a fleeing man, who nineteenth-century audiences would have identified as Jewish, clinching a bag of money as he retreats.

In their reviews of the painting, critics focused on the way that Vernet organized his painting around a proliferation of different episodic details without a central focal point, similar to the way that a panorama painter would compose a round canvas in order to keep customers interested in viewing the entire work. The fact that there was no single heroic focus made it difficult for many critics to discern any higher meaning in the work; this led to charges that Vernet had not sufficiently elevated the importance of his

subject. The sight of the cavalry charge, far from suggesting an important encounter in the desert, suggested a minor skirmish and the idea that "this war is nothing more than the *little war*."[10] Other critics called attention to the appearance of a disproportionate amount of French military force against the enemy, which "diminishes the merit of the victory" and "results in an involuntary pity for these poor Arabs."[11] This rather extraordinary evocation of sympathy for the victims of French colonial intervention underscores the instability of the painting's intended propagandistic function in support of the colonization of Algeria. Beyond the possibility that Vernet had depicted the fleeing inhabitants of the *smalah* as innocent victims, many critics perceived a troubling incongruity between the subject and its gigantic proportion. Why, asked one critic, did Vernet use such a large canvas "for an armed encounter that certainly does not rival the battles of Alexander, of Cesar, of Charlemagne or Napoleon?" He then sardonically remarked that the canvas could be rolled up and taken back to North Africa "to make a good tent."[12]

Horace Vernet had long been accused of painting journalistically, that is to say, in a descriptive mode, without elevating or idealizing his subjects. This is precisely how Charles Baudelaire, one of Vernet's most scathing critics, classified his manner of composing the *Smalah*—according to the "method of a *feuilletoniste*," or serial-novelist, an author whose works were disseminated piecemeal in the bottom section of nineteenth-century newspaper pages. In addition to serial novels, the *feuilleton* also featured art criticism, theater reviews, and other non-political items of interest. Baudelaire's disdain for the newspaper is well known. As he wrote in *Mon coeur mis à nu*, "it is this disgusting aperitif that civilized man takes with breakfast every morning. I do not understand how a pure hand could touch a newspaper without a convulsion of disgust."[13] This condemnation notwithstanding, Baudelaire could not pursue a literary career in the mid-nineteenth century without relying on newspapers to publish his work. *The Painter of Modern Life*, for example, first appeared in installments in the *feuilleton* of the newspaper *Le Figaro* in 1863. In this seminal text in which Baudelaire articulates his theory of *modernité*, he focused on the work of Constantin Guys, who worked as an illustrator for the *Illustrated London News*, the illustrated newspaper after which L'*Illustration* was modeled. In a section devoted to Guys' Crimean War drawings that were published as woodblock engravings in the *Illustrated London News*, Baudelaire had the privilege of examining the original drawings (likely owned by Nadar) and could therefore bypass their unsavory mode of mass diffusion.[14] Despite the fact that Guys worked as an actual newspaper illustrator, it is Vernet who Baudelaire calls in *the Painter of Modern Life* a "veritable journalist (*gazetier*), more than a real painter."[15] At a time when newspaper readership was rapidly expanding due to falling prices, Baudelaire's identification of a history painter as a journalist, and a newspaper illustrator as the visual poet of actuality, marks a surprising inversion of the categories of fine art and journalism. While Baudelaire may have objected to the newspaper as a vapid commodification of the written word, he nevertheless recognized that it was an indispensible component of lived experience, and took full advantage of it to formulate his ideas of what a truly modern form of artistic engagement might look like.

The first issue of *L'Illustration* appeared in February 1843, thirteen years after the French conquest of Algeria had commenced. Several articles, under the title of "Revue Algérienne," were published to catch readers up with these past events. On 17 June 1843, *L'Illustration* introduced the contemporary events of the campaign to readers with a lengthy description of the capture of the *smalah*, accompanied by a large illustration of it. In contrast to the bright clarity of Vernet's painting, the black and white newspaper image of the raid depicts French and Algerian forces charging in multiple directions within a landscape that is almost completely obscured by clouds of smoke. This illustration, which was not based on visual reportage but likely on the official dispatches of the event, focuses on the swirling chaos of the scene. Though the schematic character of the image prevents a focus on any individual soldiers, there is a clear

demarcation between Algerian and French forces in terms of the differences between their uniforms. A separate image, located below this central image of the capture of the *smalah*, provides reader/viewers with an image of a dramatic hand-to-hand combat lacking in the central image: in this case, it is the death of the Mustapha-ben-Ismaël, an Arab chieftain who fought for the French army. The image's caption states that it is his death that is represented; the column of text informs reader/viewers that Ben-Ismaël's tragic end occurred one day after the capture of the *smalah*. To the right, the smallest image on the page appears: the seal of Abd-el-Kader, ostensibly seized during the capture of the *smalah*. Spread out asymmetrically over the newspaper page, these three images offer different perspectives on the event — an overview, a close-up detail of combat, and a glimpse of the material culture of the encampment. As a group, they depict a series of shifting temporal and spatial perspectives, making reader/viewers aware of the expansiveness of the campaign and the allure of some of its details.

Two years later, the reproduction of Vernet's *Smalah* appeared in the pages of *L'Illustration*. While it had become routine by 1845 for the newspaper to publish reproductions of works of art that were on view at Salon exhibitions, the publication of this particular reproduction constituted a formal intervention, expanding, as no image previously had in the newspaper's two-year history, across the entire space of two pages. The paper made no mention of this unprecedented decision and claimed that the image appeared in order "to satisfy the curiosity of readers" who were eager to glimpse the year's most discussed work. After marveling at the size of the painting and describing its manifold episodes, *L'Illustration*'s art critic took Vernet to task for "exciting and satisfying curiosity" without "stirring the soul." At the very end of the section devoted to Vernet, the critic launched into a more severe, and exceptional, critique that revolved around the problem of illustration: "With these exaggerated proportions, painting is threatened by being no more than picturesque and animated topography; battle painters transform into illustrated bulletin authors, and Versailles, if this should continue, will cease to be a museum in order to become an annex of the [French] War Depot."[16] Illustration, claimed this critic, was best left for the newspapers: Vernet's *Smalah* problematically blurred the boundaries between history painting and the production of visual actuality by the illustrated press.

The reproduction of Vernet's *Smalah* appears on the top portion of two pages and is interrupted by the center fold, which cleaves the image into two discrete halves. This has the effect of focusing attention upon the center of the image in a way that the painting, whose sprawling horizontality and lack of a single narrative focus, does not. The dramatic imposition of a central focus also creates a rupture in the frieze-like horizontal flow of the image and proposes an alternative mode of apprehending it: from the center out toward the edges of the page. The material conjunction between the center of the newspaper page and the center of the composition bestowed upon *the Capture of the Smalah* what many critics felt that it had lacked as a large-scale oil painting. While a heroic center of focus had long been the most important criterion for grand-manner history painting, it was the emergent visual form of the illustrated newspaper and the exigencies of page layout that provided it for Vernet's painting. This striking interaction between the illustrated newspaper page, woodblock engraving, and oil painting portended a new frontier of cultural leveling between media, at a time when the identity of nascent mass cultural forms like the illustrated newspaper were still very much up for negotiation. Human perception, as Walter Benjamin argued, is "conditioned not only by nature but by history."[17] The fact that the illustrated newspaper could, for example, disrupt and readjust the visual codes of history painting, and at the same time generate its own particular systems for representing contemporary actuality, is one example of the ways in which the "medium" of mid-nineteenth century perception was undergoing constant redefinition through the circulation of new visual forms.

Notes

1 "Revue Algérienne," *L'Illustration, Journal Universel* (17 juin 1843): 255.

2 Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008): 82.

3 Jean-Joseph Louis Blanc, *La révolution française, l'histoire de dix ans*, v. II (Bruxelles: Société typographique Belge, 1844): 127. For more on the French conquest of Algeria, see Jennifer Sessions, *By Sword and Plow: France and the Conquest of Algeria* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2011).

4 See Marie-Claude Chaudonneret, *L'état et les artistes: de la restauration à la monarchie de juillet (1815–1830)* (Paris: Flammarion, 1999): 102–5; and Daniel Harkett, "Exhibition Culture in Restoration Paris" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Brown University, 2005): 72–119.

5 "Salon de 1845; les Batailles," *L'Artiste* (23 mars 1845): 177.

6 Edouard Bergounioux, "Peinture religieuse et historique; Salon de 1845," *Revue de Paris* (1 avril 1845): 479.

7 Susan Siegfried has identified a de-hierarchizing narrative tendency among post-revolutionary history painters, including Vernet. Susan Siegfried, "Alternative Narratives," *Art History* 36 (February, 2013): 100–27.

8 Antoine Quatremère de Quincy, "Notice historique sur la vie et les ouvrages de M. Gros," in *Recueil des notices historiques lues dans les séances de l'Académie royale des beaux-arts à l'Institut* (Paris: A. Leclere, 1837): 161.

9 Jennifer Sessions, *By Sword and Plow: France and the Conquest of Algeria* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2011): 163–5.

10 Edouard Bergounioux, "Peinture religieuse et historique; Salon de 1845," *Revue de Paris* (1 avril 1845): 478.

11 "Lettre sur le Salon de 1845," *Bulletin des amis des arts* 3.

12 Théophile Thoré, *Les Salons de Théophile Thoré* (Paris: Librairie international, 1868): 111.

13 Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres posthumes et correspondances inédites* (Paris: Maison Quantin, 1887): 117.

14 Baudelaire, *Critique d'art*, ed. Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, 1992): 652.

15 Baudelaire, *Critique d'art*, ed. Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, 1992): 361.

16 "Beaux-Arts—Salon de 1845," *L'Illustration, Journal Universel* (15 mars 1845): 39.

17 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008): 104.