

**FANTASMAS QUE REJEITAM FALECER
OS EFEITOS DO REINADO DO TERROR E A SUA LIGAÇÃO COM
A FANTASMAGORIA**

**GHOSTS WHO REFUSE TO DIE
THE AFTERMATH OF THE REIGN OF TERROR AND ITS
RELATION TO THE PHANTASMAGORIA**

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RESUMO: O seguinte trabalho visa, principalmente, explicar os motivos que conduziram ao Reinado do Terror e esclarecer, essencialmente, o papel da Fantasmagoria como um fenómeno crucial que ajudou a reduzir o trauma e sofrimento induzidos por tal evento.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Fantasmagoria, terror, morte, violência.

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ABSTRACT: The following paper aims to explain the motives that led to the Reign of Terror and how was the Phantasmagoria a crucial phenomenon that helped reduce the stress and trauma induced by such event.

KEYWORDS: Phantasmagoria, terror, death, violence.

Introduction

This work focuses on the aftermath of the Reign of Terror – a very notable episode of the French Revolution – and its link to a very curious experience that goes by the name of the Phantasmagoria.

The current work is divided into two main parts.

The first part is more tangible. It deals with objective evidence and facts. In this way, it is provided an historical background explanation of the Reign of Terror by clarifying in what circumstances it happened, what were the events that led to this massacre and the social consequences that resulted from it.

In the second part, we focus on the Phantasmagoria. As this is a type of art, the information has a subjective touch to it, but it still maintains the truthful and accurate data needed to comprehend what exactly is this phenomenon.

Riots and uprisings take place when communities are not pleased with their current conditions. These types of disturbances more often than not lead to wars. Individuals want change, and sometimes extreme measures are put in action to achieve those desires. If we look at all the revolutions that have accompanied us through the years until now, we can all testify to that.

The Dark Side of the French Revolution

One of the most eminent historical moments in France is, without a shadow of a doubt, the French Revolution – the antecedents of this occasion were of such brutality that it impacted its people with great force.

Up until the 18th century, France was a country reigned by an absolutist ruling model² where its citizens were seen as mere slaves and not as citizens of a democratic state like nowadays. The reign of Louis XVI³ serves as an example of this situation. While he rules, the country drowns in an immense dissatisfaction, and the people are exasperated and unhappy. Living in a monarchy means living with strict rules and these meant, especially in those times in history, no freedom at all. There exists an increase in the social disparity which is aggravated by a huge economic crisis - a result of the wars France takes part in. Hunger and poverty prevail yet the strong will of the population makes blossom inside them a rebellious attitude.

The introduction of the new ideas of the enlightenment and the influence of the American Revolution only comes to put those emotions in action. They bind in the minds of the French the ideals of freedom and equality becoming, as a result, core motivations for the Revolution to finally unfold.

The Enlightenment was, in a very generalized and summarized way, an intellectual and philosophical movement that defended that reason as the major source of authority. It also advocated ideals like liberty, progress, separation between the church and the state and the implementation of a constitutional government. In this way, the ideals of the Enlightenment consisted in a solid opposition to the absolutist monarchy.

Each and every one of these significant matters and influences led to one representational moment. An action that went down and stayed in history: the storming of the Bastille⁴, a “great symbolic act which has been associated with the revolution ever since” (Breunig and Levinger, 2002: 13). This event was crucial in this period

² Absolutism, also known as absolute monarchy, is a form of government in which the monarch holds supreme autocratic authority. All powers are centralized on one ruler (the monarch) who is not restricted by written laws, legislature, or unwritten customs. Harris, Nathaniel (2009). Systems of Government Monarchy.

³ Louis XVI (August 23, 1754 – January, 21 1793) was the last King of France before the fall of the monarchy during the French Revolution. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Louis-XVI>

⁴ The Bastille was a fortress in Paris, known formally as the Bastille Saint-Antoine. It played an important role in the internal conflicts of France and for most of its history was used as a state prison. Retrieved from <https://artsandculture.google.com/entity/bastille/m0hhxf>

because it signified the end of the old regime and the triumph of the people over the absolutist impositions.

The Revolution was starting and the craving for freedom was increasing, and in this way, the Third Estate—consisting of the general French public—realizing they were massive in numbers, declares itself as the Sovereign National Assembly and sparks rebellions all over the country. But the internal peace between the individuals of the Assembly is short-lived as a rift gradually grew between the radical (Jacobins) and moderate members (Girondins)⁵.

In an unsuccessful try to counteract the Revolution, Louis XVI helps Prussia and Austria invade France. Conspiracies are brought to the surface and the names of the members of the royal family are in the center of them and so, they try to flee (Tackett, 2003: 473). The escape is futile, and the king is taken, stripped of his powers and accused of treason against his country. However, even when proof is presented before their eyes, the National Assembly acquits Louis XVI and maintains the Monarchy, against the Jacobin's wishes, claiming that the king, instead of escaping, was kidnapped⁶. Nevertheless, he is later executed guillotine at the Revolution Square.

Fearing that French's example would spread across lands, Austria, Prussia, the Netherlands, Spain, and England form the First Coalition⁷ against France. With tensions arising, the Jacobins assume power in this critical moment and expel the members of the Girondins⁸.

⁵ Retrieved from <https://www.sparknotes.com/history/european/frenchrev/summary/>

⁶ Retrieved from <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/boundless-worldhistory/chapter/constitutional-monarchy/>

⁷ The War of the First Coalition was a set of wars that several European Monarchies fought against Revolutionary France to avoid spreading the revolutionary ideas.

⁸ Retrieved from <https://www.sparknotes.com/history/european/frenchrev/summary/>

Marat⁹, Hébert¹⁰, Danton¹¹, Saint-Just¹² and Robespierre¹³ take control running the country through the Committee of Public Safety, responsible for the administration and external defense of the country, at first commanded by Danton, its creator. Below was the General Security Committee, which took care of internal security, and then the Revolutionary Court, which judged the opponents of the revolution in summary trials¹⁴.

⁹ Jean-Paul Marat (1743-1793) was a French physician, political theorist, and scientist most known as a radical journalist and politician of the French Revolution.

¹⁰ Jacques René Hébert (1757-1794) was a French journalist and the founder and editor of the extreme radical newspaper *Le Père Duchesne* during the French Revolution.

¹¹ Georges Jacques Danton (1759 – 1794) was "the chief force in the overthrow of the French monarchy and the establishment of the First French Republic" – as said by many historians.

¹² Louis Antoine Léon de Saint-Just (1767 – 1794) was a revolutionary, political philosopher, member and president of the French National Convention, a Jacobin club leader, and a major figure of the French Revolution. He was a close friend of Maximilien Robespierre and served as his most trusted ally during the period of Jacobin rule in the French First Republic. Saint-Just worked as a legislator and a military commissar, but he achieved a lasting reputation as the face of the Reign of Terror where he was named the Archangel of the Terror.

¹³ Maximilien François Marie Isidore de Robespierre (6 May 1758 – 28 July 1794) was a French lawyer and statesman who was one of the best-known and most influential figures of the French Revolution.

¹⁴ Retrieved from <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/boundless-worldhistory/chapter/the-reign-of-terror/>

The Reign of Terror

Maximilien de Robespierre is the man who leads one of the most gruesome episodes during the French Revolution. A gentleman that chooses bloodshed and terror to put an end to violence and to bring freedom to his country. The one person responsible for “The Reign of Terror” - an episode that lasted for about a period of eighteen months, approximately, from March 1793 to July 1794¹⁵.

As one can imagine, this occasion was dominated by fear and dread.

French citizens were subjected to an escalating series of restrictive measures. Freedoms of speech and movement were curtailed severely. Special ad hoc commissions and tribunals were granted broad mandates to arrest and try people suspected of counterrevolutionary dispositions. There was an expanded application of the death penalty. Executions by guillotine became a daily spectacle in many urban centers. By the end of it all, tens of thousands of citizens had been executed. (Steinberg, 2020: 18)

Robespierre’s efforts into blocking any type of blow to the cause of the Revolution are outstanding and they are supported by one unique Law - the Law of Suspects. This empowers local revolutionary committees to arrest “those who by their conduct, relations or language spoken or written, have shown themselves partisans of tyranny or federalism and enemies of liberty”¹⁶. It said the following:

1 – those who, by their conduct, associations, comments, or writings have shown themselves partisans of tyranny or federalism and enemies of liberty;

5– those former nobles, together with husbands, wives, fathers, mothers, sons or daughters, brothers or sisters, and agents of the émigrés, who have not constantly demonstrated their devotion to the Revolution. (Duvergier, 1793) ¹⁷

Maximilien Robespierre was overthrown and arrested by the National Convention in July 1794. At this date, the terror is finally over but this event has long lasting effects. People are stuck in limbo, like in a daze not quite knowing what to do and how to react, rightfully so.

If an event of this magnitude happened in the present, what would we do? On the contrary of what people might think, we would be encouraged to talk about our difficulties and our trauma. ¹⁸

¹⁵ Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/event/Reign-of-Terror>

¹⁶ Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/place/France/The-Reign-of-Terror#ref465231>

¹⁷ Duvergier, J. (1850). Collection complète des lois, décrets, ordonnances, règlements, et avis du Conseil d'Etat. Retrieved from <https://revolution.chnm.org/d/417>

¹⁸ Let’s consider a hypothetical situation presented by Ronen Steinberg: “Imagine that such an event took place in our day and age: What would its aftermath look like?” (Ronen, 2019: 18). Let us come to the present and truly reflect on it. Would we drown in

About two months after the fall of Robespierre, Robert Lindet, also known as Jean-Baptiste Robert Lindet - a senior member of the revolutionary government - argues that for the welfare of the people, leaning on forgetting is the best measure to achieve calmness and peace of mind. For the good of the people, that will be the solution (Steinberg, 2015: 3)¹⁹. Lindet says:

Let us reproach ourselves neither for our misfortunes nor for our mistakes [...] we have all been thrown pell-mell into the same galloping race. The Revolution has taken place, it is the work of everyone [...] it [the Revolution] has left many victims in its wake. Are you now going to authorize inquiries into each and every case? The welfare of the fatherland does not allow you to look back on the ruins that you have left behind. (Lindet, 1794)²⁰

Historian Ronen Steinberg, in his work, declares the following: “the repercussion of the Terror saw not forgetting but memory, not silence but many ways of talking about this difficult past: they formed associations that purchased the sites of mass graves of victims and built commemorative chapels” (Steinberg, 2015: 251).

Sully Prudhomme, a French poet and essayist, complemented this information by saying that key functionaries in the apparatus of the Terror are put on trial and their cases attract enormous public attention. Men of letters publishes accounts of the Terror and, in one instance, even a dictionary of its victims, is organized alphabetically and including such details as their age, locale, profession and alleged crimes (Prudhomme, 1796: 7).

The ghosts of the guilty and the innocent refuse to pass to the other side and choose to remain in people’s hearts and remembrances. One therapy method – if we can call it that – is put in action. It goes by the name of phantasmagoria.

This topic will be developed and explained in the next page.

our silence or heal our wounds by venting and letting out our true emotions? Like Ronen said on his work, we would be encouraged to talk about our difficulties and our traumas, numerous psychiatrists would come to the scene and “testimonies from victims would appear in the media for months and years after the event” (Ronen, 2019: 18). People wouldn’t shy away; they wouldn’t keep quiet. They would talk incessantly until their soul was healed. But regrettably, this scenario didn’t happen.

¹⁹ Retrieved from <https://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/aa/article/download/1489/1466/2868>

²⁰ Retrieved from <https://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/aa/article/download/1489/1466/28680000>

The Phantasmagoria

Beginnings, techniques, and purpose

Phantasmagoria is a word from the Greek *phantasma*, which means to “produce an illusion”. The word *agora* refers to the public spaces in Greek city states. In this way, phantasmagoria suggests something hallucinatory and sinister may happen in a particular spot.

Phantasmagoria is a visual show, hence the visual, and it uses lights and shadows to create entertainment as we know it.

Steinberg explains that:

Unlike modern totalitarian regimes, which tend to carry out the business of political repression in secret, the violence of the French revolutionaries took place in broad daylight, in the full gaze of the public. (Steinberg, 2015: 253)

So, the gory spectacle that takes place during the Reign of Terror is still freshly painted on people’s minds. They want to talk about it to relate to something and to heal their distress. The phantasmagoria shows are a way to keep the dead between the living and resurrect their memories.

Talking about delicate topics such as mortality, suffering and injustice sometimes may feel like a taboo. Forbidden to be discussed. It’s always better to remember the joyful moments instead of the wretched ones. We like to go on walks but not when the streets are covered in blood and the agonizing screams come out of the innocent’s mouths. Reality is cruel and difficult to deal with, especially when it’s wrong. In this way, the phantasmagoria was a way of dealing with unseen fears. But who created the phantasmagoria?

Theoretically, the phantasmagoria was created by Etienne-Gaspard Robert²¹, known as Robertson, in 1798. He himself makes this claim in the *Memoires*²² published in 1831 and 1833, but this is later unveiled as a lie. The mysterious figure, the genuine true inventor, is most probably Paul Philidor²³, also known as Philidor – his pseudonym.

Etienne-Gaspard Robert explains the following:

²¹ Étienne-Gaspard Robert (15 June 1763 – 2 July 1837), often known by the stage name of "Robertson", was a prominent Liégeois (now part of Belgium) physicist, stage magician and influential developer of phantasmagoria.

²² A book containing Robertson’s memories, bibliography, tactics, and influences.

²³ Paul Philidor was a magician, and a pioneer of phantasmagoria shows. His exact origins are unknown.

Pendant toutes les lenteurs qu'éprouvait l'examen de mon mécanisme et le rapport que devait être fait, je m'occupais activement de perfectionner une invention, dont j'avais entrevu les premiers moyens d'exécution à Liège. Je veux parler de la Fantasmagorie (...) Les connaissances puisées dans l'étude de la physique et des phénomènes de la lumière en particulier avaient converti depuis longtemps mes idées extravagantes de sorcellerie en recherches plus raisonnables d'effets fantastiques ; et le désir de créer des fantômes artificiels avait succédé à l'espoir de me trouver au milieu d'un chapitre entier de diables de bon aloi. Je dois confesser néanmoins que le hasard me donne les premières idées de fantasmagorie.²⁴ (Robert, 1927, 143: 196)

In the beginning, Philidor's shows are presented as "black art" or "natural magic" and included conjuring tricks and *automata*²⁵ (Seyfried, 1789). He never really "conjured any spirits" and regarded his shows by no means supernatural. They are considered by the public as "hallucination spectacles" that cause great feelings of uneasiness and anxiety. The rooms where the displays take place are pitch black excluding some candles here and there. The projectors that reveal the images of the ghosts were never seen which increased the belief that what they were manifesting was actually real and tangible.

Author Laurent Mannoni comments that:

When the lights in the auditorium went out, a ghost appeared on the screen, at first very small; it grew rapidly and seemed to move towards the audience (it could also be the other way around: the ghost moved away, diminishing in size). (Mannoni, 1996: 390)

The silence, sometimes accompanied by "metaphysical speeches" or the strains of a glass harmonica, gives an eerie ambience and a terrorizing feel. Things got more ethereal when the images of deceased people were used in these shows. The Illuminated pictures are projected not onto the traditional canvas screen but onto a curtain of smoke via mirror and soon, moving slides are incorporated to give realness to the show (Mannoni, 1996: 392).

²⁴ The translation of the affirmation is the following: "During the slow examination of my mechanism and the report that had to be made, I was actively engaged in perfecting an invention, the first means of which I had glimpsed in Liège. I wish to talk about the Phantasmagoria (...) The knowledge drawn from the study of physics and the phenomena of light in particular had long since converted my extravagant ideas of witchcraft into more reasonable research of fantastic effects; and the desire to create artificial ghosts had succeeded the hope of finding myself in the middle of an entire chapter of good-natured devils. I must confess, however, that chance gave me the first ideas of phantasmagoria." Free translation.

²⁵ According to the Cambridge dictionary, automata is (1) a mechanism that is relatively self-operating; (2) a machine or control mechanism designed to automatically follow a predetermined sequence of operations or respond to encoded instructions; (3) an individual who acts in a mechanical fashion He is an unfeeling automaton. Retrieved from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/pt/dicionario/ingles/automata>.

As Mannoni explains “the figure crossed the screen in all directions, they burst from the rear of the canvas and came towards us at astonishing speed and disappeared as suddenly” (*idem*: 393).

The combination of the moving lantern and the animated slide constitutes an essential step forward in the history of 'movement-related' projection (Mannoni, 1996). But this isn't all that is to it. Electric shocks are also used on the audience to stun them and give them the real phantasmagoric experience.

But what's more curious than this, is the involvement of painters in this phenomenon. What would they do on this occasion? Would they help repair slides in case of them deteriorating? None of that.

The true role of Phantasmagoria

The true role of the phantasmagoria can be read in the following advertisement made by Philidor:

Phantasmagoria ... Two representations a day, the first at six o'clock, the second at ten, when the theaters close. Note. People wishing to see particular representations are asked to give notice the day before: they can then ask for the apparition of any deceased or absent person of their acquaintance that they care to name.²⁶

As a replacement for having general images of people known by the public, the shows can get more intimate and personal. Individuals can see their deceased loved ones, finally, after all the pain they go through. This is a major breakthrough at the time, considering all the events that took place.

But something as traumatic as the Reign of Terror, surely, would cause a little bit of uneasiness. Watching people get beheaded on the guillotine is indeed a distressing and painful experience. Death, even in its simplest form, shakes the devil to the core. So why were people so entertained by these shows? How can they react so well when seeing the images of the people they know that were buried under the ground?

It is considered that there might exist three major reasons that explain the enormous captivation that citizens have over the phantasmagoria.

The first one is related to the rising interest in the supernatural. After millions of people pass away, the ones who were left behind can see these shows as a means to ‘contact’ their loved ones and see them again. So, here, the phantasmagoria will play a comforting role. People will come seeking solace.

They might have even believed the ‘magician’ would actually conjure spirits and that they were real, they were actually there. For instance, Étienne-Gaspard Robert²⁷ shows were so convincing, that police temporarily halted the proceedings, believing that Robertson has the power to bring Louis XVI back to life (Barber, 1989: 74).

So, in a sense, this could be one sentimental way of coping with the loss.

The second reason is linked to science. There exists a therapeutic technique named “Exposure Therapy” that involves exposing the target patient to the anxiety source to

²⁶ Affiches ..., no. 73 (14 March 1799): 1083

²⁷ Étienne-Gaspard Robert (1763 – 1837), also known by the stage name of "Robertson", was a prominent Liégeois physicist, stage magician and influential developer of phantasmagoria.

help them overcome their distress. In this case, people who went to the 'lantern shows' are able to confront their fear of death and the unknown. After getting so familiar with that ambience because of the Revolution, they have a whole new perspective about life and death.

The third reason is pure entertainment. This would involve having a really peculiar taste and distinct personality, considering the times they live in, but it would still be valid.

Conclusion

In summary, and as we can see from the study presented, the Reign of Terror plays one of the lead roles in the French Revolution. Its effects were of such trauma that the citizens didn't know, in a way, how to live again. In this context, the phantasmagoria is the solution. This concept is a way of bringing back the dead - to remember and cherish their memories. It brings comfort and entertainment; emotions sought by many in those horrible times, and it appears as a miracle.

After going through major breakthroughs, Paris is starting to develop, bringing with it the necessity of bigger and higher constructions - the rapid industrial development only comes to help this case. With so much modernity, architectural improvement, and growth there was only one-way Paris could show their newest luxury to the world.

According to Sandra Jatahy Pesavento, a Brazilian writer, historian and teacher, these exhibitions present themselves as manifestations of prestige and flashiness, where nations affirmed their economic, technological, and even cultural power, revealing their aspirations for progress (Pesavento, 1994).

The phantasmagoria also links with the universal expositions where they present a collection of created images, technically operated by projectors. With industrial development, we see there the projection of the ambitions of a government and a society with their desire for the future.

Paris saw the biggest and best Universal Exposition happen in 1889 with a highly successful international exhibition and one of the few world's fairs to make a profit. Its central attraction was, as one can imagine, the Eiffel Tower but this exposition was home for over eighty other structures on the Champ de Mars, including the impressive 1,452-foot-long Galerie des Machines by Ferdinand Dutert.

Phantasmagoria is a very polyvalent term and can be used metaphorically in various ways. Whether it is a psychological manner of facing unresolved trauma, whether it is a form of showing a society's ostentation, this concept came to stay.

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