**Language and Culture Show and Tell: French**

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**Transcript**

**Introduction**

**Slide 1**

Hi everyone! My name is Thibaut Raboin, and I’ve prepared this session with my colleague Marie Fournier. We both teach in the French department at the School of European Languages, Culture and Society.

**Slide 2**

Today we are going to look at a print by Scottish painter and caricaturist **Isaac Cruickshank** that belongs to the UCL Museum of Art.

First we will talk about the medium of caricature and present the artist, Isaac Cruickshank; we will then use the print to introduce you to some French vocabulary and to French pronunciation; finally we will look at the print itself and place it in its historical context.

This print, entitled ***French Happiness, English Misery***, dates from 1793 and belongs to the tradition of satire. Now, do you know what satire is?

*[wait a couple of seconds]*

**Slide 3**

Let’s have a look in the online Cambridge dictionary:

<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/satire>

*[read definition, drawing particular attention to the highlighted elements]*

‘a way of [criticizing](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/criticize) [people](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/people) or [ideas](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/idea) in a [humorous](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/humor) way, [especially](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/especially) in [order](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/order) to make a [political](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/political) [point](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/point)’

Cruickshank’s print compares the English and the French through two contrasting sections, which was quite common at the time. Because of the way it represents the subject, it can also be described as **caricature**.

**So, what is a caricature?**

**Slide 4**

The word ‘caricature’ derives from the Italian word *caricare*,which means 'to load', 'to surcharge' (with details, that is) and therefore to ‘exaggerate’. In art, a ‘caricature’ refers to a painting, a drawing or a print that exaggerates or distorts the features and characteristics of the subject in order to mock it and / or criticise it.

If we take a quick look at Cruickshank's print, we can see, for instance, that the features of the characters are all exaggerated: the French are not just thin, they are emaciated; the British, on the contrary, are all rather fat.

[*insert print*]

Although by no means new, satire developed and became very popular the 18th century, a period which is sometimes referred to as ‘the Golden Age of British satire’. Even though artists needed to be careful about not being too disrespectful of the King or other important people, there was, at the time, a relative freedom of expression.

**Slide 5**

An example of a famous, slightly later French caricaturist is **Honoré Daumier** (1808-1879). Have a look at these 2 pictures. According to you, why do they classify as ‘caricatures’?

<https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1918-0511-4>

[https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8414738f](https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark%3A/12148/btv1b8414738f)

[*wait a few seconds*]

Ok, let’s have a look together.

On the first print, *Monsieur Barthe* (1833), the natural features of the French minister are extremely exaggerated in a comical way; on the second print, *Les Poires* (1831), Daumier gradually distorts the judge’s features to portray him as a pear and turn him into a grotesque character.

So, although caricature aims to amuse people, its satirical nature is uppermost, which is why it has long been used as a method to denounce political or social problems such as corruption, inequalities etc.

The genre is still very widely used nowadays in the press to comment on current issues, criticise and foster debate. Recently some particularly controversial caricatures have generated a debate over the freedom of expression.

Most caricatures in the 18th century were drawings or prints, which were very easy to circulate. Besides, they were very accessible (people did not need to know how to read in order to understand them), and were therefore a very efficient way of spreading information -- and, of course, criticising policies, ideas and people.

**The artist**

[*other prints by Cruickshank*]

**Slide 6**

Isaac Cruickshank (1764-1811) was one of the leading caricaturists of his time; he was known in particular for his political and social satire. Most of his topics were linked to contemporary British issues but he also did caricatures mocking the ideals of the French Revolution -- as in the print we are looking at today. Many of his prints are now in the British Museum, just next door to UCL -- and the UCL Art Museum is fortunate enough to have a few too, like the ones you can see here.

Before we analyse Cruickshank’s print together, let’s take a look at some French vocabulary.

**Difference in pronunciation between French and English**

**Slide 7**

Quite of few of the words we have been -- or will be -- using are actually the same in French and in English -- they usually come from Latin. For instance:

Caricature

Revolution

Satire

Art

Fruit

But if you are learning French, you must be careful as the pronunciation is not the same...Listen:

Caricature

Révolution

Satire

Art

Fruit

We won’t really talk about gender here as you will cover this in some of the other sessions -- but we also have a masculine (words in orange) and feminine (words in green) gender in French. No neuter, though...

You might also have noticed - or know - that in French accents are used to indicate how to pronounce certain vowel sounds.

**Slide 8**

For instance: the letter E has 3 different pronunciations according to whether it is used with or without an accent:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| With a ‘grave’ accent (È) or a circumflex accent (Ê) | it reads /È/, /Ê/ | bi**è**re (beer) |
| With an ‘acute’ accent (É) | it reads /É/  | r**é**volution |
| And with no accent (E) | it reads /E/ when it is in the middle of a word... ...but it is silent when at the end of a word | gr**e**nouille (frog) |
|

So, how would you read this word (meaning ‘window’): ‘fenêtre’? and ‘table’ (meaning…’table’)?

[*wait a couple of seconds before reading them*]

**Slide 9**

And actually, most final consonants are also silent letters in French:

Chat (cat)

Rat (rat)

Souris (mouse)

Blanc (white)

Vent (wind)

**Analysis of the print**

**Slide 10**

Let’s now return to the print. This picture is full of details that tell us a lot about the criticisms that the French Revolution was receiving from across the Channel.

**Historical context**

**Slide 11**

An important aspect of the French Revolution is the way it is often represented as a new beginning: not only did the Revolution change the institutions of monarchy, the laws, or how people related to each other, it also aimed at a profound cultural reinvention.

For example, some people decided to name their children after flowers or animals instead of Christian names: some girls were called Rose (rose), Tulipe (tulip) or Jonquille (daffodil); and some boys were called Jasmin (jasmine - which is a masculine noun in French), Sureau (elderflower) or even Chou-fleur (cauliflower)! Likewise, during the Revolution, a new calendar was created, Year I being 1792. This was a rapid, massive transformation of many aspects of daily life. But precisely, many critics in England thought that prosperity was not achieved through such rapid changes, but through a slow evolution.

**Slide 12**

Cruikshank’s print was made in 1793, during the most violent time of the Revolution called the Terror, which featured regular executions of alleged traitors to the Revolution, including many people who had been involved in the first years of the Revolution.

In this other print from UCL’s special collections (*Nous mangerons le monde et les Rois se tairont*, which, translated literally means ‘We’ll eat the world and Kings will go quiet’), you can see a henchman of the Terror eating the world next to a pile of skulls of the revolutionaries killed by the terror who are named on the tombstone.

**French Happiness, English Misery**

**Slide 13**

Let’s now look at the print in detail and see if we can spot criticisms aimed at the Revolution. The title is ironic and should obviously be understood the other way around...Can you spot examples of the misery brought to the French people by the Revolution?

*[wait a few seconds]*

**Slide 14**

Let’s go through a few together.

We can see:

* the famished Frenchmen fighting over a frog, their miserable clothing, the expired cat on the floor and rats running amok, the broken water urn, and the dead bird in the cage. Compare them to the well-fed characters on the English side.

There is also:

* the crucifix on the wall, which has a hanged man’s rope around its neck (whereas on the English side, there is a bible on the mantelpiece). The anticlericalism of the Revolution was seen as extreme and immoral, and it was thought the people needed the Church to guide them.

And:

* through the window, we can notice “the son of an aristocrat” being killed in a horrible scene. The Revolutionaries believed that aristocrats were “the enemy” of the people, but the print clearly implies that they were in fact innocent victims of the Revolution.

Finally (although we could isolate many more details of course):

* on the windowpane, there are what was called ‘**assignats’**: this was a type of paper money printed by the Revolutionary government, but this money quickly depreciated and was worth nothing. It aims to show that the Revolution also failed on the economic level.

All in all the message here is quite clear: prosperity comes not from Revolutions and radical change, but from conservatism. Everything that is depicted as good on the British side of the picture, from the peaceful landscape in the background to the praise to God and to the King on the side, symbolises and praises unchanging, tried-and-tested traditions.

This is all for today. We hope you have enjoyed the session.

**Slide 15**

If you want to know more about caricature or see other examples, you can check the following links:

The UCL Art museum has a nice teaching on French Revolution:

<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/museums-static/obl4he/frenchrevolution/1_reunion_de_trois_ordres.html>

You can look at examples of caricatures on the British Museum and on the Cartoon Museum websites as well as on the website of the satirical magazine Punch:

<https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/term/x12592>

<https://www.cartoonmuseum.org/collection>

<https://www.punch.co.uk/index/G0000Uiv3S1UFh5o>