

H-France Salon
Volume 11, Issue 20, #3

**Memory Avatars and Augmented Historical Reality
The French Revolution through its Commercial Spin-Offs**

**Martial Poirson
Université Paris 8**

In an era that can be characterized by the instrumentalization of the “national narrative” for political gain and by a historiography that favors popular trends as well as fictional representations, our historical awareness is uncovering new forms of mediation in a globalized culture marked by the digital era. These fictional representations are a result of creations in popular culture, artistic expression, or commercially-driven production, be it for mass consumption or for the luxury industry. This article seeks to define these “memory avatars”, the tangible creations of modern society’s production of objects, images, and fantasies associated, in this case, with the French Revolution. It underlines the paradoxical contribution of different media, material or immaterial, to the diffusion of a specific vision of history. This version of history, admittedly naïve and fantasized, is generally well-informed despite being irreverent, if not subversive, while exploiting a general enthusiasm for undermining the transmission of and adherence to the official historical discourse. Memory avatars thus constitute a privileged historiographical field of observation into the cultural unconscious that has been shaped by the myths and stereotypes associated with a version of history that innervates our media and politics.

In 2015 Playmobil marketed an action figure of Martin Luther: over a three-day period during a national shopping spree devoid of any religious fervor in Germany, over 34,000 replicas of the layman’s everyman preacher (*Gemeiner Mann*) were sold. Such novel mediations, borne from a time when history is laboring to deconstruct the national narrative in favor of a more globalized one that challenges the progress of identity politics, must be taken with a grain of salt. They lend scientific credence to popular trends and emotions¹, all while giving prominence to marginalized perspectives², historical awareness, within a globalized culture and in the digital era. These new mediations are just as much a result of popular culture as they are of artistic expressions and even of commercial production, destined for either mass consumption or the luxury market, which relies upon the growth of a real tourist economy. The historical reference appears in objects, in images and in fantasies, at the price of acknowledged anachronisms and misappropriations. This widespread vulgate results in a storytelling that contributes just as much as the official narrative and its pedagogical, political, and media outlets, as it does to the transmission of knowledge. This knowledge, despite lacking any authentication or certification by the accepted narrative, can nevertheless reflect a

¹ Alain Corbin, Jean-Jacques Courtine, Georges Vigarello (dir.), *Histoire des émotions*, Paris, Seuil, 2016, 3 vol.

² Patrick Boucheron (dir.), *Histoire mondiale de la France*, Paris, Seuil, 2017 ; Jeanne Guérout et Jean-Noël Jeanneney (dir.), *L’Histoire de France vue d’ailleurs*, Paris, Les Arènes, 2017 ; Jean-Noël Jeanneney (dir.), *Le Récit national. Une querelle française*, Paris, Fayard, 2017.

sense of history. The impact of these artefacts on the public sphere makes them indispensable barometers of public opinion.

Despite their irreverent or defiant messaging, what I will call *memory avatars* are in fact copies, mock-ups, or artefacts: texts, images, and objects created using various media including more complex, interactive interfaces that have become ubiquitous in the digital age. The rapport between video games and history, for example, stretches from the allusive use of a historical citation, true or fictive, to creating realistic reproductions of ancient objects or of authentic archives³. They contribute indirectly, if not serendipitously, to a collective-memory effort within a community that nonetheless marginalizes the work of commemorative agencies and other legitimate, cultural authorities. These secondary sources, considered unauthentic, should be able to gain favor with a historiography that seeks to question the significant distortions of the official historical narrative all while showing how it is received and appropriated by popular cultures. This historiography is part of an excavation of our values that strives to clarify the meaning of existence, authenticity, and uniqueness. It allegedly takes into account an “awareness of the present”⁴ as well as “contemporary mythologies”⁵. It provides insight into a “new form of capitalism” observable in the leisure and entertainment industry’s creation of collectable objects that personify certain “symbols of national identity”⁶ within an “artistic capitalism”⁷.

The idea of a memory avatar can be primarily understood as referring to a digital culture that is just as interested in historical knowledge as it is in exploiting visually-recreational potential. It can also be understood as a category of by-products inspired by historical periods, events, or persons. These avatars are created within a materialistic culture that is as preoccupied with producing everyday objects from popular culture as it is with producing original pieces meant for collectors seeking ostentatious uniqueness. They may also inspire the creation of an intangible cultural heritage ready to exploit the performing arts’ potential through re-enactments or historical plays such as those at the amusement park Le Puy-du-Fou which is celebrating its forty-year anniversary this year (2019). Even if the park’s mission remains accessible to the non-specialist, its Cinéscénie blends mainstream theatre, special effects, and illusion technology dedicated to the “memory region” defined by the contentious history between the Vendée region and the French Republic⁸.

Despite their seemingly whimsical nature these memory avatars are historically significant given that they contribute considerably to memory politics by reinforcing a historical subconscious.

³ Alyssa Sepinwall, *Slave Revolt on Screen: The Haitian Revolution in Films and Video Games* (Jackson, Miss: University Press of Mississippi, forthcoming)

⁴ Anne Coudreuse, *La Conscience du présent. Représentations des Lumières dans la littérature contemporaine*, Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2015.

⁵ Martial Poirson (dir.), *La Révolution française et le monde d’aujourd’hui : mythologies contemporaines*, Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2014.

⁶ Luc Boltanski et Arnaud Esquerre, « La collection, une forme neuve du capitalisme. La mise en valeur économique du passé et ses effets », *Les Temps modernes* n°679, 2014/3, p. 5-72 (ici p. 8).

⁷ Gilles Lipovetsky et Jean Serroy, *L’Esthétisation du monde. Vivre à l’âge du capitalisme artiste*, Paris, Seuil, 2013.

⁸ Jean-Christophe Martin et Charles Suaud, *Le Puy-du-Fou en Vendée. L’histoire mise en scène*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 1996.

The colossal productions surrounding the Bicentennial celebrations of the French Revolution is a particularly useful case in point in studying this spirited approach to history. In the case of historical minutia it is useful to consider these seemingly insignificant, anecdotal, or disposable line of bizarre, out-of-place objects that are tangentially inspired by historical references that occupy a dominant space in both the public and private domains.

Eschewing any resemblance or aura of the original, or supposedly original object, their brazen artificiality in constitution, function, or public reception, differentiates them from any trace, vestige, or teaching passed along through traditional institutions.

Our investigation here does not take into account any heritage collections, whether private or public, but rather focuses on commemorative, commercial, decorative, and recreational productions. It will emphasize the absurdity of working within a seemingly heterogenous ensemble that is, in fact, constituted by blatant artificiality and whose seemingly programmed obsolescence defies any efforts at collection, conservation, or especially, investment. Rather it requires that collectors, conservationists, researchers, and teachers rethink how they operate.

A history critical of “untruths”

The speculative production of disparate objects, operating on the margins of scholarly learning, though not ignorant of history, seemingly defies any historical logic and proposes a counter-model to the antique object. To the same degree that heritage collections, whose value is determined by their authenticity, uniqueness, integrity, or longevity demonstrate a notable devotion to the object’s source be it substantiated or not, the memory avatars inspired by these objects are characterized by their artificiality, serialization, alterability, and the instability of their relationship to minutia histories insofar as these are understood as second rate substitutes to history. The way in which these objects are used, or consumed, further differentiates them. The antique object’s value can be established by way of its intrinsic (measured or not) or natural (constitutive of the object) value that is individually or collectively determined. Memory avatars, by way of subjectification, derive their value transitively and transactionally. As is customary within popular cultures, these avatars are often represented in ironic and casual, if not auto-parodic ways based on presumably shared references.

At first glance these avatars reveal a duality between conforming to historical stereotypes that inspire their production and the performative efficiency of their attempts at perverting social conventions. At a time when mainstream history is undergoing a process of democratization in a commercial and mediatized forum that may reframe the “national history”⁹ it may be useful to consider an abridged version of history. And yet establishing a genealogy of basic events linked to the French Revolution implies revealing the numerous falsehoods associated with this “fantasy machine”¹⁰ and “myth”¹¹, as well as retracing the troubling persistence and resilience of these “lost treasure’s”¹² historical stereotypes. Doing so requires a three-pronged approach: reframing the meaning of historical references; deterritorializing perspectives related to the national narrative; and democratizing scholarly expertise for the ordinary,

⁹ Jean-Clément Martin, *La Machine à fantasmes. Relire l’histoire de la Révolution*, Paris, Vendémiaire, 2012.

¹⁰ Jean-Clément Martin, *La Machine à fantôme*, *op. cit.*

¹¹ Sophie Wahnich, *La Révolution française n’est pas un mythe*, Paris, Klincksieck, « Critique de la politique », 2017.

¹² Sophie Wahnich (dir.), *Histoire d’un trésor perdu. Transmettre la Révolution française*, Paris, Les Prairies Ordinaires, 2013.

everyday people who are otherwise marginalized in the official historiography as well as the institutional politics of memory. It means defining the scope of our investigation to include the creation of a political-media discourse, as well as popular culture, and even the creative process.

A deliberate merchandising of history

Historical referencing of the French Revolution may seem easy, when it is devoid of any real historical substance, as evidenced through the mass production of commemorative memorabilia for the Bicentennial that became reasonably-priced, tourist-oriented conveyors for remembrance: items of clothing (t-shirts decorated with archived images or period paintings, (un)verified famous quotes, bags, gloves, umbrellas, fans, ties, aprons), toys for children and adults (card games or board games such as “The goose of the Revolution” or the “The sans-culotte”, figurines to be assembled or painted, and dolls), objects for interior decoration (posters, statues) or for daily use (dishes, stamps, medals, tea towels), and even foodstuffs such as “camembert de 1791”. These objects place the Revolution within a shared, everyday culture whose merchants blur or efface the polemical issues surrounding the Revolution in favor of celebrating its legacy of human and civil rights. More an ersatz avatar than a real one, the derivative products sublimate any contentious dimension of the revolutionary allusion while losing sight of any “sensible history within observable history”¹³.

Such oddities, stemming from profit-driven marketing and merchandizing, are valuable in that they provide insight into an ensemble of ironic, parodic, or even irreverent uses of history. Jim Henson’s muppet, Miss Piggy, engenders one such example when she dresses as Marie Antoinette by donning a crinoline and a tall, white wig. Another example is the quirky resin statue of “Marie Catoinette”, a personification of the queen in a feline appearance¹⁴ that echoes certain zoomorphic caricatures of the revolutionary era. They arrogantly defy the Marie-Antoinette Barbie doll¹⁵, a three-dimensional rendering of Vigée le Brun’s portrait¹⁶, whose price varies with the complexity of the doll: the basic model retails at 249 dollars whereas the most intricate models cost several thousand dollars. A label and a brand that serves as a personal investment for some, and a speculative one for others, the Queen-avatars are objects of obsession that transcend social classes and national cultures.

These disparate objects are also the converging point of a collective imagination and especially a semantic shortcut that facilitates the archeology of offensive appropriations of the French Revolution within a globalized mainstream culture. This is evidenced by the ambivalent iterations of the Queen of France in the United States. At times she is subject to paradigms belonging to Queer culture, if not revisited through the lens of a revival sado-masochism or porn-chic, and at other times presented as Teen Queen as evidenced by the work of luxury brands such as Christian Louboutin who launched a limited-edition collection of 36 pairs of shoes in tribute to the Queen. This collection is on sale exclusively in Dubai, Gipsy Factory, Juicy Couture, and Nina’s. Other items include fans, plates, silverware,

¹³ Sophie Wahnich, *Les Émotions, la Révolution française et le présent*, Paris, Éditions du CNRS, 2009.

¹⁴ *Marie Catoinette*, ERTL Collectibles, « The Cat Hall of Fame », 2011.

¹⁵ Marie-Antoinette Barbie® Doll, Women of Royalty™ Series, modèle n° 53991, série limitée (2003), Mattel : <http://www.barbiecollector.com/shop/doll/Marie-Antoinette-barbie-doll-53991>

¹⁶ Celui de 1778 conservé au Kunsthistorisches Museum de Vienne.

chandeliers, crochet necklaces, paper dolls to dress, porcelain, wigs, costumes, bedside lamps, make-up cases, lingerie, perfume, pendants, labels, bookmarks, mouse pads, calendars, and pastries. As arbitrary as these commercial exploits may seem, they allow us to dialogue with history by highlighting its consistencies as well as its discrepancies with reality. In doing so they appropriate the pamphleteer culture and the anti-monarchical caricature by way of frivolity and even sexually predatory allusions for which these objects are a sort of extended metaphor if not a metonymy. Advertising also fully exploits the historical reference as it did with “Marie Antoinette” tea in 2009: “a bucolic walk to the Petit Trianon. A delicious afternoon tea for a romantic afternoon snack. That’s the Ladurée spirit!”

Still the conservation surrounding the study of these memory avatars, relevant in understanding a cultural subconscious of history, is problematic from the way in which they are collected to their valuation: how does one preserve perishable foods such as the cupcakes “Let them eat Cakes”, the Head Pops (lollipops in effigy to the decapitated queen) or perfumes inspired by a particular vision of Marie-Antoinette’s luxurious lifestyle? How is it possible to expose the plethoric and dematerialized production of digital cultures other than by screenshots, photograms, or photomontages that do not capture the algorithms, the mediums for sharing, sharing itself, and enrichment? How can visitors use toys such as models that must be assembled and painted, animated figurines, or even more so online video games?

Incompatible with museographic conservation these avatars constitute a new typology. There are several categories of revolutionary avatars. The first of these are the commemorative products circulated by the public authorities during the Bicentennial such as the iterations of Marianne (stamps, busts, coins, statues) or the limited-edition posters of the Declaration of the Rights of Women. Some of these carried a strong symbolic legacy such as the “Cuvée des Sans-Culottes” (Registre national des marques n°1501730) or the “Sang des Sans-Culottes” representing revolutionary groups in arms, or especially the “bière des Sans-Culottes” which plays on a series of ambiguous and risqué allusions. The next category consists of products derived from the mass marketing of cultural industries, such as film companies, and the release of biopics or heritage fiction (Heritage Film as was the case during the frenzy associated with the release of Sophia Coppola’s 2006 film *Marie Antoinette*).

The third consists of consumer products distributed worldwide, and particularly in Japan and the United States. These products include children’s toys (dolls, illustrated books, Epinal images, figurines, fan magazines), comics and crime novels portraying the women of the Revolution as serial killers, or, on the contrary, as luxury products such as cosmetics, food products, and clothing accessories (macabre and sexist Halloween costumes in addition to haute couture). Fourthly and finally there are the products embraced by subcultures, counter-cultures, or anti-establishment artistic expressions such as graffiti, tattoos, or, on an entirely different level, advertising which, in its own way, also misappropriates and reinvigorates gender stereotypes.

Some of these categories may overlap, as evidenced by the tasting tribute organized by the pastry chef Frédéric Vaucamps. This tasting was organized in honor of the activists of the Counter Revolution under the Directory and the emblem “Aux Merveilleuses” and which is based on a curious twisting of gender: Frédéric Vaucamps finds himself so clearly in the novelty of the *Incroyables et des Merveilleuses* that the name on the sign was quickly changed to the masculine. Furthermore the separation between authentic object and avatar is not always as clear as it may seem. This is the case of the acquisition of the bathtub in which

Marat was supposedly assassinated by the Musée Grévin in 1886 with the purpose of creating a living tableau in the form of wax mannequins inspired by David's painting.

A fictional history that is both contributory and collaborative

In addition to this typology of objects we find more composite products, inspired by interactive experiential protocols, from a scale model of the guillotine called "The Chamber of Horrors – La Guillotine" with its magnetic head mechanism, to the pop-off head Marie-Antoinette action figure whose red dress, when removed, reveals a white shirt such as the one she wore when ascending to the scaffold. Other examples include the Assassin's Creed – Unity video game as well as the numerous information-sharing websites which constitute an entirely fresh field of investigation for historians within a wider "dictionary war".

Lady Oscar, a transgender, transcultural, and transhistorical hero of Riyoko Ikeda's famous shojo manga entitled *The Rose of Versailles* (*Berusaifu no Bara*), initially published in May 1972, is a matrix figure that exists on the margins of material and digital cultures. Since its original release this manga has spread to multiple media (comics, cartoons, musical comedy, rock opera, and cinema thanks to Jacques Demy), flooding the market with everyday consumer products that have helped it gain in popularity amongst new and old fans alike. Showing pride in their "favorite mankaka", they reaffirm their "monomania" on several, dedicated sites. This moment marks a turning point as the avatar's private and intimate vocation is voided: advances in digital technology have blurred the separation between intimacy and externality as fans can share resources and constitute a community around customized objects, images, and shared experiences.

Case in point is the development of a "new folklore" enabled, or at least amplified, by the emergence of data-sharing websites allowing users to share and exchange avatars by resituating them in the serial perspective that initially inspired their creation. This is accomplished through a culture of visual citation as evidenced by David's aforementioned painting *The Death of Marat* or *Marat Assassinated* (1793): the deceased tribune in his bathtub is personified, in turn, by Mister Bean, Darth Vader, Obama, Superman, and Lady Gaga. Blurring the boundaries between public and private, numerous blogs have been rebaptized "marie-internet" whereas collaborative practices have thrust the Queen's "black and pink legend" into an unprecedented limelight serving as a testimonial to the universalization of the French Revolution by way of a culture of feeling and of image, but also of music and of text.

These digital cultures can capture, in real time, the spontaneous productions of anti-establishment cultures by exposing, for example, a series of images created in reaction to the theme of the "hooligans" of 1789 which inspired a sort of graffiti of declarations in support of social movements inscribed on the walls of the capital. On Claude Guillon's blog, "the Revolution and us" he pays tribute to these militant practices in the public sphere. Here again the memory avatar consists of a series of concurrent reactions that are not intended to be shared outside of their initial context or absent their framework of expression. More generally the profusion of digital avatars symbolizes an augmented historical reality that has morphed into the predominant expectation of digital natives.

An oriented immersive participation

The rise of new communication and information technologies and the development of intangible and collaborative heritages finds within the video game a privileged yet controversial battlefield. The eighth installment of the action-adventure video game *Assassin's Creed – Unity* spans the period from 1789 to 1794 and resurrects the figures of Charlotte Corday, Théroigne de Méricourt, and Marie Tussaud alongside purely fictional characters. Designed by Ubisoft, and under the counsel of historical advisors, this video game is set against a backdrop of Paris during the Revolution. The script is based on the redemption of the main character, Arno Victor Dorian, who saves Elisa from the guillotine with the help of his “Phantom Blade”. His investigation leads him to believe that the murderer plays a central role in the Revolution and to organize the “union” opposing the Terror’s revolutionary militia. Designed for new-generation consoles capable of processing and projecting 5,000 on-screen gamers simultaneously, and intervening massive crowds, the design of the game is based on three pillars: navigation, movement of characters, and fighting. It gives gamers wide berth in terms of their choices and decisions during their missions, thus stimulating their imagination once inside the largest digitized city ever conceived. Irrespective of their portrayal of the Revolution’s violence, these avatars revive a living heritage of ideological strategies that may incite the heirs of the Revolution’s revolutionary fighters to emancipatory action, or fuel the retrospective terror of historical events, if not offer a critical and ironic vision of the Revolution.

Planned obsolescence, an extension of history’s framework

The final category of avatar, in the meaning attributed to this term by digital cultures, places the object at the center of reflection, not as a finished product but as a process of continuous creation likely to be part of a relational aesthetic. It consists of creating new protocols for immersive and even emersive devices alike, which will invite the visitor, spectator, or collector to interact with the collection. If the expertise of museums and contemporary art galleries is a given, history museums still have a Copernican evolution to undergo as they struggle to integrate living, participatory, and evolutionary material into their collections. While it is clear that any collection is in part a mutilated form of object conservation, insofar as they are exempt from the social, cultural, economic, or political uses which motivated their creation, anticipated their public reception, and even determined their programmed obsolescence, the question arises, even more acutely, with regard to memory avatars.

Situated in the grey zone between market and state, or in other words between consumerist mercantilism and active-citizen pedagogy, memory avatars attest to the influence of objects on the conscious which, in turn, significantly impacts our relationship to history. Given the apparent incongruity of intentionally unusual objects and deliberately fictitious creations, the scientific community has an entirely new field of investigation that is far from its usual epistemological foundations. The collecting, inventorying, and use of these avatars which can be characterized as having both a limited lifespan and disputed legitimacy, by virtue of their ambivalence and constitutive ambiguity, ultimately appears to constitute a new field of expertise and interdisciplinarity. It is likely to reinvigorate historiography while stimulating more recent disciplines such as film studies, performing arts, design, or the digital humanities without losing sight of its political and ideological dimension. This new investigation into an evanescent and volatile domain offers a deep look into the politics of memory borne from the patrimonial fervor related to the social and cultural imagination of the French Revolution within the framework of globalization. However, while the interest for some revolutionary

imagery is now obvious, making the production of cultural and recreational industries a serious business, few are still grounded in scientific research on cultural avatars.

And yet some institutions devoted to conservation are timidly opening up to this minutiae history that is becoming more popular in some museums. At a time when pop rock star Lady Gaga, in her series of “GAGA portraits” at the crossroads of performance and video performance and in the context of her highly mediatized “Artpop” album, is immortalized in the posture of David’s *The Death of Murat* (1793), and the Louvre Museum in 2003 gave Robert Wilson carte blanche in his on-screen composition, it seems that the Revolutionary allusion is alive and well in our cultural unconscious. It blurs the contours of our relationship with history, with the present, as well as with the future as it shakes the foundations of our cultural, aesthetic and ideological codes, all while challenging researchers who must reinvent its objects, methods, and approaches.

Martial Poirson
Paris 8 University

H-France Salon

ISSN 2150-4873

Copyright © 2019 by the H-France, all rights reserved.