
The Deceitful Artwork: Beautiful Falsehood or False Beauty?

Louis Groarke

Humber College

Formalists such as Dziemidok, Greenberg, Fry, Bell, Prall, Fried, Fiedler, Kant and others separate the aesthetic and the ethical. In this article I argue that moral considerations may play a decisive role in our appreciation of particular works of art. My argument involves a close examination of a particular painting, *La mort de Marat* (*The Death of Marat*) by the French painter Jacques-Louis David. (See page 72 below.)

A Brief Overview of Formalism

Bohdan Dziemidok, in a scholarly paper, has proposed an “aesthetic formalism” based on the primacy or exclusivity of the perceptual or sensual structure of art.¹ Invoking David Prall’s notion of “aesthetic surface,” Dziemidok favourably reviews the claim that “the aesthetic strictly (properly understood) is what

¹ Bohdan Dziemidok, “Artistic Formalism: Its Achievements and Weaknesses,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51:2 (Spring 1993): 185-193. In addition to works cited elsewhere in this article, see, for example: Michael Fried, *Three American Painters* (Cambridge, MA: Fogg Art Museum, April-May 1965); David Pole, *Aesthetics, Form and Emotion*, ed. George Roberts (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1983); Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz, *Nowe formy w malarstwie, szkice estetyczne, teatr* (*New Forms in Painting*), (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawn. Naukowe, 1974); Harold Osborne, *Aesthetics and Art Theory* (New York: Dutton, 1970); Noel Carroll, “Formalism and Critical Evaluation,”

is apprehended directly and immediately by sensation."² This formalist view of painting is hardly unprecedented.

Although Clement Greenberg complained that the term "formalism" had "acquired ineradicably vulgar tones in English,"³ a similar emphasis on the perceptual aspects of painting led to his indefatigable defence of abstract art.⁴ Greenberg goes so far as to recommend that we ignore the subject matter of representational work. He points out that Baudelaire was better able to appreciate the paintings of Delacroix when "he was still too far away . . . to make out the images [they] contained, when [they] were still only a blur of colours,"⁵ and that "critics and connoisseurs . . . consciously dismissed from their minds the connotations of Rubens' nudes when assessing and experiencing the final worth of his art."⁶

*Willful
reductionism?*

Clive Bell, the famous proponent of "significant form," likewise argued that the perceptual aspects of a work are what count. Bell distinguishes between pictures that "convey information" and works of art. The former "leave untouched our aesthetic emotions because it is not their forms but the ideas or information suggested or conveyed that affect us."⁷ According to Bell, "To appreciate a work of art we need bring nothing but a sense of form and colour and a knowledge of three-dimensional space."⁸ "Subject matter is unimportant. It is the formal elements of pictorial design which engender an emotional or perceptual experience that is valued in and of itself."⁹

English art critic and painter Roger Fry also identified per-

in P. McCormick ed., *The Reasons of Art* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1985); Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, *A History of Six Ideas (Dzieje sześciu pojęć)*, trans. C. Kasperek (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1980) and "The General Question of the Essence of Form and Content," *Journal of Philosophy* 56 (1960), 222-233.

² David Prall, *Aesthetic Judgement* (New York: Crowell, 1967), 19.

³ Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, John O'Brian ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), Vol. 4, "Complaints of an Art Critic," 269.

⁴ In "The Case for Abstract Art," Greenberg argues that "the very best painting, the major painting, of our age is almost exclusively abstract" and that abstract art is "a purer, more quintessential form of pictorial art than the representational kind" (Greenberg, 4, "Abstract Art," 82.).

⁵ Greenberg, "Abstract Art," 83.

⁶ Greenberg, "Abstract Art," 83.

⁷ Clive Bell, *Art* (New York: Capricorn, 1958), 22.

⁸ Bell, 187.

⁹ Bell, 17.

ceptual experience as uniquely and properly aesthetic. Fry limits aesthetic appreciation to an awareness of "order and variety in the sensuous plane." The artist "arrange[s] the sensuous presentment of objects . . . with an order and appropriateness altogether beyond what Nature herself provides."¹⁰ The connoisseur, in recognising this superior order, enjoys an exalted emotional state that arises solely from the visual facts of perception.

The views of Dziemidok, Prall, Greenberg, Bell and Fry echo the thought of earlier formalists like Conrad Fiedler, Robert von edler Zimmermann¹¹ and Eduard Hanslick.¹² Inspired by Kant and writing in 1867, Fiedler identifies artistic creation with "perceptual experience." According to Fiedler, such experience is "an impartial, free activity, which serves no purpose beyond itself."¹³ Fiedler dismisses the subject matter of representative work. That part of an artwork "that can be grasped conceptually and expressed in verbal terms does not represent the artistic substance which owes its existence to the creative powers of an artist."¹⁴ For the true artist, "the world is but a thing of appearances." In true artistic appreciation, "interest in literary content vanishes."

Stefan Morawski has argued that Fiedler and Hanslick are the true authors of an artistic formalism that is, more commonly, attributed to Kant.¹⁵ If, however, Kant does not focus on art but, more broadly, on our appreciation of natural beauty, he does argue that aesthetic judgements are rooted in the immediate sensible particular and must be "disinterested" or disengaged from considerations of subject matter.¹⁶ As Paul Crowther explains:

In the case of [Kant's category of] pure aesthetic judgement . . . our pleasure in beauty is purely a function of how the object ap-

¹⁰ Roger Fry, *Vision and Design* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1958), 38.

¹¹ R. Zimmermann, *Allgemeine Aesthetik als Formwissenschaft* (Wien: W. Braumüller, 1865).

¹² Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful (Vom Musikalisch-Schönen)*, Geoffrey Payzant trans. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1986).

¹³ Conrad Fiedler, *On Judging Works of Visual Art (Über die Beurteilung von Werken der Bildenden Kunst 1876)*, H. Schaeffer-Simmern and F. Mood, trans. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 42-43.

¹⁴ Fiedler, 10-11.

¹⁵ Cited in Dziemidok, 188-189; Stefan Morawski, *Glówne nurty estetyki* (Wrocław : Wiedza o Kulturze, 1992), 15. Authors like Mary Mothersill and Ruth Lorand dispute an overly simple identification of Kant with formalism.

¹⁶ See Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, Book 1, SS1-5.

pears to the senses. What kind of thing the object is, its relevance for our practical interests . . . whether the object is real or not, are [irrelevant] questions.¹⁷

Modern Art as Contributing to the Rise of Formalism

The rise of formalism in modern aesthetics was partly due to the nature of contemporary practice. In divesting their canvases of subject matter, modern abstract painters emphasized form and repudiated any overt preoccupation with content. Artists and critics of various schools—abstract expressionists, minimalists, action painters, conceptual artists and so on—argued that the business of painting was not *mimesis* (imitation). Art made available an experience of pure aesthetic facts which were valuable in themselves. It was only secondarily, in some very subordinate way, a means of reproducing something else in the outside world. When it came to art criticism, questions about subject matter were at best a distraction.

This emphasis on form was championed as a kind of purism. When we pay attention to the formal qualities of a painting, we experience the painting itself; when we pay attention to the subject matter, we focus on something outside the painting. Art critic Fairfield Porter, for example, in a typical statement, confidently proclaims the superiority of American non-objective painting because it “stands by itself, and one remembers it on its own terms.”¹⁸ According to Porter, European abstract painting is of poorer quality because it still refers to something that exists outside the canvas.¹⁹ It would seem to follow, on this logic, that representative painting is of even poorer quality than European abstract art, because, in an even more necessary and obvious way, it “still . . . stands for something outside itself.” This is, of course, to overlook the possibility that some kind of external reference may enrich rather than impoverish the meaning and power of particular works of art.

Emphasis on form a kind of purism.

¹⁷ Paul Crowther, “The Significance of Kant’s Pure Aesthetic Judgement,” *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 36 (April 1996), 111.

¹⁸ Fairfield Porter, “American Non-Objective Painting,” in Rackstraw Downes ed., *Fairfield Porter: Art in Its Own Terms: Selected Criticism* (New York: Taplinger Publishing, 1979), 55-57.

¹⁹ Porter, 57.

What Is the Role of Morality in Art?

In restricting the spectator's attention to considerations of shapes, lines, textures, values and colours, formalists eliminate any consideration of moral content from the act of aesthetic appreciation. If a painting portrays morally offensive subject matter, this will not detract from its aesthetic value, for it is only its formal qualities that make it a worthwhile piece of art. Perhaps this is what Greenberg means when he (rather obliquely) remarks that "Art can get away with anything."²⁰ Other formalists are more explicit.

Dziemidok claims that when we look at an artwork from an aesthetic point of view, "we consider irrelevant its pernicious or beneficial influence on man."²¹ Bell insists: "Once we have judged a thing a work of art, we have . . . put it beyond the reach of the moralist."²² And Fry, in a succinct and definitive phrase, declares that "In art we have no moral responsibility."²³

Formalism precludes any union of the moral and the aesthetic. Kant does argue that our capacity to feel pure aesthetic pleasure renders us more susceptible to moral feeling and leads to the development of greater moral awareness, whereas Bell claims that artworks are a "direct and powerful" means to the good.²⁴ If, however, formalists argue that art is a moral preoccupation, they exclude moral considerations from specific acts of aesthetic or artistic appreciation.

I believe that all works of art raise moral issues, directly or indirectly. The moral and the aesthetic go together in all art criticism above a certain level. Even the formalist account, which derives ultimately from Plotinus, could be fleshed out in moral terms. In this article, however, I want to propose a specific counter-example to formalism. As we shall see, David's painting *La mort de Marat* cannot be properly appreciated in purely formal terms, in part because there are overwhelming moral issues which arise from any informed contemplation of the work.

²⁰ Greenberg, "Complaints," 266.

²¹ Dziemidok, 189.

²² Bell, 24.

²³ Fry, 26.

²⁴ Bell, 84.

A Criticism of Formalism

Formalism has, of course, its critics. Crispin Sartwell writes: "The program of critical formalism . . . is a classic case of over-enthusiasm. To claim that the presentational content of a work is never a significant aesthetic feature of the work . . . is ludicrous."²⁵ Sartwell points to art forgeries as paradigmatic counter-examples to formalist theories. Suppose an original painting and a forgery are visually (i.e., formally) indistinguishable.

That one of the paintings is a forgery . . . means that there are innumerable aesthetic differences between the two: for example, one is original, ingenious, a product of the seventeenth century, and a work by Franz Hals, while the other is a slavish copy made in the twentieth century by George Ersatz.²⁶

If, however, these objects possess different aesthetic traits, they should elicit different aesthetic responses. It follows that we must pay attention to other factors over and beyond the formal or perceptual qualities of a work when engaged in the act of artistic appraisal.

But Sartwell's criticism is not conclusive. Real-life forgeries usually do present us with an inferior visual effect. More importantly, the formalist can always argue that we disapprove of the forgery on moral rather than aesthetic grounds. We value the original more than the forgery, not because it affords a different aesthetic experience (they are, after all, identical), but because the latter is associated with a sense of moral condemnation. It is like eating a fine meal in a blood-stained execution chamber. Our appetite palls before even the most savoury offering. The problem is not, however, the meal. It is the setting in which the meal is offered.

If, however, formalism can make sense of our reaction to an artistic forgery, it cannot make sense of representative artworks which elicit aesthetic effects based, in part, on something other than formal considerations. In this article I will argue that the formal elements of a painting are not the only source of authentic aesthetic experience. In the case of representational painting, one cannot identify the "appropriate experience of emotion" without taking into consideration the content of the picture.

²⁵ Sartwell argues against "strict formalism" and in favour of "common sense formalism." Crispin Sartwell, "Appropriation and Interpretation," *Journal of Value Inquiry*, 28 (1994), 329.

²⁶ Sartwell, 331.

La mort de Marat

We philosophers, in discussing art, tend towards reductionism. We simplify examples, devise thought-experiments, limit discussion to general principles, direct attacks against the arguments of other philosophers. We can, however, develop a more sophisticated understanding of aesthetic appreciation, one which transcends this kind of formalist reductionism. Close attention to the issues raised by a careful study of David's *La mort de Marat* (1793) may elucidate this contention.

David's piece has been universally acclaimed. Baudelaire calls it "*le chef d'oeuvre de David*."²⁷ McMullen confirms that it "is generally considered [his] masterpiece."²⁸ Canaday thinks that it is "possibly David's masterpiece."²⁹ Brest describes it as the painter's "first truly great work."³⁰ Beckett remarks that it has "gigantic force."³¹ Anita Brookner argues that the correct reaction "is one of awe."³² Starobinski writes that the scene has all "the dimensions of an eternal monument."³³ And Luc de Nanteuil calls it "a Revolutionary Pieta," a "masterpiece," an expression of "extraordinary emotion, simplicity and authority."³⁴ As Friedlaender points out, "David considered 'Marat' and [its companion piece] 'Lepelletier' his best works, and when they were given back to him in 1795 kept them near him in his atelier, in spite of worthwhile offers."³⁵

Visually, formally, *La mort de Marat* is a masterpiece, a painterly display of consummate beauty and skill. The treatment is fresh, spontaneous, bold, appropriately morbid yet tender, even

²⁷ Cited in Anita Brookner, *Jacques-Louis David* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987), 116 and elsewhere.

²⁸ Roy McMullen, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. "David, Jacques-Louis."

²⁹ John Canaday, *The Lives of the Painters*, Vol. 2 *Baroque* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1969), 694.

³⁰ Jorge Romero Brest, *Encyclopedia of World Art* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1971), 244.

³¹ Sister Wendy Beckett, *The Story of Painting* (London: Dorling Kindersley, 1994), 255.

³² Brookner, 115.

³³ Jean Starobinski, *1789: Des Emblèmes de la Raison* (Paris: Flammarion, 1979), 78.

³⁴ Luc de Nanteuil, *Jacques Louis David* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1985), 31.

³⁵ Walter Friedlaender, *David to Delecroix* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1952), 25.

gentle in a kind of icy, tranquil and yet emotionally charged neo-classical style. If, however, the painting provides us with an impressive visual display, if we focus solely on its formal aspects, we will respond in a radically inappropriate way, for the painting constitutes, at the same time, a panegyric to an infamous political figure, a man described by some as “a homicidal maniac.”

What Kind of Artwork Is David's Painting?

Roger Fry writes:

In our reaction to a work of art . . . there is the consciousness of purpose, the consciousness of a particular relation of sympathy with the man who made this thing to arouse precisely the sensations we experience. . . . And this recognition of purpose is, I believe, an essential part of the aesthetic judgement proper.³⁶

Wimsatt and Beardsley, in their famous paper on the intentional fallacy, argued (unconvincingly, I think) that the author's original purpose is not available as a standard for judging a work of art.³⁷ In the present instance, however, the artist's original purpose can be readily recovered, for David and his contemporaries have left us a rich historical record outlining their artistic aspirations.

“Intentional fallacy” a fallacy.

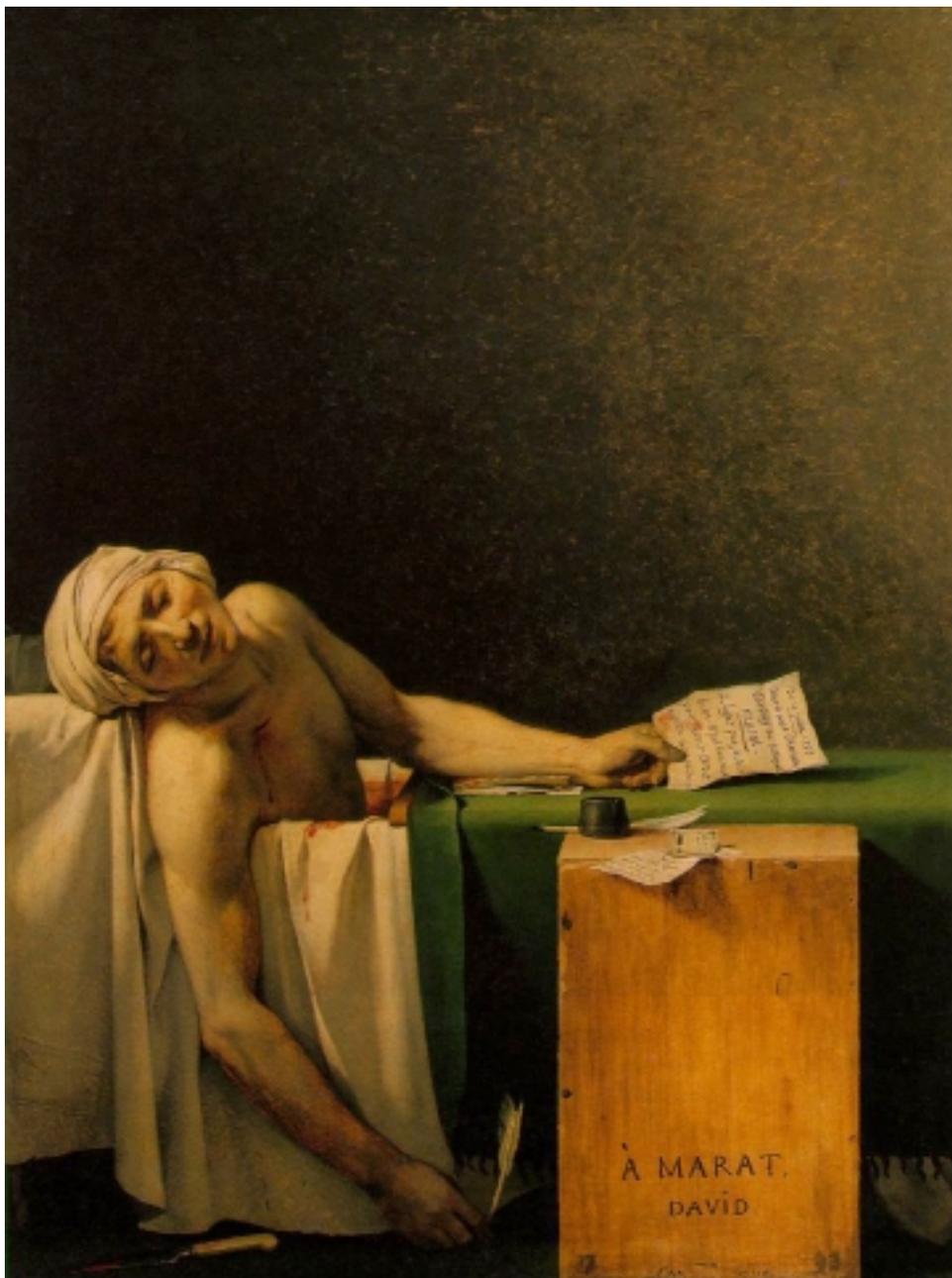
David (1748-1825) was a celebrated radical artist who had made his reputation as a historical painter, presenting, in various Salons, neoclassical works such as: *The Oath of the Horatii*, *The Death of Socrates*, and *The Lictors Bearing the Bodies of Brutus' Dead Sons*. In Kelder's words: “No contemporary of David's could rival him in prestige nor in the amount of influence produced by his *tableaux d'histoire*.”³⁸ The practise of historical painting was, however, shot through with moralizing purpose. Kelder credits Diderot with “a constant plea for the representation [in art] of virtue,”³⁹ and the age as a whole with a “critical preoccupation with goodness and with the moral purpose or function of the

³⁶ Fry, 33.

³⁷ I have commented, at some length, on their views elsewhere. See Louis Groarke, “Following in the Footsteps of Aristotle: The Chicago School, the Glue-Stick, and the Razor,” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* IV (Summer 1992): 190-205.

³⁸ Diane Kelder, *Aspects of 'Official' Painting and Philosophic Art* (New York, London: Garland Publishing, 1976), 55.

³⁹ Kelder, 25.



Jacques-Louis David, LA MORT DE MARAT

work of art.”⁴⁰ The historical painter, in particular, was to portray, in La Font de Saint-Yenne’s words, “the virtuous and heroic actions of great men, examples of humanity, generosity, greatness, courage, . . . the passionate enthusiasms for honour and well-being of the Fatherland.”⁴¹

With the coming of the French revolution, these same aesthetic preoccupations were now shaped and fitted to a new purpose. As Kelder explains, “It was now the duty of those artists serving the new republic to provide works of art which would stimulate the high moral standards and sense of patriotic self-sacrifice consonant with a utopian state.”⁴² This desire for an exalted secular morality expressed itself, in particular, in “the revolutionary cult of great men.”⁴³ The artist’s duty was, in this case, clear—to glorify the revolutionary martyr, “to immortalize the sacrifices of these great men through . . . permanent works of art.”⁴⁴

*Aesthetics
subordinated
to politics.*

David’s artistic work falls within these broad outlines. *La mort de Marat* is intended as a historical painting of a contemporary event. It immortalizes a revolutionary hero, the journalist Jean-Paul Marat who had made his career denouncing the enemies of the revolution. Marat had been assassinated, stabbed to death in his bath, by the treacherous Charlotte Corday d’Armont. The painting captures the final, tragic, melodramatic scene; the expiring moments of one of the fathers of the revolution. The artist presents Marat in lush visual terms as the embodiment of revolutionary morality.

David’s painting tells a story. Like a book, it has to be read. Marat, the famous journalist, suffered from a serious skin disease and had the habit of working in a medicinal bath to ease his condition. On July 13, 1793, Marie-Anne Charlotte Corday came to him with information about alleged counterrevolutionary conspiracies. Admitted to his presence, she pulled out a butcher knife and plunged it into his lungs. These facts would have been entirely familiar to any spectator in David’s time. David, however, presents a particular perspective on the story.

The painting omits the assassin. All our attention is focused

⁴⁰ Kelder, 22.

⁴¹ Kelder, 33.

⁴² Kelder, 63.

⁴³ Kelder, 133-134.

⁴⁴ Kelder, 133-134.

on the journalist, killed in the course of his revolutionary labours. Pen and ink stand waiting on the box that serves as a bedside stand. Papers lie on the makeshift table in front of him. His mighty pen, the pen that struck fear into the hearts of traitors, is about to slip from his moribund right hand.

David contrasts the virtuous penury of Marat with his fabled generosity. On the bedside box, there is a promissory note with a handwritten letter: "You will give this assignat to this mother of 5 children whose husband died in the defence of the Fatherland." In his left hand, he clasps a note from his assassin with the telling phrase: "It suffices that I am unfortunate to have the right to your kindness." The painting is personally dedicated "TO MARAT," signed "DAVID," and dated "YEAR TWO," the second year after the declaration of the French Republic.

David's painting is not entirely new. In form and composition, it closely recalls his earlier reception piece into the Academy, *Hector and Andromache*.⁴⁵ But this inspired new painting is more than a deathbed scene of an ancient hero. It reflects the emotional fervour of the times. Marat was widely celebrated as a revolutionary hero. At his funeral, "Hymns were sung and speeches pronounced comparing him to Jesus."⁴⁶ The crowd had chanted "O heart of Jesus, O heart of Marat!"⁴⁷ David, carried away with emotion, presents us with a homage to a revolutionary Christ.

The composition recalls traditional religious iconography. The idealized nude body is like a Renaissance Christ. The bath, with its long box-like form, takes on a solemn tomb-like shape. The recumbent pose with the extended, trailing arm recalls, in detail, Renaissance depictions of the Disposition of Christ. (Cf. Girodet-Trioson, Caravaggio, Pontormo, Fiorentino, van der Wyden, Jan van Scorel,⁴⁸ Michelangelo, etc.) The gaping wound below the clavicle with the stream of blood parallels the wound in the Saviour's side. The knife, smeared with blood, is the in-

⁴⁵ Exhibited in 1783.

⁴⁶ Louis Gottschalk, *Jean Paul Marat: A Study in Radicalism* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1966 ed.), 187.

⁴⁷ Brookner, 114.

⁴⁸ For example, Jan van Scorel's (1495-1562) *Lamentation* depicts a Christ figure almost identical to David's Marat. Whether or not David saw this work, what is important is that both artists have been inspired by the very same artistic heritage.

strument of Marat's passion. Even the note clutched in the martyr's languishing hand might be compared to the notice Pilate nailed to the cross above the Saviour's head. If the Comte de Caylus had expressed the notion "that virtue can be personified or epitomized in a single figure,"⁴⁹ Marat is presented here as the personification of virtue, a Christ-like martyr who gave his life for the salvation of the people.

David's painting belongs to the neoclassicist tradition. As a report on a contemporary event, it lacks the usual neoclassicist props of antique costume and setting. The artist has managed, nonetheless, through the use of draperies, through the bandage around the head and the absence of any period dress, to imbue the scene with a timeless, if not antique, quality. More important is the painterly style. The clarity of the contours, the absence of distracting detail, the simplicity of the colour scheme, the stillness of the pose, the basic stability (even rigidity) of the composition, all point to an artist steeped in neoclassicist values. If Diderot associated the neoclassical style with a characteristic "tranquillity in the composition,"⁵⁰ David's work seems an embodiment of the neoclassical ethos.

La mort de Marat is a stunning visual display. The play of the light, the rich but sombre colour-scheme, the nobility of the figure which, despite its haggard look, is suffused with an undeniable grace and gentleness, the finely modeled forms, the austere composition, the evident naturalism in the body and surroundings, the emotional sincerity, the sense of restrained pathos, the clarity of the drawing, the blood-stained highlights, all add up to an overpowering visual experience. To consider the painting in purely formal terms (if that is even possible) is, however, to miss the point. The physical beauty of the work is intended by the artist as a fitting reflection on Marat's moral integrity. This is a visual sermon, a call to piety, to reverence. David, in presenting his painting to the National Convention, expressed the hope that his colleagues, in looking at "the livid and bloody features of Marat," would be reminded of "his virtues," which they "must never cease" to emulate.⁵¹

*Painting
a visual
sermon.*

⁴⁹ Gottschalk, 30.

⁵⁰ Gottschalk, 38.

⁵¹ Cited in *Jacques-Louis David: 1748-1825: Musée du Louvre, Département des peintures, Paris [et] Musée national du château, Versailles, 26 octobre 1989-12 février*

Who Was Marat?

*Marat a
bloodthirsty
neurotic.*

David points to Marat as the paradigm of morality. If, however, we delve into the life and times of Jean-Paul Marat (1743-1793), we discover a disturbingly different character, a strident propagandist, leader of the mob in the French Revolution, who has been variously described as bloodthirsty, hysterical, and neurotic. The basic facts are well-known. Marat approved of and perhaps participated in the September 1792 massacres of between 900 and 1600 clergy and nobles held in Paris prisons. He militated vigorously and voted for the summary execution of the king. And he personally orchestrated the June 2, 1793, condemnation that resulted in the guillotining of the Girondins, those conservative representatives who opposed him in the National Convention. Rounded up in the morning, they were summarily killed that afternoon, without any hint of judicial process.

Marat was, first and foremost, a journalist. His radical and immensely influential newspaper, first the *L'Ami du Peuple*, then the *Journal de la République Française*, was, however, little more than a propaganda sheet. It was famous, not for balanced, fair reporting, but for impassioned, fierce crusading in the name of an ideological cause. Marat was more than willing to shape the truth to his political purposes. As Gottschalk writes: "[He] often lied, often planned to mislead by false implication, often employed innuendo."⁵²

Marat may have "exercised the greatest influence of all the journalists of the Revolution,"⁵³ but he hardly stands as a model of responsible journalism. In his hands, the printed word became an instrument of invective and vituperation, a political tool, a weapon to incite the masses, to calumniate enemies, to weed out and expose counterrevolutionaries, to destroy or defeat anyone or anything that could be viewed as a threat to the perceived progress of the revolution. His journalistic practise belies any conception of the profession as a disinterested, objective inquiry into truth.

Marat talks of "tear[ing] out the heart of the infernal [Lafayette]," of "burn[ing] the monarch and his henchmen in his pal-

1990 (Paris: Ministère de la culture, de la communication, des grands travaux et du Bicentenaire, Éditions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, c1989), 285.

⁵² Gottschalk, 52.

⁵³ Gottschalk, 183.

ace,” of “impal[ing]” the representatives in the National Assembly in their seats and “bury[ing them] under the flaming debris of [their] lair.”⁵⁴ As Gottschalk comments:

Often, in blood-curdling tones, [Marat] had himself summoned [the people] to revolt, to burn the Senate house, to purge it of its suspect members, to mutilate and destroy individual traitors. In November 1790 . . . his cries for such popular measures occurred almost daily, so passionate and angry as almost to justify the charge, frequently made, that he was a homicidal maniac.⁵⁵

When prisoners are captured during the attack at Tuileries (the royal residence adjacent to the Louvre), Marat tells the mob that they should break into the prison and dispatch them with the sword.⁵⁶ In another infamous passage, he warns the mob:

Six months ago, five to six hundred heads would have been enough to pull you back from the precipice. Today, now that you have stupidly let your implacable enemies regain their force, you will have to slaughter perhaps five to six thousand, but even if it was necessary to slaughter twenty-thousand, there isn't a moment to hesitate.⁵⁷

As a political thinker, Marat's legacy is as ominous. He proposes, without qualms of conscience, the use of mass execution and terror as a legitimate means of achieving a political goal. At one point, he agitates for the establishment of “a supreme dictator” (he seems to have had himself in mind) to punish the guilty⁵⁸ and “lay hands upon the principal known traitors.”⁵⁹ When his suggestion goes unheeded, he calls for the formation of patriotic clubs like the “Society of Avengers of the Law,”⁶⁰ “judicial [bodies] created for the express purpose of punishing political offenders.”⁶¹ In April 1793, he tries to muster support for three draconian measures: “firstly, [that all] monks and officials of the

⁵⁴ Gottschalk, 78.

⁵⁵ Gottschalk, 109.

⁵⁶ The French is “*les passer au fil de l'épée.*” Gérard Walter, “Marat” in *Histoire de la presse française: des origines à 1881* (Paris: René de Livois, 1965), 127. Citation from *le 19 août 1792*.

⁵⁷ Walter, 126. Citation from *le 18 décembre 1790*.

⁵⁸ Gottschalk, 111.

⁵⁹ Gottschalk, 111.

⁶⁰ Gottschalk, 107.

⁶¹ Gottschalk, 173.

Ancient Regime . . . shall not be permitted . . . [to] meet in greater numbers than three, under penalty of death; secondly [that] every public functionary who has conspired against the country shall be punished by death; thirdly, [that] every civil official guilty of embezzlement shall lose his right ear, every military official guilty of evil intentions his two thumbs, and every henchman of the former King or any officer [who] lack[s] discipline . . . his two thumbs also."⁶² Despite a real need for political reform in France at this time, this is hardly an innocuous legacy.

Consider, finally, Marat the individual. Personal testimony indicates that Marat was deeply troubled, jealous, paranoid, vindictive, capable of enormous hatred, thirsty for revenge, and motivated, if not by selfishness, by "a natural tendency towards self-glorification."⁶³ Gottschalk, a moderate commentator, speaks of Marat's "profoundly suspicious nature," his "morbid expectation of unjust treatment," his "persecution mania," "his distrust of others' motives," his "martyr complex."⁶⁴ In an open letter to Marat dating from the French Revolution, one commentator writes: "You denounce in order to denounce, to have the pleasure of calumny, because slandering others is for you a need."⁶⁵

Evil idealized. In his painting, David has idealized an evil or at least a monstrously troubled figure. Marat, with his martyr complex, would have been well pleased with David's depiction. If Plato complains that the artist has the power to make the bad seem good,⁶⁶ the offence in this particular case seems flagrant, for David's self-conscious aesthetic purpose was to immortalize that which is noble and good, not just in technique, but in choice of subject matter. David betrays his own artistic goals and the aesthetic sensibilities of his age. And he inevitably deceives the spectator.

⁶² Gottschalk, 134.

⁶³ Gottschalk, 53.

⁶⁴ Gottschalk, 25-26.

⁶⁵ "Tu dénonce pour dénoncer. pour avoir le plaisir de calomnier; parce que dire du mal est pour toi un besoin." C. Fournier (*Américain*) *A Marat*, Paris 14 Mars, l'an 2 de la République Française, De l'imprimerie de Mayer & Compagnie, 3-4.

⁶⁶ Plato, *Republic* 597b-598c.

Does the Painting Tell a Lie?

Antoine Schnapper, in describing *La mort de Marat*, refers to David's "total commitment to reality, interpreted objectively and without excessive detail or adornment."⁶⁷ This is a common view. But the painting is anything but an objective recording of reality. It tells a lie. It is part of a political campaign which involved "the transformation of Marat from the fierce and physically ugly person that he was into a figure of veneration and adoration."⁶⁸

There are many levels of untruth here. To begin with, David presents us with a handsome Marat. But the journalist was a pugnacious, coarsely featured figure with an unattractive face.⁶⁹ It is not simply, as Kelder suggests, that David "softens the ugly features of the radical journalist."⁷⁰ This is *extreme* idealization. In Roberts's words: "The remarkable realism of the painting [is] . . . combined with an utter disregard to the actual features of Marat."⁷¹

Multiple levels of untruth.

Walter describes Marat as "a little man, ugly and deformed, poorly and negligently dressed."⁷² Most notably, the journalist's entire body was disfigured by a very serious skin disease. As Shearing, a virulent critic of Marat, explains: "It was commonly believed that he had leprosy; his whole body was covered by a foul eruption, a scrofula (*purigo de Hébra*) or eczema."⁷³ David's Marat is then, at best, a careful reconstruction of reality.

David has also remodeled the murder scene, which was carefully described in various newspaper reports at the time. Marat worked in a shoe-shaped bath in a room decorated with pilaster-ornamented wallpaper. Hanging on the wall was a map of France, a poster with the word "Death" and two pistols. There were plates of food and stray newspapers cluttering the floor.

⁶⁷ Antoine Schnapper, "Painting During the Revolution," in Founders Society, Detroit Institute of Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Réunion des musées nationaux, *French Painting 1774-1830: The Age of Revolution* (Detroit: Detroit Institute of Art, 1975), 112.

⁶⁸ Warren Roberts, *Jacques-Louis David: Revolutionary Artist* (Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 81.

⁶⁹ Cf. Marat's portrait in the Musée Carnavalet.

⁷⁰ Kelder, 139.

⁷¹ Roberts, 82.

⁷² Walter, 128.

⁷³ Joseph Shearing, *Angel of the Assassination* (London, Toronto: William Heinemann, 1938), 129.

David has, however, eliminated all these homely details.⁷⁴ The wooden box, blankets, and sheets are pristine, clean. If one sheet has been discreetly patched, there is nothing squalid or sordid about these impoverished surroundings. This is, in David's own words, an "honourable indigence."

But once again, this is a misrepresentation. This was "a time when one could be denounced by one's servant for wearing clean linen."⁷⁵ As a partisan of the lower classes, *les sans-culottes*, Marat made a display of dressing in a slovenly, unkempt manner. To be clean was to be an aristocrat. Shearing, the author of a book on Charlotte Corday entitled the *Angel of the Assassination*, refers to Marat's "verminous black hair" which was "bound with a dirty rag soaked in vinegar," to his "scabby limbs covered with filthy clothes," to "his bandaged legs" and "broken boots."⁷⁶

One can gauge the extent to which David has remodeled his subject matter by comparing his painting of the assassination scene to Shearing's description of what Mlle. Corday saw when she entered Marat's bathroom. In his words:

The scene . . . had all the horror of a hallucination; . . . Marat was seated in his bath, which was *sabot* shaped, which had been painted fawn colour and was nearly black from dirt; he was nude to the waist, an old dressing gown thrown across his shoulders. . . . [His] huge head, so disproportionate to his meagre body, was bound by a napkin dripping vinegar that hung in the clotted masses of his heavy, greasy black hair.

The face itself was terrible beyond even what Mlle. de Corday had supposed; the features were swollen and crushed, the frightful humid lips and the sunken cheeks were the same livid hue, . . . [his] lead-coloured tint was disfigured by scabs and sores, [by] the sparse hairs of ragged eyebrows, [by] the coarse stubble of a half-shaven beard[;] the naked body was scaled as if by leprosy, and beneath the sunken flesh showed the pitiful undeveloped frame bent by rickets.

From this almost inhuman mask looked out two piercing yellow eyes, infected with bile and blood, but serene and formidable.⁷⁷

Catherine Decours, in a more recent book on Corday, provides a similar description of Marat.⁷⁸ It is difficult to imagine, however,

⁷⁴ Brookner, 113; Shearing, 205-206.

⁷⁵ Brookner, 115.

⁷⁶ Shearing, 129.

⁷⁷ Shearing, 205-206.

⁷⁸ Catherine Decours, *La lettre à Alexandrine* (Paris: Olivier Orban, 1985), 461.

that the painting and the literary passage record the same event! In each case, a basic fund of fact is seen through a thick overlay of editorial slant.

There is a serenity and composure to David's depiction which belies the feverish, fanatical pace of Marat's life. If David depicts Marat's death as a slow, calm, languorous event characterized by an eerie beauty, Shearing describes the same event in more brutal terms: "With open jaws from which the tongue hung out, with staring eyes, Marat lay dead."⁷⁹ If Charlotte Corday is, for Shearing, the hero of this historical drama, David has contrived to exclude the counterrevolutionary martyr from his representation. Her presence in the painting might provide a worthy foil to the Jacobin hero. It might also have led to questions about Marat's sexual integrity.

David succeeds in his polemical purpose through a deft idealization of Marat's appearance and the physical setting. But his picture also contains editorial alterations of a more serious nature. In presenting his painting to the National Convention, David assured "mothers, widows, orphans, oppressed soldiers," that Marat had died giving them "his last crust of bread."⁸⁰ But the alm depicted on the bedside box is pure invention. Marat did not die giving his last pennies to the poor. The details surrounding his death are of an altogether different nature.

The note Marat clutches was never delivered. Corday did write a note to this effect, but David has altered the actual wording. Corday did not appeal to Marat's *bienveillance* (good-natured kindness). She appealed, not to his charity, but to his political hatred and partisan suspicions. She had written: "I am coming from Caen. Your love for the Fatherland must make you want to know the conspiracies that are being hatched there."⁸¹ In the course of the interview, she handed him a list of alleged Girondist conspirators. His response was quick and unequivocal: "I will soon have them guillotined at Paris."⁸² As Roberts explains:

⁷⁹ Shearing, 211.

⁸⁰ Cited in Brookner, 115. *Discours prononcé à la Convention Nationale de David, député de Paris. Séance 24 Brumaire, l'an II de la République Française.*

⁸¹ Decours, 458. Citation from the *Gazette Nationale* 16 juillet 1793.

⁸² The precise wording of his response has been variously reported, but the intent is unmistakably clear. See: Ernest Bax, *Jean-Paul Marat: The People's Friend* (London: Grant Richards, 1901), 303; Gottschalk, 168; Decours, 463.

[Marat] said this without any evidence, without any trial, with nothing but the word of a person he had never seen. It was precisely such a disregard of ordinary legal procedures, such unswerving determination to destroy all who were suspected enemies of the revolution that was the essence of Marat the political person.⁸³

In David's painting, Marat is the lamb immolated, his blood spilled out for the people. He might be more accurately depicted as the butcher who was butchered. Marat died as he lived, agitating for the execution of others. David's representation excludes any awareness of the morally problematic nature of his role in the French Revolution.

Deceptive realism.

Boime writes: "Despite the manipulation of the actual facts, . . . David has rendered the figure and the narrative details with an astonishing realism."⁸⁴ Baudelaire had earlier commented: "All these details are historical and real."⁸⁵ But David's realism is only a very skilful exercise in deception. It persuades us, through visual means, of the moral heroism of an evil or, at least, a sinister man. Formalism notwithstanding, this must influence the way an informed spectator responds to the painting.

Was David an Innocent Bystander or Knowing Accomplice?

One might want to argue that David was an innocent tool of evil men, that the painting embodies genuine moral aspirations and should not be judged too harshly. But David himself was a willing accomplice to the most brutal aspects of the French Revolution. This particular composition was, moreover, part of a sweeping propaganda campaign mounted by the Jacobins to facilitate the execution of their more moderate conservative rivals. It must be seen against the background of the Reign of Terror which, according to one sober estimate, led to the arrest of "at least 300,000 suspects, 17,000 of whom were sentenced to death and executed, while more died in prisons or were killed without any form of trial."⁸⁶

David was actively involved with the political forces that orchestrated the widespread killing. Elected deputy to the National

⁸³ Roberts, 81.

⁸⁴ Boime, 464.

⁸⁵ Cited in Brookner, 116.

⁸⁶ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. "French Revolution."

Convention from Paris in 1792, he sat with the extremist *montagnards*, including Marat and his cold-blooded friend Robespierre.⁸⁷ After enthusiastically voting for the execution of the King, he was appointed to the Committee of General Security in 1793-94 and became personally involved in the bloodletting.⁸⁸ De Nauteuil explains:

Accomplice to mass murder.

David signed nearly three hundred arrest warrants for the apprehension of subjects and about fifty summonses calling the parties involved before the revolutionary tribunal. Among the victims, most of whom would be guillotined, were the names of individuals who had once been his patrons, such as Philippe Egalité . . . the marshal and the Dutchess de Noailles . . . General Alexandre de Beauharnais . . . and Madame du Barry, among others.

From the beginning, David was well aware of the widespread violence. He was present at the storming of the Bastille where he drew the head of the Governor Marquis de Launay (Bernard Jordan) impaled on a pitchfork.⁸⁹ He was less than sympathetic to the royalists' plight. The day after the women's raid on Versailles, he was reported to have said: "It is a great misfortune that that vile bitch [the Queen] was not strangled or torn to pieces by those women mobsters."⁹⁰ He later completed a harsh sketch of the Queen being carted off to the guillotine.⁹¹

As the leading revolutionary artist, David was officially appointed "director of all revolutionary festivals,"⁹² staging extravagant pageants and rallies for the cause.⁹³ These public festivals, with their strident overtones, simplistic symbolism, and love of spectacular effects, parallel propaganda rallies orchestrated by fascists and Nazis a century-and-a-half later.⁹⁴ David also organized politically motivated funerals for Lepelletier and Marat and served on the Commission of Public Monuments (he suggested

⁸⁷ In 1792 he sends Robespierre a self-portrait and, in July 1794, tells him that he will stand by him to the death. De Nanteuil, 32.

⁸⁸ De Nanteuil, 27-28.

⁸⁹ De Nanteuil provides a useful chronology of David's life, 67-70.

⁹⁰ Cited in Boime, 467.

⁹¹ De Nanteuil, 31; Boime, 467.

⁹² De Nanteuil, 28.

⁹³ See David Dowdy, *Pageant Master of the Republic: Jacques-Louis David and the French Revolution* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, c1948).

⁹⁴ See, for example, De Nanteuil, 28.

tearing all the statues off the facade of *Notre Dame*).⁹⁵ He was also the artist of the National Convention and reorganized the Salons.

In any number of revolutionary works, Marat joins political and aesthetic ambitions. *La mort de Marat*, *Lepelletier de Saint-Fargeau*, and the unfinished *La mort de Barra*, are all rhetorically embellished compositions intended to whip up revolutionary fervor in favour of the Jacobin cause. A design for a theatre curtain dating from this period features an allegorical procession of personified virtues and revolutionary martyrs led by citizens with upraised swords about to dispatch the fallen royalty.⁹⁶ David also contributed a number of political cartoons to the revolutionary cause. One scatological example shows the Royalist British government adorned with sceptre and crown with the King as its arse farting out a plethora of taxes on the common people.⁹⁷ David's later work for Napoleon also joins the aesthetic to the political purpose in a highly conscious and deliberate way.

What Is the Appropriate Aesthetic Reaction to the Painting?

We cannot appreciate *La mort de Marat* unless we first understand what kind of object it is. Formalists argue for an appreciation of an artwork based on formal qualities alone. But to appreciate an artwork is to experience the appropriate emotional reaction. If David's masterpiece is, formally, a beautiful work of art, the appropriate emotional response is not spiritual rapture or exaltation. It is a very different feeling, a sense of betrayal, a feeling that one has been swindled, seduced, tricked, defrauded, by the very magnificence of the pictorial representation. This painting is made up of formal elements that constitute, at the same time, an exercise in deception.

*Form and
content
inseparable.*

One cannot avoid the moral issues that arise from David's painting. It is not as if one experiences the form *or* the content of a representative painting. The enlightened spectator is aware of both together. *La mort de Marat* is, on one level, a beautiful visual display. On another level, it is an exercise in flagrant, sordid, politically motivated deception. The appropriate aesthetic

⁹⁵ De Nanteuil, 29.

⁹⁶ De Nanteuil, 29.

⁹⁷ Musée du Louvre, *Jacques-Louis David*, 147

response includes an awareness of the resultant tension. To naively celebrate the formal beauty of the work without taking into consideration the moral problems it poses is to miss out on a more sophisticated level of aesthetic appreciation.

The appropriate aesthetic reaction to *La mort de Marat* is a simultaneous and complicated awareness of its beauty and its deviousness. We are driven to the aesthetic ecstasy Bell talks about and, in the same instance, we are pulled down into disgust and indignation. There is no point trying to find a resolution to this terrible tension. In David's painting, the ideal is the sordid and the sordid is the ideal. Bell argues that the experience of successful artistic form *must* be attended by a corresponding emotional pleasure.⁹⁸ In the present case, we have an experience of successful artistic form which should be attended by some searing emotional discomfort. In an ideal world, the ethical and the beautiful would exist together. In the real world, things are not so simple.

*Ecstasy
marred by
disgust.*

As has been widely recognized, *La mort de Marat* may be David's best piece. The painting exhibits a startling realism, a freshness, a spontaneity, as if it had been painted in a great rush of inspiration. It must be seen as an offshoot of a public hysteria occasioned by Marat's assassination. Modern readers will find it hard to comprehend the public's reaction to the journalist's death.

Marat's heart was embalmed and hung from the ceiling of a church. His bathtub and other paraphernalia were put on display beneath a wooden obelisk. Thirty-seven municipalities changed their name to Marat. In Bax's words: "Every good citizen throughout France was expected to wear some memento of the People's Friend. Rings, scarf-pins, medallions were manufactured by the hundred-thousand and sold as fast they were made. . . . His portrait hung in every citizen's room. . . . Hymns to the memory of the 'People's Martyr' were composed by the hundreds and hawked about the streets."⁹⁹

Brookner writes: "The quality of [David's] productions at this time is of breathtaking audacity and beauty. It is as if he is animated at a subliminal level."¹⁰⁰ Witnesses said the painter was

⁹⁸ Carol Gould, "Clive Bell on Aesthetic Experience and Aesthetic Truth," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 34 (April, 1994), 131.

⁹⁹ Bax, 327-328.

¹⁰⁰ Brookner, 110.

delirious: “*en délire*.”¹⁰¹ There is a Faustian element here. David has committed himself, heart and soul, to a political party bent on genocide. Yet he paints a work of dazzling mastery. It is as if, in this state of diabolical exaltation, David’s artistic powers have been heightened to fever pitch. Traditional warnings about the glamour of evil spring to mind. This is a beautiful but loathsome work. Again, the appropriate reaction is a profound disquietude, a queasy feeling in the pit of one’s stomach.

La mort de Marat is a valuable work, not because the artist achieves his purpose (he ultimately fails), not because it epitomizes the spirit of the age (as it most certainly does), not solely because it is a beautiful visual display (which it is). *La mort de Marat* is a valuable artwork because it exposes the complexity of the aesthetic impulse. This is art, in the most beautiful guise, in the service of base propaganda. We are confronted with the problem of evil: that which is most reprehensible comes to us in the form of that which is most beautiful. The unsophisticated spectator who walks away from the painting without an awareness of this underlying tension has not understood the work.

What Is in an Aesthetic Response?

*Perception
more than
mere
sensation.*

A formalist like Dziemidok identifies the “purely aesthetic point of view” with the purely perceptual point of view. This is to introduce a false dichotomy into our experience. When we view a representational painting, form and content coalesce. When we view the depiction of a human body, we do not experience abstract expanses of pigment *per se* but expanses of pigment *qua* human form. The humanness of the form is an indissociable part of the visual experience. If the world was not made of things, visual content would be only that—visual content. But the world is made up of things, and the identity of these things can and must intrude on our consciousness when we experience them deeply. In contemplating artworks, we are not called upon to ignore the nature of reality or to divest ourselves of our humanity.

To appreciate an artwork is to respond with the appropriate emotional reaction. We cannot experience, however, the appropriate emotional reaction to David’s work without taking into

¹⁰¹ Brookner, 110.

consideration the subject matter, the historical context and David's artistic purpose. Though Greenberg claims that formalism allows us to experience the old masters "with less intrusion of irrelevancies, [and] therefore more fully and more intensely,"¹⁰² to view this particular painting without taking into consideration its non-formal elements would be unsophisticated, untutored and, properly speaking, unaesthetic.

Formalists divorce the moral from the aesthetic. In the present case, this is inappropriate. In considering the moral ramifications of David's painting, we are not imposing foreign values on the work. The painting, by its very nature, imposes these standards on itself. It demands a moral evaluation. It was originally designed to be viewed in a moral light. If we want to experience it fully, we must grapple with the attendant moral issues.

Not every painting presents us with the searing dilemma of David's masterpiece. If, however, David's work is ultimately a colossal failure, it is aesthetically and philosophically significant because it illustrates, in a conspicuous way, the poverty of aesthetic formalism. Many artworks do not, of course, address moral and political issues in so direct a manner. Nonetheless, every artwork is an expression of human purpose; and, wherever there is human purpose, there is some underlying moral aspiration.

It is proper and fitting to respond to the world in an appropriate manner: to delight in the beautiful, to feel awe at the sublime, to laugh at what is truly funny, to weep at what is truly sad, to feel horror at the horrible, to feel contempt for the contemptible, and so on. The best art enhances and intensifies these feelings. David, on the other hand, would have us delight in the reprehensible, the grotesque and the insane. He betrays the artistic impulse. *La mort de Marat* is, at best, a deceitful distortion of what art is all about.

¹⁰² Greenberg, "Abstract Art," 82.