Close to the Source: Analysing the High Art of Propaganda during the French Revolution

Jacques-Louis David’s *The Death of Marat* reveals the blurred lines between historical fact and fiction.

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Analysing primary source material is both an important and highly rewarding exercise in historical scholarship. The ability to critically examine and evaluate primary documents is the foundation of quality historical research. Analysis requires historians to look far beyond first impressions of a historical source. They must examine it in fine detail and be able to communicate their description to the reader. Reconstructing the historical context of the source both deepens the analysis and frequently provides inspiration for further research. Armed with detailed research and observation, the focus of the analysis is to uncover the intentions of the author and the message they are trying to convey. Determining the value or ‘weight’ of a historical source is often far more complicated than simply evaluating the author’s integrity. In history, some of the most elaborately constructed lies can harbour the most profound historical truths. A well-researched and written primary source analysis can impart a close personal affinity between historians and their subjects. This relationship fuels the passion of historical inquiry.

*The Death of Marat* (1793, see Figure 1) by Jacques-Louis David is a uniquely complex historical source that captures both the brutal reality and the elaborate fiction of the French Revolution. The tragic depiction of Jean-Paul Marat, the radical journalist and political agitator lying dead in his bath, reveals the methods employed by political propagandists to manufacture a new ideological reality for the revolutionary state. Simultaneously, it serves to accentuate the sense of tragedy and death the revolution has left in its wake. This analysis examines the multiple meanings of David’s iconic painting to explain how a historical source with such a deliberate political agenda can reveal so much about revolutionary France.

Both the painter and his subject were Jacobins and members of the Montagnard political faction, a radical wing of the Legislative Assembly that dominated the revolution’s trajectory from 1792 to 1794. Under the direction of the Montagnards, many of the revolution’s most violent and controversial events occurred. These included the execution of King Louis XVI on 21 January 1793 and the period known as the ‘Reign of Terror,’ a brutal purging of political opponents and so-called counter-revolutionaries that spanned from
Marat was a polarising figure of the French Revolution. As a radical left-wing journalist he was a revered mouthpiece for the new social order that the revolution promised. However, he was equally loathed and feared by his political opponents who held him responsible for promoting the revolution’s most brutal campaigns of oppression. David was deputy for Paris to the National Convention and, like Marat, directed his artistic talent towards producing artwork that supported the Montagnard’s revolutionary agenda. The hidden third participant in David’s *The Death of Marat* is Marat’s assassin, Charlotte Corday. Corday was a Girondist sympathiser, the Girondins being the opposing political faction most persecuted by the Montagnards. She had resolved to kill Marat both out of retaliation for his role in the persecution of the Girondins and to silence his calls for further violence.

Marat’s assassination and the production of David’s painting occurred at a time of acute political crisis and social upheaval. Instead of strengthening and consolidating the Montagnard’s control, the campaign of political violence known ominously as the Reign of Terror was weakening the revolutionary movement and generating increasing public outcry. This, coupled with the 1793 peasant uprising in the province of Vendée against the revolutionary government, signalled the impending downfall of the Montagnard faction. In this increasingly unstable environment, Maximilien Robespierre, the leader of the Montagnards, instructed David to formalise the Montagnard’s response to Marat’s assassination. Having visited Marat several days before his death, David made the bold decision to paint his friend as he had last seen him, in the bath where he died.

David’s *Marat* is quintessentially a political painting, a propaganda piece commissioned by a revolutionary political faction to serve an ideological agenda. Commissioned the day after Marat’s death, the painting depicts him lying in his bath in the immediate aftermath of his assassination. The composition and contents of the painting have been arranged by David to generate feelings of sympathy and reverence in his audience. The focus of the painting, Marat’s face, is placed on the far left in the middle. This position requires the viewer to simultaneously look down on Marat and directly at him, evoking a sense of both pity and respect. Marat’s surroundings are stark and austere. They include his writing materials, a crude wooden box that serves as a table and green and white sheets that completely obscure his bath. In this way, David presents Marat as a humble and virtuous servant of the people. In his left hand, Marat holds a letter that identifies his assassin, providing a point of focus for the anger and retribution he intends to stir in his audience. All of these elements are combined to affect the French people on an emotional level and to spur them to patriotic action.
The core recurring theme of David's Marat is the rejection of the traditional religious establishment and its long held position of authority and influence over France and its people. The de-Christianisation of French society, both spiritually and administratively, was one of the driving principles of the revolutionary movement, and this can be observed in numerous elements of David's painting. At the base of Marat's wooden crate can be seen the inscription 'L'an Deux' (year two). David is dating Marat's murder in accordance with the Gregorian Calendar. The dumping of the Gregorian Calendar was a controversial and unpopular revolutionary change that widely disrupted French society. David's use of the new secular calendar serves to bolster its ascendance and legitimacy. Online reproductions of the Marat are frequently cropped to omit this critical detail in David's composition. As a result, great care and attention must be exercised when using digital reproductions of historical sources. In contrast, the secular martyrdom of the painting's subject is pervasive throughout the entire canvas.

With the aggressive implementation of de-Christianisation throughout France and the establishment of the secular ‘Cult of Reason,’ revolutionary icons such as Marat were elevated to a god-like status in secular society. To accomplish this, David borrows heavily from the composition and themes of classical Christian paintings and sculpture, focusing in particular on the death of Christ. In a direct emulation of Michelangelo's Pietà (1498–99), see Figure 2), a representation of the deceased Christ, Marat’s right arm descends vertically from his limp and sunken face. As Christ is cradled by the Virgin Mary, Marat is cradled by his bath and both martyrs are skirted in folds of white cloth. Just as Christ had died for the sins of humanity, David commemorates Marat’s death for the noble cause of the revolution. His bath is no longer a medicinal instrument to treat his debilitating skin condition, but the purifying baptismal font of his exemplum virtutis. David’s repurposing of Christian imagery was so effective that it spawned the ‘Cult of Marat,’ with streets and towns named in his honour. Marat’s posthumous influence became so extreme that Robespierre attempted, unsuccessfully, to reintroduce elements of traditional religion in the form of the ‘Cult of the Supreme Being.’ This shift would lead to the removal of the painting from public view.

While all historical materials must be assessed with careful attention to historical accuracy, a profound skepticism must be engaged when evaluating David’s Marat.

The sheer depth of David’s artistic expression, combined with the defenseless posture of his subject, encourage the viewer to accept his version of events on first impressions. However, as the art historian Jörg Traeger observes, the painting is ‘not a reportage, but a political interpretation of the attack.’ Indeed, closer inspection reveals a deliberate and skillful work of historical fiction that brazenly replaces authenticity with agenda. David has employed a great deal of artistic licence to ensure a favorable and sympathetic depiction of his subject while simultaneously diminishing and disempowering the status of his killer. The most frequently cited omission is Marat’s graphic skin condition, which was his sole reason for being in the bath. For David, placing Marat in his bath serves to emphasise vulnerability, while his smooth skin tones accentuate his purity and saintliness. The note perched on the edge of Marat’s upturned wooden crate is an assignat, a form of currency issued by the French National Assembly during the revolution. It promises support to a recently widowed mother and her five children in an attempt to emphasise Marat’s ceaseless benevolence until the moment of his death. The inclusion of this letter within the painting must be questioned as it lacks any specific relevance to the death of Marat, 16.

LEFT: Figure 2 – Michelangelo’s Pietà (1498–99). Photograph by Stanislav Traykov. Used under CC BY 2.5 sw.
event being depicted. Such blatant character references serve only to reinforce the painting’s primary function as propaganda.

With respect to Marat’s assassin, Charlotte Corday, David has gone to great lengths to diminish her importance and tarnish her reputation. As political scientist Anne Norton observes, ‘the death of Marat is remembered not as Charlotte Corday’s act but as David’s painting.’ The most glaring omission is Corday herself. David’s decision to focus solely on Marat, rather than the entire scene of the murder, detracts from Corday’s importance and her glory. Corday’s absence appears all the more jarring when David’s work is compared with Paul Jacques Aimé Baudry’s 1860 revisionist painting, Charlotte Corday (see Figure 3). Baudry’s piece approaches the scene from a very different angle, both visually and politically. She is not invisible however in the Marat, as her name can be seen on the letter held in his left hand. This letter was written by Corday to function as a ruse to gain entry to see Marat under charitable pretenses. Like the assignat Marat has prepared for the widowed mother, Corday’s letter serves to emphasise his goodwill and charity. David exploits Corday’s letter to expose her duplicitous character despite the fact that the letter was never delivered to Marat. A further subjugation of Marat’s assassin involves the substitution of the real murder weapon, a six-inch ebony handled chef’s knife, for a smaller white-handled kitchen knife. Thus, the sturdy instrument of trade gives way to common cutlery and, by extension, Corday is demoted from professional killer to desperate housemaid. There is no mistaking the impact of so many fraudulent charges on David’s journalistic integrity. With historical hindsight however, each manipulation exposes both the artist’s motivations and intriguing insights into life in revolutionary France.

For historians, The Death of Marat is a highly significant and influential primary source. Part of its significance stems from the fact that it is a famous and widely recognised work of art. In consequence, scholars can derive insight from a wide range of responses to the piece. Half a century after its creation, the Marat had lost none of its potency as propaganda and once again fuelled the flames of revolutionary France. In the lead-up to the 1948 revolution, the poet and critic, Charles Baudelaire, proclaimed the painting to be ‘as historical and real as a novel by Balzac,’ and that ‘there is nothing trivial or ignoble about it.’ As bold and biased as the painting itself, Baudelaire strives to re-engage the Marat as a propagandistic weapon. Throughout history, David’s painting and its influence on Marat’s legacy has functioned as a barometer for revolutionary political upheaval.

David’s Marat is a dense, multifaceted primary source that succeeds both in capturing the historical verisimilitude of revolutionary France while simultaneously deceiving the viewer with a skillfully crafted historical fiction. As is the intention of political propaganda, David has taken every opportunity to skew the historical record in favour of his subject. Far from the grotesquely disfigured journalist whose poison pen sent thousands to their deaths, Marat lies in repose as the very embodiment of virtuous innocence. Despite all that is known about the true nature of Jean-Paul Marat and the circumstances of his death, David’s depiction draws sympathy in the staunchest of critics. However, like all propaganda, Marat’s benevolent, saintly depiction cannot be squared with the historical record. Instead we see David’s deceptions as the final gasps of the brutal Montagnard regime, fighting desperately against the reality of its rapidly deteriorating power. The Death of Marat is amongst the most famous and most fascinating primary sources from the French Revolution.

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