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Understanding the Field of Waterloo: Viewing Waterloo and the Narrative Strategies of the Panorama Programmes

The Waterloo panoramas, which were exhibited for weeks and months at a time as well as several years after the battle on 18 June 1815, accentuated the finale on the field of Waterloo and highlighted the human cost of the French Napoleonic wars. This article, which is on the viewing experience of Waterloo in early nineteenth-century panoramas, evaluates the narrative techniques of the panorama programmes and analyses how they address and involve spectators. Pursuing a detailed analysis of the narrative techniques employed in the programmes, I challenge the idea that visitors of a panorama were fully immersed and imagined to be part of the scene, and, therefore, unable to look or judge for themselves.

Except for the narrative programmes, only preparatory sketches for the Waterloo panoramas have survived; visitors' accounts are rare. Writing about the panoramas, Oliver Grau notes that images of atrocities were "a magnet for the voyeuristic gaze of some", suggesting that the perceived danger had a sublime effect.¹ Phil Shaw, who has worked extensively on representations of the battle as well as images of suffering in the Romantic period, argues that in pictures of war, poses and attitudes of soldierly virtues outweighed representations of carnage.² Shaw does not think that the visual alone could control responses to the idea of war, but he focuses on the visual as a means to train or prepare British audiences. Grau, on the other hand, claims that the audience's "knowledge of the artificiality of the image" has been underestimated.³ Applying Grau's critique to the discussion of the Waterloo panoramas, this article identifies responses to the viewing experience of the battle of Waterloo inside a panorama and it refers to Scott's "The Field of Waterloo", the Waterloo stanzas from Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage III* and Charlotte Anne Eaton's *Waterloo Days* as examples for nationalistic celebration and acknowledgment of the carnage. The main focus is on the Waterloo panoramas, written to explain visual responses to the battle, to argue that the panorama was a space in which viewers were encouraged to critically engage with the topic represented.

The first rotunda, which opened in Leicester Square in 1793, exhibited two views simultaneously: sublime or picturesque landscapes coincided with foreign cities or scenes of military activity. Its smaller, upper circle accommodated a painting of 2,700 square feet, while the walls of the larger, lower circle had space for a 10,000 square-foot painting. The panorama succeeded in heightening the effect of illusion due to technical innovations in depiction as well as

¹ Oliver GRAU, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT, 2003, 107.

² Phil SHAW, *Suffering and Sentiment in Romantic Military Art*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2013, 7-8, 15-16, 18.

³ Oliver GRAU, *Virtual Art*, 110.

representation. The viewing platform was 30 feet across and to this platform were added a roof and a balustrade. The rotunda was lit indirectly via a glass dome at the top. The painting appeared to have no frame and it was impossible to determine the exact distance between platform and painting or to make out individual brush strokes.⁴ The patent stipulates that visitors would “feel ... as if they were in the actual place” and describes the invention as “La Nature à Coup d’Oeil” (‘Nature at a glance’).⁵ The panorama-painters normally made sketches on the spot from a tower or natural elevation and then adjusted their material to the viewing conditions inside a panorama.⁶ As Grau argues, the painting “addresses the human subjects on a physiological level, they find themselves both physically and emotionally *in the picture*.”⁷ The controlled viewing experience inside the rotunda emphasised the viewers’ proximity to the painting as well as their parity with the represented figures. According to Denise Blake Oleksijczuk, viewers had to “suspend their disbelief, and compensate imaginatively for the panoramas’ multiple defects, distortions, and limitations, by buying into the fiction.”⁸ One of the programmes explains in a footnote that the “present view” had been taken “upon a small stage sufficiently elevated to see into the valleys and clear the objects”, implying that in the painting the representation of military action had been deduced from the traces or “objects” left behind.⁹

Grau emphasizes that since there was nothing to compare the painting with, “the spectator’s gaze was completely subdued by it” and “the image space [...] was experienced as the real presence of a second world”. However, judging from eyewitness accounts, which Grau discusses in his book, this effect decreased the longer spectators spent inside the building.¹⁰ Crucially, the viewing experience was to a large extent mediated by the programme. Contemporary visitors would have entered the building, walked through a dark passage way and climbed the stairs. Programme in hand, their eyes would have moved between the painting, the explanatory notes and the schematic drawing or key at the end which was littered with numbers,

⁴ Sophie THOMAS, *Romanticism and Visuality: Fragments, History, Spectacle*, New York and London: Routledge, 2008, 15-19.

⁵ Anne ANDERSON, Sibylle ERLE, Laurie GARRISON, Verity HUNT, Phoebe PUTNAM and Peter WEST (eds.), *Panoramas, 1787-1900: Texts and Contexts*, 5 vols, London: Pickering and Chatto, 2013, 1, 1, 5. The first time the word “panorama” was used to promote a purpose-built, cylindrical building in Leicester Square as well as a massive painting of 360° inside it, was on 18 May 1791. Ekki HUHTAMO, *Illusions in Motion: Media Archaeology of the Moving Panorama and related Spectacles*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 2013, 1.

⁶ Scott WILCOX, “Erfindung und Entwicklung des Panoramas in Großbritannien”, in: Marie-Louise von PLESSEN (ed.), *Sehsucht: Das Panorama als Massenunterhaltung des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Frankfurt a.M.: Stroemfeld, Roter Stern, 1993. 28-35.

⁷ GRAU, *Virtual Art*, 107.

⁸ Denise Blake OLEKSIJCZUK, *First Panoramas: Visions of British Imperialism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011, 17.

⁹ Henry Aston BARKER, *Description of the Field of Battle, and Disposition of the Troops engaged in the Action, fought on the 18th of June, 1815, near Waterloo; Illustrative of the Representation of that great Event in the Panorama, Leicester-Square*, London, 1816, 8.

¹⁰ Oliver GRAU, *Virtual Art*, 97 and 98.

to match information with image. Oleksijczuk outlines that the programmes and their keys did not explain the atrocities but rather “transformed the violence of war into a visual puzzle that engaged the viewer’s mind and emotions, even as they guided the viewer through the space of the panorama image”.¹¹

Much work has been done on how the aesthetic of the sublime came to dominate artistic responses to the battle of Waterloo.¹² The panorama, due to its “visual subjectification”,¹³ was a propaganda tool and the Waterloo panoramas especially were perceived as reinforcing patriotic feelings qua identification with the painted scene. They celebrated the victory but essentially failed, like most visual representations of the French Napoleonic wars, to completely translate the carnage into an indispensable national sacrifice. Shaw notes that though “pictures were produced with the express purpose of conditioning audiences to support belligerent activities [...] the political effectiveness of such works was often compromised by the material and intellectual circumstances in which they were transmitted, received and discussed.”¹⁴ As Keirstead and Demoor have recently argued,

Waterloo was the most sacred places of English national feeling on the Continent but one that quickly took on a less savory reputation as a site overrun by tourists and the locals who attempted to profit from them. Waterloo demanded, in a sense, a unique kind of travelling poetic recuperation.¹⁵

According to Shaw, visitors to the battlefield approached it as a “locus of textual significance” rather than a deserted or undetermined space.¹⁶ The experience of Waterloo was mediated through guidebooks, specially written for the Waterloo tourists, as well as through the picturesque mode of observation and attitude to travel. Similarly, Waterloo panoramas provided a “dislocated experience” of the violence of war.¹⁷ While the surviving narrative programmes claim that the battle of Waterloo was represented accurately, they also indicated the educational agendas and social reach of the panoramas.¹⁸ According to Mary Favret “mediation itself

¹¹ Denise Blake OLEKSJ CZUK, *Panoramas*, 160, 162.

¹² Simon BAINBRIDGE, *British Poetry and the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, 168-179; Phil SHAW, *Waterloo*, 18, 35-66, 165-191.

¹³ Phil SHAW, *Waterloo*, 85.

¹⁴ Phil SHAW, *Suffering*, 4-5.

¹⁵ Christopher M. KEIRSTEAD and Marysa DEMOOR, “Introduction: Waterloo and Its Afterlife in the Nineteenth-Century Periodical and Newspaper Press”, in: *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 2015, 48, 4, 448.

¹⁶ Phil SHAW, *Waterloo and the Romantic Imagination*, Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, 71.

¹⁷ Mary FAVRET, *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010, 9.

¹⁸ The entrance fee to Leicester Square was 1 Shilling. The programmes were sold at sixpence. Robert HYDE, *Panoramania! The Art and Entertainment of the ‘All-Embracing’ View*, London: Trefoil Publications, in Association with Barbican Art Gallery, 1988, 39-40.

becomes an object of emotion: of comfort, complacency, relief, anxiety, impotence, complicity. [...] war itself does not necessarily *make sense*.”¹⁹ As I will argue, also the viewing experience of the Waterloo panoramas proved unstable, as can be derived from the programmes and texts circulating outside the panorama, such as Scott’s, Byron’s and Eaton’s. The delicate balance between staging Waterloo as glorious victory and as tragic carnage, which determined almost all of the artistic responses to Waterloo, also applies to the Waterloo panoramas.

Most of the information about the early days of the panorama has come to us through the panorama-painter and proprietor Henry Aston Barker, who was the youngest son, partner and eventual successor of Robert Barker the inventor. In his *Memoirs* Barker junior recalls that Sir Joshua Reynolds, the first president of the Royal Academy, could not be persuaded during the first demonstration but eventually came round and admired his father’s achievement.²⁰ Reynolds did not understand the demonstration because he could not see it. He was almost blind and it is also unlikely that he visited the view of London, exhibited in a makeshift building at the back of Barker’s house in Leicester Square, as Barker claims, because Reynolds died of cirrhosis on 23 February 1792 and after a confinement of almost three months.²¹ Early public endorsement came from Benjamin West, the second President of the Royal Academy.²² Many painters known for their huge canvases, such as Henry Fuseli and John Martin, dismissed the panorama as vulgar, associating it with performance and showmanship.

Much of the existing scholarly debate is on the reception of the stable panorama and the extent to which it was conceived as well as experienced as virtual reality. The first ever panorama shown at Leicester Square was the *Grand Fleet at Spithead, being the Russian Armament in 1791*. It opened in May 1793 and closed in December 1793, depicting thirty-six of the gigantic warships of the British fleet alongside life-size portraits of its admirals and sailors. The *Grand Fleet at Spithead* was deemed a great success because Queen Charlotte felt sea-sick during the opening ceremony.²³ While exploring visceral responses to panorama viewing, Oleksijczuk points out that the Queen’s reaction was the expected “feminine” response”.²⁴ Ekki Huhtamo, on the other hand, dismisses all anecdotes as a “marketing gimmick”.²⁵ The reason Barker makes so much of anecdotes has to do with ‘animation’. That the paintings were overly realistic was an undisputed

¹⁹ Mary FAVRET, *Distance*, 15.

²⁰ Laurie Garrison et al., *Panoramas*, 1, 17.

²¹ Sir Joshua REYNOLDS, *The Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, ed. Edmund Malone, London: T. Cadell, Jun. and W. Davies, 1797, lxi.

²² Markmann ELLIS, “Spectacles within doors’: Panoramas of London in the 1790s”, in: *Romanticism*, 2008, 14, 2, 137.

²³ Laurie GARRISON et al., *Panoramas*, 1, 27-38.

²⁴ Denise Blake OLEKSJJCZUK, *Panoramas*, 69-70, 74.

²⁵ Ekki HUHTAMO, *Illusions*, 79.

fact and Reynolds would have objected to Barker's invention because he rejected realism in his *Discourses on Art* on account of style. It seems that when Barker was writing what became the first history of the panoramas in the 1850s, he included a good number of anecdotes in order to propose that the stable panorama had always been ahead of the moving panoramas. The sensation of movement enhanced the illusionism or reality-effect. Evidence for Barker's attempt to animate the action, however is already in his writing on Wellington in *Description of the Field of Battle, and the Troops engaged in the Action, fought on the 18th of June, 1815* (1816):

The Duke of Wellington is represented in the foreground, near the Guards; but to say where he actually was, at this point, is impossible. His Grace, in the course of the day, went to every part of the line, animating the troops with his presence; and, in some cases, leading them on. Exposed to the greatest danger, the Duke stood to reconnoitre the manoeuvres of the enemy, and gave his orders with the most intrepid coolness, amidst showers of shot and shells; but, though so much exposed, he miraculously escaped being hurt.²⁶

Apart from installing Wellington at the centre of the battle, this passage tries to capture the turmoil of military action as well as the speed Wellington had to muster to control it. In terms of narrative strategies, the passage reveals Barker's main tactic which is self-interruption. To create the impression of immediacy, he contradicts himself: even though Wellington could be clearly identified in the painting, viewers were to understand and imagine that he was constantly moving. That he "stood to reconnoitre" is, therefore, not a description of the painting but a metaphor for the action.

The panoramas not only brought history to life but also the war to London.²⁷ Analysing the viewing experience of the Waterloo panoramas, Shaw argues that viewers would have identified with Wellington by aligning themselves with his point of view onto the field.²⁸ The panorama has been discussed as spectacle, mass-medium and virtual reality as well as in terms of the viewing experiences it offered. These approaches have put emphasis on viewers as spectators who fall for the reality-effect, which means that they lose all sense of self. While acknowledging the appeal of violence to contemporary audiences, Shaw stresses, that images of war were integral parts of complex compositions. Any excess of violence in these compositions would have tipped the critical balance between support and horror of war.²⁹ Shaw talks about

²⁶ Henry Aston BARKER, *Description of the Field*, 11.

²⁷ Gillen D'ARCY WOOD, *The Shock of the Real: Romanticism and Visual Culture, 1760-1860*, New York and Houndsmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001, 103.

²⁸ Phil SHAW, *Waterloo*, 86-87.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 23, 26, 29.

identification as well as over-identification. Whereas the former is the declared goal of the government's campaign to control attitudes towards war, the second is an undesired but often inevitable side effect.³⁰

While it is important to draw attention to the panorama's visual technology, it is equally important to realise that the panorama-painters always downplayed the illusionistic effect of their paintings and instead emphasized their documentary value.³¹ Discussing the changes made to keys and programmes, Oleksijczuk contends that when circular keys or handbills were used exclusively, viewers had more freedom to "elude the artist's directions".³² There was no singular viewing position. Visitors could walk around the platform.³³ The provision changed from single-sheet handbills to, on average, sixteen-page-long narrative programmes and with the narrative programmes came the horizontal key.³⁴ The new programmes, in other words, organised the viewing experience, because visitors were given a narrative to guide them as well as a map for orientation. The panorama was "read" and not freely looked at. As Oleksijczuk writes, "the viewer's position is no longer indeterminate".³⁵ Oleksijczuk, however, is overly confident in the power of narrative. The war panoramas especially wrestled with accuracy and they had to tackle problems of representation in order to create realistic paintings as well as a nationalist celebration of the battle. In addition, while it is easy to understand that the proximity of the horror was experienced as mentally and physically overwhelming, the argument about the illusion of the simultaneity of event and viewing is unconvincing. The representation of the battle inside a panorama is mediated and was experienced as such. In the programmes, visual information is treated as instantaneous but painting a topical panorama was a race against time. Gaps emerged whenever it was too late to rearrange or include more detail into the emerging picture. These gaps rupture the surface of the 'perfect' painting and interfere with the viewing experience because they force visitors to think about what they see.³⁶

A good example of the imaginative scope created through a programme is Barker's *A Short Description of the Island of Elba, and Town of Porto-Ferraio* (1815), which is not normally counted as a Waterloo panorama. This panorama was on display in the upper circle of Leicester Square from June 1815 to January 1816 and would, due to this timing, have been associated with the battle as well as the final chapter of Napoleon's career. *Description of Elba* included the most up-to-date

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 8-11, 28-29.

³¹ Oliver GRAU, *Virtual Art*, 98

³² Denise Blake OLEKSIJCZUK, *Panoramas*, 133

³³ *Ibid.*, 134.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 141.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 160 and 167.

³⁶ Discussion was part of Robert Barker's original vision. Denise Blake OLEKSIJCZUK, *Panoramas*, 29, 36, 43-44.

full-length portrait of the French ex-emperor, who was on the run after his defeat at Waterloo. The programme outlines what he was doing on Elba and hints at the fact that he had not lost interest in European politics; Napoleon was receiving many visitors and in the painting he is standing near the Martello Tower built by the Medici in the early 1600s to protect the harbour. While Barker was busy getting the Waterloo panoramas ready, *Description of Elba* invited visitors to imagine ‘what if’ Napoleon escaped yet again. His capture and transportation coincided with the exhibition of this panorama. Napoleon left France in July to arrive on St. Helena in October 1815 but this news reached London only in early December.³⁷ My point is that visitors had expectations about the panorama’s optical technology, on the one hand, and opinions about the topic represented, on the other hand. Inside a panorama, the battle of Waterloo was frozen in time. While the dead had long been buried on the field or had been brought back to England to be laid to rest in a family plot, the panorama painting brought to life the horror of the battle. Given the lapse in time, the panorama painting is not simply an illustration of British history; it is - on account of its visualisation of dying at Waterloo - a fixation on slaughter, carnage and death. Temporality, in short, is involved in representations in panoramas and it is most poignant in war panoramas. The only figure to transcend the effect of temporality in representations of Waterloo is Napoleon.

The season of the Waterloo panoramas began in the spring of 1816. Barker’s *A Description of the Defeat of the French Army, under the Command Napoleon Bonaparte, by the Allied Armies, Commanded by Field Marshal His Grace the Duke of Wellington, and Field Marshal Prince Blucher, in front of Waterloo, on the 18th of June, 1815* (1816) opened in the Strand³⁸ in early March 1816 and closed in mid-May 1817. *Defeat of the French Army* in the Strand coincided with *Description of the Field*, exhibited in the Leicester Square rotunda, and later with *Explanation of the Battle of Waterloo, Painted on the largest Scale, from Drawings taken on the Spot by Mr. Henry Aston Barker* (1816), shown together with the *Battle of Paris* in the upper circle. Barker’s *Description of the Field* was the version which was revived in 1842 by Robert Burford, Barker’s successor at Leicester Square, as *Description of a View of the Battle of Waterloo; with the Disposition of the Troops Engaged in the Action, fought on the 18th of June, 1815* (1842). According to its title-page Burford’s painting was done from “accurate drawings taken at the time; and plans obtained at head quarters”.³⁹ Commenting on the facts that had emerged since 1815, one reviewer remarks that the new painting was much better:

³⁷ Laurie GARRISON et al., *Panoramas*, 1, 93-106.

³⁸ Stephan OETTERMANN, *The Panorama: History of a Mass Medium*, New York: Zone Books, 1997, 111-112.

³⁹ Laurie GARRISON et al., *Panoramas*, 2, 163-180.

The leading merit of the new panorama we take to be the clearness with which it shows the disposition of the troops engaged in the action. It is not a vast *mêlée*, comparatively devoid of interest by its indistinctness, but it is rather a series of episodal confictions and operations, the most distant of which is as clearly depicted as those immediately beneath the spectator's eye [...].⁴⁰

Literally, with the years both the understanding of the event and its representation have gained in clarity.

While the early literary responses to the Battle of Waterloo struggled to both process and describe the events, the panoramas had to recreate the battle's immediacy by focusing on the visual. Considering the impact of emerging news on artistic representation of Waterloo, Simon Bainbridge writes that Scott's uneasy relationship with Waterloo comes to the fore in *Paul's Letters to His Kinsfolk* (1816).⁴¹ The letter to the Major gives a panoramic overview of the field's topography, explaining the positions of the troops as well as their movements. Paul's second letter, however, treats Waterloo differently because it is addressed to his sister. The narrator is acutely aware of the carnage and when writing to his sister, he checks himself, "I must not weary your patience with a twice-told tale". He appears to limit himself to describing what he saw in front of him.⁴² Talking of the "pilgrimages of English families and tourists",⁴³ Paul describes the mixture of human or animal bones and the jumbled heaps of cloth, leather and paper, indicating that the density of scattered objects corresponds to centres of slaughter. All objects, in addition, are viewed as potential souvenirs. Abruptness is also integral to Byron's and Eaton's reactions. The first line of stanza 17, "Stop!- for thy tread is on the Empire's dust",⁴⁴ is both a response and an instruction to the reader. On a literal level it completely disrupts the natural imagery of cyclical renewal so favoured by Scott. Byron is alluding to Napoleon's political death and the restoration of the old political order. Echoing Byron's choice of phrasing, Eaton suggests that when approaching, it was difficult to tell where the field actually started: "We suddenly stopped – we stood rooted to the spot – we gazed around us in silence; for the emotions that at this moment swelled our hearts were too deep for utterance – we felt that we stood on the field of the battle."⁴⁵ Eaton's realisation is tied to her guide's story about the "graves of the braves".⁴⁶ On a symbolic level Eaton is alluding to the conceptually blurred boundaries of the place and the

⁴⁰ "Panorama of the Battle of Waterloo", *London Saturday Journal*, 1842, 3, 68, 188.

⁴¹ Simon BAINBRIDGE, *Napoleon and English Romanticism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, 156-157.

⁴² Walter SCOTT, Paul O'KEEFE (ed.), *Scott on Waterloo*, London: Vintage, 2015, 138.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁴⁴ George Gordon BYRON, Jerome MCGANN (ed.), *Lord Byron: The Major Works*, Oxford World Classic, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, 109.

⁴⁵ Charlotte Anne EATON, *Waterloo Days: The Narrative of an Englishwoman resident at Brussels in June, 1815*, London: George Bell & Sons, 1888, 127.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem.*

battle's political outcome. Realisation and graveyard imagery, on the other hand, are carefully constructed; Eaton describes her journey from Brussels as "one long uninterrupted charnel-house": "Deep stagnant pools of red putrid water, mingled with mortal remains, betrayed the spot where the bodies of men and horses had mingled together in death."⁴⁷ She talks of the horrible smell, which she mentions again later on when walking over shallow graves.⁴⁸

Like the literary responses, the panoramas were set before the challenge to strike a balance between nationalist celebration and representation of the carnage. As is to be expected the Duke of Wellington is in the foreground and No. 1 on the keys in the narrative programmes of Barker's panoramas.⁴⁹ Napoleon, on the other hand, tends to be a small figure in the background. In Burford's programme Napoleon is No. 75 and in Barker's *Description of the Defeat of the French Army*, Napoleon does not even get a number: "Above No. 7, Bonaparte and his staff are quitting the field of battle."⁵⁰ The programme of *Description of the Field* imitates the sweeping panoramic view of the painting, giving the visitor an overview of the battlefield. *Defeat of the French Army*, which focuses on the final moments of the battle, shows Napoleon leaving the field. The programme suggests that Barker was an eyewitness. He travelled to Brussels to make sketches and went to Paris to interview the officers: "The representation of the ground was taken while all the wreck of the armies was on the field; and the following concise account of the battle being read, as it were on the spot, will convey a general idea of the events of the whole day, as well as the period which this Panorama represents."⁵¹ But Barker's insistence on the accuracy of his painting also evokes his emotional response. While the word "defeat" in the title reminds the reader of victory and carnage, Barber describes what he sees as "wreck of the armies". We do not know when exactly he made his sketches. During her visit Eaton records signs of decay, concentrating on the destruction of the field as well as of human lives. Barker, too no doubt, chose his words carefully. The image of the "wreck of the armies" does not differentiate between the nationalities of the victims. The word "wreck", moreover, is singular in its allusion to carnage as well as to the force of destruction. The experience of war remained raw and affected Barker deeply because the expression "wreck of armies" reveals more than it can hide and the image has also much in common with what Freud describes as uncanny. It melds metal with flesh and animal with human and is something "that was meant to remain secret and

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 124. A very similar description of the field of Waterloo is in Charles Campbell's *The Traveller's Guide through Belgium and Holland* (1817). Phil SHAW, *Suffering*, 33.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁴⁹ Laurie GARRISON et al., *Panoramas*, 1, 107, 121 ; *Ibid.* 2, 174, 180.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 1, 121.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 1, 112.

hidden and has come into the open.”⁵² Barker’s intention was to build immediacy; though disturbed by the experience, he wanted to maximise the technical sophistication of the medium at his disposal, and not to disturb or repulse viewers but to create a ‘what if’ situation in order to give his audience the opportunity to grasp as well as connect with the suffering and emotional weight of the national sacrifice. Barker provides a foreshortened description of what he saw, because he anticipates a disjointed viewing experience, which he attempts to control. At the same time, his narrative shorthand (“wreck of the armies”) enables visitors to imagine what they cannot see and Barker only hints at.

The blurring of boundaries between the apparent and the hidden can also be identified in the programme of *Description of the Field*. The first paragraph contextualises Waterloo with reference to the battle of Quatre Bras and the second, quite brusquely, starts its explanation of the painting with a description of the conditions on the ground:

A violent storm of rain, accompanied with thunder, continued to fall during the night, and our brave men were obliged to sleep on ground already trampled into sandy mud. The cold was excessive, but the state of the weather prevented the possibility of lightening many fires; yet, notwithstanding these disadvantageous circumstances, our troops were formed early in the morning, full of ardor, to meet the enemy, who appeared on the opposite heights, collecting in considerable force.⁵³

In this passage, which is on the valour of the common British soldier, Barker quickly moves from one point to next. He also interrupts himself because he appears to stop to ‘insert’ a quotation from Scott’s “Field of Waterloo”, which essentially transposes his description into a statement about British resilience. The quotation includes the lines “for not an eye the storm that view’d, / Chang’d its proud glance of fortitude”.⁵⁴ After considering the enormity of the ensuing mud again, Barker turns to the French dead, whose bodies “covered the ground”. Again, and quite abruptly, he quotes from Scott: “Then, Wellington! thy piercing eye, / This crisis caught of destiny. / The British host had stood / That morn ‘gainst charge of sward and lance, / As their own ocean-rocks hold stance; / But when they voice had said ‘Advance!’ / They were their ocean’s flood”.⁵⁵ The sudden shift from material conditions to nationalist celebration has an

⁵² Sigmund FREUD, *The Uncanny*, London: Penguin, 2003, 132. Favret outlines that responses to violence tend to be “un-joined”.⁵² Commenting on Wordsworth’s “The Ruined Cottage” and the deteriorating state of mind of the figure of Margaret, she concludes “The poem’s affective and epistemological unease is located in the discrepancy between these two realms: between sensible feeling and comprehensive pattern. This discrepancy serves, in fact, as the motor for the poem’s vagrancy, its restlessness of body and mind”. Mary FAVRET, *Distance*, 24, 28-29.

⁵³ Henry Aston BARKER, *Description of the Field*, 3-4.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem.*

unexpected effect. Because of the narrative order, the almost clumsy transition from the mass of corpses on the ground to Wellington's elevated position and its association with Wellington's "piercing eye" in Scott, Barker fundamentally undermines Wellington's role in the battle. Scott's attempt at immortalising Wellington, "Then, Wellington!", is here presented as a consequence of the defeated French army, fleeing over the bodies of their dead comrades, rather than the British Field Marshal's heroic initiative. Moreover, on account of the water-imagery dominating this section, Barker allows for soldiers and field to evolve into an amorphous mass: "wreck of armies", an image, which as mentioned before, could potentially unravel into disgust and horror in the minds of the viewers. The viewing experience, in short, is unstable due to the programme's flawed explanations of the painting as a visual response to Waterloo.

In all programmes Barker uses a variety of narrative techniques, taking different angles on what he was trying to represent. Barker consistently addresses viewers to involve them and as if to seek their approval. In *Description of the Field*, for example, he concedes that he manipulated the scene for dramatic effect: "This is the period represented, generally, in the Panorama; though a liberty has been taken, as to time, in introducing the glorious charge made by the Highlanders [...]. This charge was made a few hours before the general advance of the British Army".⁵⁶ This explanation interrupts the narrative flow. Here Barker anticipates criticism by acknowledging that his audience will be familiar with the facts. In *Defeat of the French Army*, by comparison, he comments on the complexity of the information, again justifying his artistic choices: "It is obvious, that in the course of nine eventful hours, the field of Waterloo would furnish subjects for many Panoramas, and it is difficult to say what time the battle was most interesting. The period last described is the subject of the present Panorama."⁵⁷ Panorama paintings took weeks, if not months, to complete, which is why Barker cannot but draw attention to new facts in either the programme text or the footnotes. He also admits to mistakes or gaps which he was unable to correct or fill since work on the painting was already too advanced. But Barker makes such gaps work to his advantage. In *Defeat of the French Army* he uses a mismatch between painting and programme to draw attention to his great efforts at bringing Waterloo to the public at maximum speed: "It is now known that Bonaparte headed this body of troops [sic] part of the way, though he was not observed by the English."⁵⁸ He uses another gap, again created by news emerging, to hint at his interview with the Duke of Wellington shortly after the battle: "The annexed Print [key] does not exactly correspond with the Painting, owing to some alterations, since the Print was engraved, made by direction of a distinguished officer, whose personal exertions contributed

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵⁸ Laurie GARRISON et al., *Panoramas*, 1, 9.

much towards the success of the day, but it is sufficiently correct for the purpose of explaining the Picture”.⁵⁹ By recognising the shortfalls of the painting, Barker not only flatters his audience but also suggests that they assess what he has given them. Then, towards the end he tells them what they ought to have deferred from his painting: “that great Victory [is] the highest pinnacle of glory [...] the extirpation of that formidable organized banditti whose existence was incompatible with the repose of Europe”.⁶⁰ Barker’s patriotic message guides the communal viewing experience. In his programmes he never dwells on death; here he simply talks of the “extirpation” of a worthless enemy.

The attitude towards Napoleon is very different in Peter and William Marshall’s moving panorama, *Description of the Peristrephic Panorama ... Illustrative of the Principal Events that Have Occurred to Buonaparte ... Ending with his Funeral Procession at St. Helena* (1822). The Marshalls’ moving panorama had no fixed form; it was added to, assembled or dismantled as required and the paintings were a lot smaller than Barker’s. They were on a rolling canvas, which was stopped, to change to another scene, in front of a seated audience. The 33-page long programme, describing thirteen views, gives detailed information about Napoleon’s character, looks and clothes. The overarching narrative is Napoleon’s fall and death. Much more than the stable panoramas discussed so far, this moving panorama is mediated through text: Edward Baines’s *History of the Wars of the French Revolution* (1818), O’Meara’s *Napoleon in Exile* (1822) and Las Cases’s *Mémorial de Sainte-Hélène* (1823). It toured from Dublin to the South-west and arrived in London as late as 1824. The Waterloo scenes, the first and second view, existed since 1815.⁶¹

As before, the viewing experience is contingent on narrative techniques and the persona of a narrator, who gives precise viewing instructions as well as a running commentary: “To your extreme left, in the distance, near the bottom of a tree, is Sir Thomas Picton” is the first sentence of View I (“The last and decisive Charge of the British, at the Battle of Waterloo”). This View shows Napoleon “mounted on a white charger” and the advancing French army.⁶² Closest to the spectator is the British Heavy Brigade led “to the charge” by the Marquis of Anglesey.⁶³ As a result of the attack (represented in the painting) the French “became appalled and panic struck, defeated; routed, dispersed, [...] [they] fled in the utmost confusion [...] and in an instant the whole army was nothing but a mass of confusion [...] all pressed to one point, so that it was utterly impossible to rally a single corps – all hopes were lost with the French”.⁶⁴ We do not see

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 1, 10.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem.*

⁶¹ Laurie GARRISON et al., *Panoramas*, 4, x-xii, 63-98.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 4, 69.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 4, 70.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 4, 71.

this. In View II, “The Flight of the French Army after their disastrous Defeat at the Battle of Waterloo”, the narrator summarises British troop movements as well as Napoleon’s desperate attempts to stop his army. The Marquis of Anglesey is now in the distance. Reminding viewers that at Waterloo “the sun of Napoleon set for ever”, the narrator explains that Napoleon said afterwards that if the Marquis had not been wounded, “he should have been his prisoner in two minutes”. In brackets he writes further that the Marquis “was wounded amongst the last shots fired”.⁶⁵ The Marshalls’ moving panorama is more sympathetic towards Napoleon (the narrator, admittedly, is fascinated with the ex-emperor), and it gives information about the casualties among both the French and the Allied Armies. Napoleon died on 5 May 1821 on St Helena. Since this panorama ends with Napoleon’s funeral, we could say that it not only returns Napoleon to Europe, it brings him back to life to then kill him again, because in the description to the final view, “A correct representation of the Funeral Procession of Buonaparte”, the narrative moves back and forth between an alive, a dead and a buried Napoleon.⁶⁶ The Marshalls were an exception in their treatment of death at Waterloo due to their focus on Napoleon. It was Barker’s Waterloo panoramas, however, that set the tone.

When Barker’s *Description of the Field* is revived in the 1840s by the panorama-painter and new proprietor of the Leicester Square rotunda Robert Burford more emphasis is given to the battle’s national significance. Burford draws heavily on Barker’s programme but omits descriptions of the military action to include Wellington’s comments and reflections. As a result, the passage on Wellington is summative, blending represented and narrative events, which means that it has a different flavour. Burford’s Wellington is a cool, rational and almost aloof hero:

The Duke of Wellington, during the whole engagement, displayed the greatest talent and the soundest views, and set a brilliant example of presence of mind, courage, and confidence. His system of tactics was admirable, and his plans, fully carried out, were eminently successful; he never for a moment doubted of victory, expressing at all at times to the officers, his confidence in the result, founded on his knowledge of the bravery of the British he commanded.⁶⁷

Burford, however, still uses self-interruption to purposefully undermine or clash depiction and description: “The Duke’s return to Waterloo across the field of battle, where so many of his former friends and companions in arms lay mangled and lifeless, was a period of deep emotion, his feelings were overpowering, and he was observed to shed tears.”⁶⁸ While the painting (as in

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 4, 72.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 4, 87-88.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 2, 174.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem.*

1816) offers viewers a representation of the glorious victory, the programme projects another scene by talking about a future event: Wellington's inspection of the field on the day after the battle. He was overwhelmed by the carnage, lost for words and seen to cry. In the programme the transition is abrupt and isrede followed by another, sudden transition to Wellington's speech about his response.

The programme of Burford's *Description of a View*, the revival of Barker's *Description of the Field*, starts with an epigram consisting of the last seven lines of stanza XXIII of Scott's "The Field of Waterloo", starting with "Yes! Agincourt may be forgot. / And Cressy be an unknown spot".⁶⁹ Bidding farewell to the field, Scott determines how Waterloo will be remembered; in addition to Hougomont, the field shall be remembered for all eternity, such is its significance. Bearing in mind Eaton's visit to Hougomont and in particular her response to it as a site of death,⁷⁰ it is revealing that Burford added a "!" to Scott's "yes". The epigram is a preamble to Burford's first paragraph which follows Scott's poetic argument to justify the revival of the Waterloo panorama in 1842:

Mr. Burford feels persuaded, that, in exhibition a new Panorama of this arduous and decisive Field, he at once meets the wishes of his numerous patrons and friends, and produces a subject of national and never-failing interest to all classes of society, to whom the well-earned fame of their country is dear; equally to those who were contemporary with the glorious event, and to the rising generation that is fast supplanting them.⁷¹

Burford's opening paragraph confirms what Bainbridge has argued about Scott's poem.⁷²

Waterloo is not only "the triumph of romance" but also the pinnacle of all of the war panoramas, because, as Scott before him, Burford brushes over the matter of the carnage. Death at Waterloo is sacrifice and, therefore, the reason for the public's "never-failing interest". Burford talks of generations of spectators "supplanting" each other, an image which puts less emphasis on the dead of 1815 and more on the survivors and relatives. And yet, this panorama's ambition is to ensure the immortality of the dead.

Burford's programme has sixteen (instead of twelve) pages as well as a key.⁷³ Burford, like Barker before him, recalls the technical challenges he has had to meet, as well as the necessity of making selections in order to adequately represent the battle. He addresses the spectator directly:

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 2, 166.

⁷⁰ Charlotte Anne EATON, *Waterloo Days*, 137-138.

⁷¹ *Ibidem.*

⁷² Contradicting Shaw, he writes: "At the end of the wars, and the end of his poetic career, Scott finds in Waterloo an event which, rather than making romance redundant, redeems it". Simon BAINBRIDGE, *British Poetry*, 170.

⁷³ Laurie GARRISON et al., *Panoramas*, 2, 163-180.

It may be well here to observe, that a few anachronisms have been committed, in order to present some of the main incidents; indeed, it would be scarcely possible to give the occurrences a precise moment. The Duke himself says, ‘Some individuals remember all the little events of which, or the exact moment at which, they occurred’.⁷⁴

Burford talks about the simultaneity of events and takes notice of the limitations of his medium. These self-conscious reflections empower viewers to reach their own conclusions. In 1816 Barker alludes to the carnage, “our loss”,⁷⁵ and gives no figures. Instead, he relates the deaths of individual officers, such as Thomas Picton’s and only speaks of one specific charge, when 20,000 (British) men were lost: they were “dispersed, killed, or taken prisoner”.⁷⁶ Burford is in a position to supply viewers with a more or less accurate figure of the total number of casualties: “in the small space many nations lost their bravest warriors; English, French, Germans, and Prussians, mingled their blood, and at the close of the day 50,000 dead and dying covered its surface.”⁷⁷ On the following pages, however, he provides information on the units at the beginning of the battle, because these figures would have been more relevant to the viewing experience.⁷⁸ (Barker listed the units but gave no figures.)

With regard to the fragile balance between celebration of victory and acknowledgement of carnage, death and suffering the already mentioned review is particularly relevant as the reviewer not only compares Barker’s and Burford’s versions of Waterloo, he also considers the quality of the representations of carnage in the paintings, revealing, at the same time, why figures of casualties in the programmes are not required for understanding the significance of Waterloo:

Well do we remember our visit to the first panorama: how impatiently we ascended the stairs to the centre of the area, and how the scene of carnage burst upon us with bewilderment to our easily excited temperament! Then, indeed, England was in the gale of her glory – the flush of victory lit up every corner of her isle and gladdened every heart, save those whom the triumph had robbed its dearest treasure. As a boy of fifteen, we felt these influences, and the panorama of 1816 was to us almost a scene of unmixed gratification. But six-and-twenty years make strange alteration in habits of thought, and accordingly we regarded the new picture, a few days since, with very different feelings. As a scene of deep interest, its hold was stronger than ever, for we read in its sickening desolation as far more valuable lesson than history had ever taught us before. Its importance has even been magnified by distance of date – an unerring testimony of its impressive interest. [...] As a work of art, as well as accuracy of detail, Mr. Burford’s picture takes precedence of all representations of the same class. The horses are invariably well drawn, and the characteristic distinction in the different cavalry regiments well maintained; whilst the ubiquity of the conflict is preserved with individual intensity, which is truly surprising in so vast a painting

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 2, 167-168.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* 1, 115.

⁷⁶ Henry Aston BARKER, *Description of the Field*, 4.

⁷⁷ Laurie GARRISON et al., *Panoramas*, 2, 167.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 2, 168 and 170.

as the present. [...] Here and there the fidelity of the carnage is appalling – as in the life-guard striking off the head of a French cuirassier with a sword!⁷⁹

The description of the painting moves from the impersonal “we” to an almost neutral or distanced analysis of the scene. Responding to Burford and quoting the same lines from Scott, this reviewer articulates not only his personal viewing experience, he also comments specifically on his altered reaction to the carnage. He gives one example, which he describes as a beheading. This reviewer’s response resonates with Susan Sontag’s argument about visual representation of violence never losing its power to disturb.⁸⁰ The impact of the carnage, according to this reviewer, was felt much more strongly due to the quality of the new painting. Looking back to 1816, the reviewer juxtaposes victory with sacrifice but describes the enormous loss of loved ones in terms of a theft of a “dearest treasure”. He personalizes the carnage but depersonalises the individual, associating it with materially precious objects. Assuming that he agrees that those who died are worth remembering, because their sacrifice had meaning, it is not surprising that his reflection on national grief is tied closely to a description of the physical space of the panorama. He had to return to this place in order to reconnect with it. The impersonal “we” at the beginning of the passage may suggest loss of identity as the battle of Waterloo is coming to life (again). The final sentence, however, betrays this viewer’s emotional state of mind. He is shocked by the violence of the French cuirassier’s death. Neither Barker in 1816 or Burford in 1842 pay much attention to the French cuirassier. Barker attributes the death to the Marquis of Granby, who, even though he was without a helmet and on foot, attacked and “killed” him and then “rode off with his horse”.⁸¹ Burford repeats, almost verbatim, Barker’s description but identifies Private Godley as the British hero responsible for the Frenchman’s death.⁸²

To conclude, all accounts of the battle of Waterloo are constructed or mediated and all artistic representations are determined by the balance between staging the battle as glorious victory and as tragic carnage. Like Scott, Byron and Eaton, the narrators of the programmes of the Waterloo panoramas struggle when navigating between the then (of the event) and the now (of the viewing). In the programmes the immediacy of the viewing experience of Waterloo is heightened by narrators interrupting themselves, reflecting on what they saw or dared to imagine, while trying to comprehend what happened. These reflections can be seen to interfere with the master narrative about the victory. This article has argued that, as a result of self-interruption and the awkward juxtaposition of represented and narrated events, viewers could not but evaluate the

⁷⁹ “Panorama of the Battle of Waterloo”, 188.

⁸⁰ Susan SONTAG, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, London: Penguin, 2003, 16.

⁸¹ Henry Aston BARKER, *Description of the Field*, 12.

⁸² Laurie Garrison et al., *Panoramas*, 2, 177.

painting and its representation of the battle in front of them. This observation challenges the idea that the viewing experience inside a panorama can be controlled or managed to produce politically desirable responses (i.e. the support of war) and suggests that the balance between glorious victory and tragic carnage is determined by more general figurations of death. Viewing the battle of Waterloo inside a panorama facilitated a communal experience and a salutation of the sacrifice of so many for the greater good, but, due to the growing distance between the historical event and the actual visit to a Waterloo panorama, explanations about the visual response gradually lost their power to persuade. Viewers would also have been confronted with the realisation of the finiteness as well as fragility of all human life.

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