

Durnin on Brown (2017)

Brown, Marilyn R. *The Gamin de Paris in Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture: Delacroix, Hugo, and the French Social Imaginary*. Routledge Research in Art History, 2017, pp. ix + 152, ISBN 978-1-138-23113-9

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The *gamins de Paris* were street urchins, orphaned or abandoned in the revolutions of the nineteenth century, their parentage aggregated as they were labeled *enfants du peuple* or *enfants de la patrie*. Though marginalized in scholarship, the *gamin* (usually, but not always, male) was frequently central in depictions of the street life and revolutions of nineteenth-century France, in art and literature. Using apt examples drawn from a variety of sources, and with illustrations in color and black and white, Marilyn Brown shows how the changing depiction of the *gamin* reflects thought about the French body politic.

The predecessors of the *gamins de Paris* as revolutionary actors were the “child hero-martyrs” of what the early nineteenth century called the Great Revolution of 1789. Joseph Bara and Agricol Viala were two boys elevated to honorary manhood by their heroic deaths in the revolutionary army, the former in Jacques-Louis David’s celebrated painting of 1794. This elevation accompanied certain transformations in nineteenth-century family dynamics: with reforms in child labor laws, education, and health, the state took on some of the welfare concerns and regulated some of the duties traditionally associated with the father. Father and son met on the level ground of fraternity, which, as Brown points out, matched the republican idea “that paternity was linked vertically to hierarchy ... whereas fraternity led horizontally to equality and cooperation” (17). *Gamins* appear in various settings, where their dress, social group, and revolutionary posture—real or playful—identify them as *enfants du peuple*, *enfants de la patrie*, or both, the terms reflecting the evolving political understanding of the role of the body politic in relation to its children.

Focusing on the *gamin de Paris* during the Revolution of 1830, Brown closely studies Eugène Delacroix’s *Liberty Leading the People* (1830) and notices, for example, that the *gamin* is a step ahead of Liberty, and thus leads the way. Delacroix’s composition is “much more confrontational than that of other pictures at the time” because the viewer is at eye-level with the dead, “as the combatants move over the barricades into our space” (27). Ahead of the action, the viewer is placed in the future, an *avant-garde* space. Brown points out the sexual awareness exhibited in another boy’s gazing upward at Liberty’s naked breasts.

Brown looks at so-called panoramic literature from the 1830 revolution to the years following 1848. These popular commercial texts about street characters provided encyclopedic sources for writers such as Balzac, Hugo, Zola, and Eugène Sue, as well as for painters. The publications themselves—the *physiologies* franchise and the enormous enterprise of *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes*, published by Léon Curmer in 423 installments—were frequently illustrated by noted caricaturists, such as Charlet, Daumier, Gavarni, and Markl. The ever-present *gamin* had, by this time of population growth, become a “potentially problematic social type,” but in the classificatory development of the *physiologies*, “description and classification could become means to control anxiety about social and cultural difference” (54). Numerous illustrations of Sue’s sinister character of the cunning hunchback Tortillard, for instance, seemed to reinforce principles of social determinism.

Though not as celebrated in visual culture as he had been after the Revolution of 1830, the *gamin de Paris* is still present during the Second Empire and the Commune. Brown skillfully describes Charles Nègre’s photograph *Chimneysweeps Walking* (December 1851), noting how his granular technique and the addition of pencil shading to the image give gritty mobility to the young *ramoneur*: “laterally cast shadows give a sense of both desolation and forward movement” (74).

In her discussion of Gavroche, Brown acknowledges the influence Hugo’s creation has had on the construction of the type of the Paris urchin, but notes its origin in the panoramic texts of Victor Fournel and Jules Janin, and the illustrations of Nicolas-Toussaint Charlet. Though formed, or rather recycled, from earlier types, Hugo’s *gamin* is more innocent, and a victim (77). Brown recalls the Saint-Denis scene from *Les Misérables*, where Gavroche is singing, “blithely at the top of his lungs,” what Hugo calls the urchin’s own form of poetry, aligning himself with this “*gamin* of letters” (78).

Brown is especially good on Édouard Manet, complex *flâneur* and, as his friends observed, himself a *gamin* of sorts, affecting the Parisian *gamin*’s drawl and mocking expression (80). *Boy with Cherries* (1859) shows Manet’s practice of staging his models in costume. The schoolboy fez indicates an *enfant de la patrie*, but the boy subject himself was a tragically neglected *enfant du peuple* (86). In Manet’s lithograph *The Balloon* (1862), an “impressionistic” panorama of the annual *Fête de l’Empereur*, Napoleon’s pretensions are deflated by two *gamins*, one crippled boy in the center of the scene, the other climbing

a greased pole, a *mat de cocagne*, hoping to retrieve a dangling prize.

As the Third Republic attempted improvements in the treatment of children, the *gamin* came to be represented less as a political agent at the barricades and more as “a powerless victim in need of the state’s social welfare or middle-class philanthropy” (96). He still has a complex place in the social imaginary, however. Zola’s *Germinal* (1885) and *Le Ventre de Paris* (1873) bring a Naturalist focus to the problems of child labor and the need for education. The child-martyr appears again in Jean-Joseph Weerts’s painting *Death of Bara* (1883)—to educate viewers about citizenship and patriotism in post-Commune France—and as an exhausted violet seller in Fernand Pelez’s painting. But the *gamin* does appear in entrepreneurial roles, such as the healthy, energetic newspaper boy in Jules Cheret’s poster for Paul Féval’s novel *L’Ogresse* (1874). Ironically, considering his origins among a “lower-class ‘race’ of the people fighting for freedom in recurring revolutions” (108), he also appears as a white colonizer in Louis Boussenard’s colonialist novel *Le Tour du monde d’un gamin de Paris* (1894).

Gavroche is prominent on theater posters across the world. Marilyn Brown’s shrewd and intelligent book leads us to pay greater attention to the complex history behind the representation.

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