Revolutions of the Senses

Martin Renz/Julius Schwarzwälder

The same things just don't look the same anymore.

You may, for instance, come home from a war to find that the people who stayed behind "just don't speak the same language."[01] Or you may be looking for common ground with people from the other side of a recently abolished geopolitical frontier, only to discover that "looking at the same images, we did not see the same things."[02] But it is not only that two people can say the same words and mean, can look at the same object and see different things. It is more unsettling still when one and the same person, or one and the same group of people, comes to perceive exactly the same thing in a completely different way.

We call this un-unseeability. Un-unseeability concerns something that happens to people. It is not a personal quirk or an illusion, it is certainly nothing that can be revoked, and, curiously enough, for about 250 years it has been a pivotal phenomenon of modern political and even revolutionary change.

Once you see it, you can't unsee it.

01
Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Fontana, 1976), 9.

02
Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (MIT Press, 2000), 236.

Un-Unseeability: Outlines of a Phenomenon

We will approach un-unseeability by exhibiting a certain kind of image. Take a look at the logo of Toblerone chocolate.

[06]

Toblerone, of course, is well known for the resemblance of its logo to the mountain-shaped chocolate pieces that each bar consists of. While this will certainly come to mind, all that matters for our purposes is a closer visual inspection of the image. At first sight, it simply consists of a golden mountain silhouette, ostentatiously subtitled by the brand name 'Toblerone,' spelled out in its virtually unmistakable lettering, consisting of red capitals, gold-edged and shadowed in black. But if you look closer, you may find something else. So take another look. (Or flip the page for help.)

[07]

While it is clear that you have now 'found' the shape or *gestalt* of a giant bear climbing the mountain, the gravity of the perceptual shift you have just experienced might not be immediately apparent. For when you revisit the first image, you will not only be able to see a bear—you will never be able to unsee it again. The bear has become un-unseeable. This does not mean that it was invisible, though it may in fact not have come into sight immediately. Rather, the bear was (and continues to be) hidden in plain sight and, most importantly: once it is seen, it cannot be unseen.

The idea of un-unseeability gained wider attention through memes centered on the catchphrase 'what has been seen cannot be unseen.' This became an "internet axiom"[03] in the early 2000s, when it was used to describe the experience of being haunted by violent images that people saw online.

03
Jostin Asuncion, "What Has Been Seen Cannot Be Unseen," *Know Your Meme,* November 6, 2009, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/what-has-been-seen-cannot-be-unseen.

[08]

In its subsequent iterations, this pictorial phenomenon became increasingly detached from the traumatizing content to which it first referred, being applied to more harmless subjects, such as logo designs and memes of various kinds.

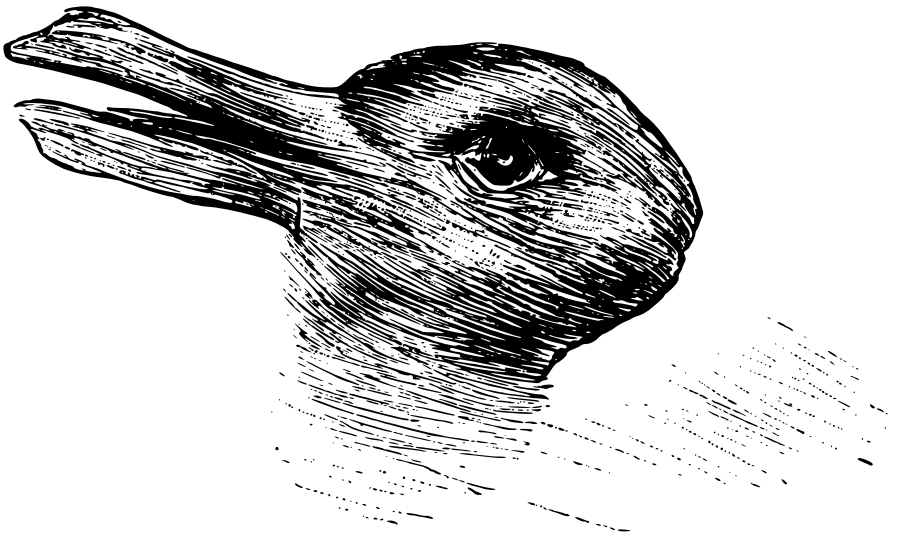
Though the phrasing may have stayed the same, the experience of these two kinds of phenomena is strikingly dissimilar. The difference between violent images that induce trauma and un-unseeable images in our sense comes down to the distinct ways in which they work on the viewer. Violent images burn themselves, so to speak, into your retina, with a propensity to appear when your eyelids are shut and you are looking for rest. Trauma strikes without volition; much like a permanent afterimage that makes its presence felt only every now and then, it grips and sticks to those touched by it.[04] In gore or snuff, the 'shock' comes about through the very confrontation *with* the image itself, and not through a kind of perceptual shift that occurs *within* the image. While the bear is sticky, too, it seems to stick more to or in the image than to or in your memory. You are 'forced' to see it when, and only when, you are actively looking at the Toblerone logo. The bear will hardly come to torment you at night.

Significantly, un-unseeability is also markedly different from another famous kind of perceptual shift, known as 'aspect-dawning,' which plays a decisive role in the work of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. This phenomenon is closely bound up with an image invoked by Wittgenstein, the duck-rabbit, or *hasente* in German.[05]

04 But even the "compulsion to repetition" *(Wiederholungszwang)* of the original traumatic experience in dreams and in free association is, at least in a Freudian frame, more a product of the traumatized themselves staying "fixated on" or "in obedience to" it than a kind of 'coercion,' see Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (W. W. Norton, 1961), 7 and 17–26.

05 We coined this portmanteau comprised of the German words *Hase* and *Ente.* If you focus on the central 'e,' you will have the phenomenon of the duck-rabbit in the spelling of the word itself.

Welche Thiere gleichen einander am meiſten?



Kaninchen und Ente.

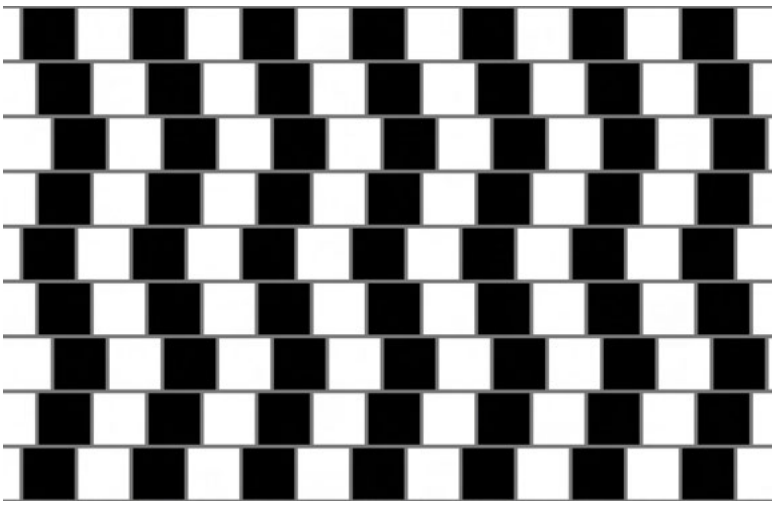
[09]

The perceptual shift elicited by the *hasente* differs more from the Toblerone logo than it might at first appear. After all, it too seems to lead its spectator to a point of no return. Once both versions are recognized, there is no going back to the state where one only saw a duck *or* a rabbit. But note that this image has the property of appearing only as *either* a duck *or* a rabbit. Once a person recognizes that the duck can also be seen as a rabbit (or vice versa), she can freely shift between the two, akin to flipping a switch that activates solely one or the other, but never both and nothing in between.

This is remarkably different from the case of the bear in the Toblerone logo, since the actual shift it engenders is contained within one singular event. It takes place once and only once, forever changing the boundaries of your perception of the logo—no flicking and no switching back and forth. There is no way to make the bear disappear except by closing your eyes, but then the mountain disappears as well.

Even if you manage to approach this state—say, by trying to look at it in a peripheral blur—you will never fully escape the presence of the bear, even and especially when attempting to negate it. While the case of the bear and of the *hasente* have in common that they make you leave a state of 'innocence'—in which one would, for instance, say "I see a duck" instead of "*Now* I see a duck"—the latter differs from the former in that it is always only one or the other aspect that forces itself upon you.[06] It is really much less a dawning than a flickering, a constant illumination or "lighting up" of either the duck or the rabbit.[07] The difference then lies in the fact that with the *hasente*, you must be able to unsee one aspect of an image to be able to perceive the other. In the Toblerone logo, you cannot see one aspect without the other, the bear without the mountain.

In this impossibility of separating the aspects of an image, un-unseeability is similar to optical illusions. But they are not the same. The difference is that the un-unseeability of the bear reveals the 'truth' of the Toblerone logo, namely the bear that is hidden in plain sight and cannot be unseen. In contrast, an optical illusion tries to hide the 'truth' of its image. Consider, for instance, the café wall illusion, which, in its most basic form, was first described in Hugo Münsterberg's *Pseudoptics* of 1894.



[10]

06
Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Wiley Blackwell, 2009), 205.

It shows a pattern of black and white squares arranged in an irregularly staggered pattern, with seemingly crooked gray lines separating each row of squares. However, upon closer inspection with, say, a ruler, it turns out that the crooked lines are actually straight and run parallel to one another. In this case we are dealing with an optical illusion in that we cannot immediately perceive this image as it really is. While you may (or may not) have been able to find the bear all by yourself, we strictly require external assistance here. In terms of attempting to find out the 'truth' of the lines, the ruler trumps your seemingly private perceptual experience. The lines of the café wall are certainly not invisible—look at them—but their parallelism cannot be seen directly. In this case, our senses distort reality. In the case of the bear in the mountain, however, our perception may reveal something that has been there all along. It is not an illusion, it brings about a revelation. The subtle surprise that is brought about by the *gestalt* of the bear comes not despite but because of the fact that nothing about the image itself has changed.

07 G. E. M. Anscombe translated this phrase as "the 'dawning' of an aspect." The German is *aufleuchten,* which means 'lighting up' (something that becomes foregrounded momentarily, as when someone's eyes light up in excitement, or when some striking feature seems to jump out at you). Lighting up is an instantaneous event, whereas dawning is a gradual process; a thought cannot dawn on one in a flash. Moreover, 'dawning' is overly intellectual, as in "'it gradually dawned on me that things were thus-and-so,'" Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* 262. Cf. Stephen Mulhall, *On Being in the World: Wittgenstein and Heidegger on Seeing Aspects* (Routledge, 1990) and Avner Baz, *The Significance of Aspect Perception: Bringing the Phenomenal World into View* (Springer, 2020). For a convincing reading of Arendt alongside Wittgenstein, see Linda Zerilli, *A Democratic Theory of Judgment* (University of Chicago Press, 2016), especially chapter 1, and, more recently, Linda Zerilli, "Wittgenstein, Arendt, and the Problem of Democratic Persuasion," in *Wittgenstein and Democratic Politics,* ed. Lotar Rasiński et al. (Routledge, 2024).

Perception: Subtitled

While the appearance of the bear-*gestalt* is a useful primer on the matter of un-unseeability, it also conceals something relevant. Our examples so far have made it seem like un-unseeability is somehow intricately linked with *gestalt*-switches. But a focus on shapes and contours distracts from an essential feature of un-unseeability: no changes in what is seen are necessary for the phenomenon to take place. To appreciate this, follow the instructions of John Berger and his co-authors in *Ways of Seeing*.[08] By showing how the phenomenon of un-unseeability may be employed as an effect, they lay bare a crucial aspect in the relation between an image and its context.

08
John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Penguin, 1972). Berger's co-authors are Sven Blomberg, Chris Fox, Michael Dibb, and Richard Follis, who are implied when we refer to John Berger in the following.

Paintings are often reproduced with words around them.

This is a landscape of a cornfield with birds flying out of it. Look at it for a moment. Then turn the page.

[11]

It is hard to define exactly how the words have changed the image but undoubtedly they have. The image now illustrates the sentence.

[12]

Evidently, the two images are identical, but nonetheless the image has changed. By adding a subtitle, it seems like it is supposed to take on a certain 'gloominess.' This effect is achieved by adding a photo-copied handwritten note under the image that catches the reader's attention by virtue of its graphical deviance, suggesting a kind of intimacy that distances its statement from the typed passages in which the authorial voice speaks.

None of this is to imply, however, that Berger's point is that we must in fact perceive *Wheatfield with Crows* as a sad, mournful, or gloomy painting. The interplay of image and subtitle inserts itself into the audience's perception in such a way that a 'mere' fact about the production of the image seems to stand in an intricate relation to what is depicted and what this depiction stands for. A structure of relevance is thereby constituted in which the meaning of the painting is saturated by the solitary life and suicide of its painter. Note, however, that the commentary in the main body of the text destabilizes this bond between van Gogh's biography and the meaning of the painting by refusing to elaborate how exactly

the image has changed. The typewritten voice does not presuppose that readers now 'must' accept one specific way of seeing the image. (After all, this is a book on *ways* of seeing.) Instead, it demonstrates how, by making certain features of the image 'stand out,' those seeing it have to orient themselves towards this emphasis in order to 'find' their own position—feeling sad, annoyed, or something different altogether.

At this and many other points in his argument, Berger employs the phenomenon of un-unseeability to produce and exemplify an effect for his audience. What he attempts to show (not tell) is how instances of un-unseeability can be used to structure the interface of our sense impressions and the sense that we make of them—what, metaphorically, is called the 'framing' of a thing. It is not the details depicted in *Wheatfield with Crows* that matter (the night sky, some birds, a path, and a cornfield), but the way in which its framing highlights certain features for those guided by the perspective that Berger half-ironically implies. He debunks the biased perspective that such a staging of the image implies by means of an active contrast.

It is against the background of these stand-out features that you will then form your own personal judgments of the painting. You may judge the gloomy interpretation to be correct, or you may reject it as tainted by a cult of self-centered genius that reduces the meaning of a painting to its painter's suicide.[09] But in all these judgments, your point of departure will differ from your first view of the image, before you were confronted with the subtitle. There is a change in the object towards which you take your position, the aspect around which your perception revolves in acceptance or disagreement. The phenomenon of un-unseeability is here employed to produce an effect which pre-structures not the perspective you take but the basis on which you form one perspective or another in the first place. There is no 'pure,' 'authentic,' or 'innocent' perception of anything, nor has there ever been.[10]

By juxtaposing a non-subtitled with a subtitled version of *Wheatfield with Crows,* Berger shows the change in perception that the latter produces to be an effect that inserts itself into one's seemingly private perception of the image. But his point is not to suggest that there is an untarnished

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As much is implied about the van Gogh industry in John Berger, *Permanent Red: Essays in Seeing* (Methuen, 1960), 34: "No artist's life lends itself better to this new kind of romanticism than Van [sic] Gogh's."

10
A phenomenological argument in the same vein, touching on the idea of a *perspectiva communis,* has recently been made in Emmanuel Alloa, *The Share of Perspective* (Routledge, 2024), 4: "Far from *relativizing* reality, perspective *realizes* it."

way of perceiving the image that we can return to. He enables his readers to critically assess their initial reactions to images without therefore discounting the fact that all perceptions are always embedded in existing structures of relevance. All perception is 'subtitled,' because all perception occurs in a situation that precedes it.

Oddly enough, the effect of un-unseeability plays out somewhere between coercion and voluntariness: it works by compulsion. By involving us without asking for permission, it nonetheless leaves us room to position ourselves toward it. (It does not persuade 'automatically'; we are not talking about brainwashing.) Although un-unseeability may be irrevocable, this does not mean that the purpose for which it is employed is self-evident, correct, or necessarily convincing. On the contrary, by openly employing it as an effect, Berger shows how it can be used to simulate self-evidence. Yet the intrusiveness of un-unseeability must be differentiated from its supposed claim to relevance. The point is that this implicit claim to relevance may actually be more questionable than it first appears. Berger cautions us not to mistake the self-evidence of un-unseeability for the self-evidence of a claim in whose service it is employed. By uncovering a kind of intrusive appeal that usually remains hidden in plain perception, his audience is invited to consider new, alternative ways of perceiving.

There is thus one further important conclusion that needs to be emphasized. Contrary to the language Berger employs—'ways of seeing,' 'changing an image,' and so on—the van Gogh example subtly distances us from the register of vision and draws us in the direction of a more general register of 'perception' in talking about un-unseeability. While it is true that *Wheatfield with Crows* changes by subtitling it in the way that Berger claims, this change does not happen on the level of vision. Nothing about the visual experience—shapes, colors, etc.—is tinkered with. Instead, it is our perception of the image that changes, making the image appear markedly different. Still, as the typewritten voice remarks, "it is hard to define exactly how."[11] This difficulty does not stem from an incapacity on the part of the viewer. There just is nothing 'in' the image to which you could point to spell out your

11
Berger,
Ways of Seeing, 28.

newfound relation to it, nothing that could ultimately settle the question of what has changed—other of course than the stubborn, un-unseeable 'fact' that subtitles the image.[12]

The Revolution Will Not Be Unseen

There is a point in time that we believe marks the origin of the political relevance of un-unseeability. We take our cue from an epic passage in Hannah Arendt's *On Revolution*.

> The date was the night of the fourteenth of July 1789, in Paris, when Louis XVI heard from the Duc de La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt of the fall of the Bastille, the liberation of a few prisoners, and the defection of the royal troops before a popular attack. The famous dialogue that took place between the king and his messenger is very short and very revealing. The king, we are told, exclaimed, 'C'est une révolte,' and Liancourt corrected him: 'Non Sire, c'est une révolution.' Here we hear the word still, and politically for the last time, in the sense of the old metaphor which carries its meaning from the skies down to the earth; but here, for the first time perhaps, the emphasis has entirely shifted from the lawfulness of a rotating, cyclical movement to its irresistibility. The motion is still seen in the image of the movement of the stars, but what is stressed now is that it is beyond human power to arrest it, and hence it is a law unto itself. The king, when he declared the storming of the Bastille was a revolt, asserted his power and the various means at his disposal to deal with conspiracy and defiance of authority; Liancourt replied that what had happened there was irrevocable and beyond the power of a king. What did Liancourt see, what must we see or hear, listening to this strange dialogue, that he thought, and we know, was irresistible and irrevocable?[13]

12 After all, the idea that this is van Gogh's last painting is not only a common feature of sentimentalized accounts of his genius, it is simply mistaken, see Zachary Small, "Contrary to Popular Belief, 'Wheatfield with Crows' Was Not Vincent van Gogh's Last Painting," *Hyperallergic,* February 25, 2019, https://www.hyperallergic.com/486142/contrary-to-popular-belief-wheatfield-with-crows-was-not-vincent-van-goghs-last-painting/.

13 Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (Penguin Books, [1963] 1990), 47–48.

Arendt's story implies that this is when the new meaning of the word revolution became un-unseeable. The word is still 'revolution,' but it no longer sounds or looks the same.

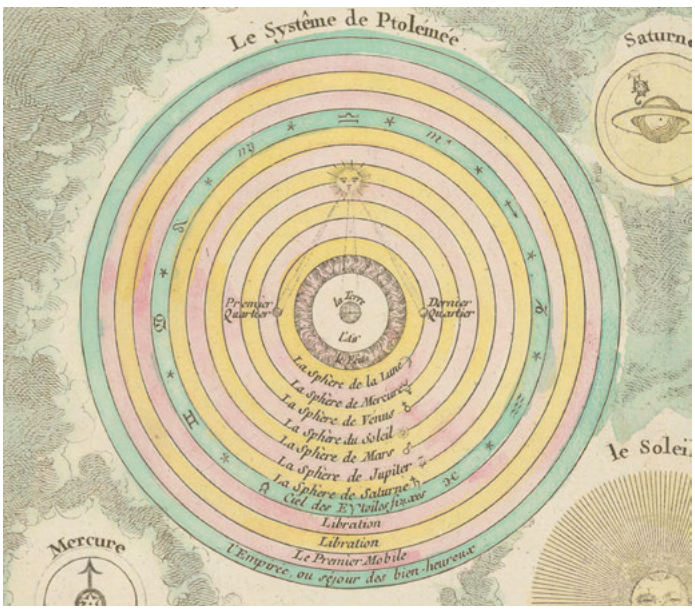
Before 1789, 'revolution' was an astronomical metaphor that likened the course of developments in the sphere of politics to the motion of celestial bodies. This cyclical motion was thought to be eternal, neither ceasing nor changing, and recurring, meaning that prior states will always be returned to. This in turn meant that it was irresistible, implying that no earthly force was great enough to divert the pre-ordained ways of the heavens. It designated a return to the eternal, original order of things—a cyclical motion that ultimately always brings about "restoration" after so and so many revolutions.[14]

The notion of 'sphere,' just like 'revolution' in the pre-modern sense, is also a remnant of astronomic imagery that was intimately tied to ideas of cosmological harmony.[15] The application of the notion to the description of human affairs began in the early 17th century.[16] In this figurative sense, it took into account one's social position and status, and was often used to indicate that someone was 'in' or 'out,' depending on how far their "sphere of activity" extended.[17]

14
Arendt, *On Revolution*, 43.

15
See Hans Schavernoch, *Die Harmonie der Sphären: Die Geschichte der Idee des Welteneinklangs und der Seeleneinstimmung* (Alber, 1981).

16
See Helmut Hühn, "Sphäre," in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie: Band 9 Se–Sp*, ed. Joachim Ritter and Karlfried Gründer (Schwabe, 1995), 1373.



[13] Depiction of an ancient model of the cosmic spheres from 1786.

The sphere of politics might then refer to something like an isolated upper stratum of the world to which, by divine providence, only the privileged have access.[18] The idea that politics is positioned in an exclusive spherical location thus serves as the very footing on which the pre-modern image of 'revolution' rested, which then denoted the coming-to-order of worldly affairs in their proper spherical arrangement. This is why

> coups d'état and palace revolutions, where power changes hands from one man to another, from one clique to another … have been less feared [than revolutions] because the change they bring is circumscribed to the *sphere* of government [emphasis added].[19]

Revolts, coups, and revolutions, Arendt laments, are often identified by the same attribute: their violence. Putting aside the objection that not all revolutions are violent, there is one important distinction we should make. Whereas a successful coup is prepared secretly and replaces one group of rulers with another, revolutions are brought about in public. They are situations in which the entirety of the established order collapses and a new kind of order must be established.

All of this must be taken into account when considering the dialogue that Arendt recounts. Its location—the king's private chamber in Versailles—exemplifies the pre-modern spherical logic of politics. The king's palace itself was structured in a manner that regulated access according to rank.

17 Antoine Furetière: *Dictionaire universel* (Rotterdam, 1708), 1950: "quand on parle de ceux qui veulent entreprendre une chose au delà de leurs forces. Il ne reüssira pas dans cette affaire, il est hors de sa sphere, elle est au dessus de ses conoissances." But already by the end of the 19th century, the term "n'évoque plus aucune image," see *Trésor de la langue française,* s.v. "Sphère," accessed March 04, 2025, https://www.stella.atilf.fr/Dendien/scripts/tlfiv5/affart.exe?19;s=1370422275;?b=0.

18 But this depends on the concrete imagistic realization. In the case of the frontispiece to John Case: *Sphaera civitatis* (Barnes, 1588), an Aristotelian treatise on political theory, the Queen is positioned outside of a spherical model of majestic virtues, governing the destiny of order like a God.

19 Arendt, *On Revolution,* 34–35.

Liancourt, the king's "grand maître de la garde-robe,"[20] was amongst the few court officials authorized to enter a location as restricted as the king's chamber without prior invitation.

Arendt's story is illuminating not only in that it contrasts the old and the new meaning of 'revolution,' but also in how the protagonists of the dialogue can be interpreted as hearing the word in the old and the new sense respectively. Their relative proximity to or distance from the events in the streets mattered to their ability to perceive the change in meaning. As Arendt explains, Louis XVI heard the word "still, and politically for the last time, in the sense of the old metaphor" and "asserted his power" by dismissing the storming as a mere revolt—at worst a change in who occupied the sphere of government.[21] And such a change in power would, in any case, be only transient, as the king's understanding of 'revolution' implied the ultimate restoration of the monarchy.

In a sense, the anecdote reenacts the feat of the Toblerone logo at the level of the word.[22] The king, as it were, fails to see the bear. Phenomenally, he is stuck with the mountain. He cannot hear the shift in emphasis of the meaning of 'revolution' towards irresistibility because doing so would imply an admission of the loss of kingly power. In a brilliantly convoluted way, Arendt then assumes Liancourt's point of view to bring out the new meaning of revolution when she asks: "What did Liancourt see, what must we see or hear, listening to this strange dialogue, that he thought, and we know, was irresistible and irrevocable?"

The answer, claims Arendt, "seems simple." Liancourt saw "the multitude of the poor and the downtrodden," who, driven by biological needs, are seen not as groups of individual people but as torrents, storms, and waves that flooded the streets and burst into the public.[23] With these images vividly impressed upon him, Liancourt's use of the word 'revolution' no longer emphasizes recurrence and order. Only one aspect remains: irresistibility. From Liancourt's point of view, the

20 Olivier Coquard, "'C'est une révolte?—Non, Sire, c'est une révolution': cet échange impliquant Louis XVI a-t-il vraiment eu lieu?," *Historia,* December 7, 2018, https: //www.historia.fr/personnages-historiques/citations/cest-une-revolte-non-sire-cest-une-revolution-duc-de-la-rochefoucauld-liancourt- 1789-2058044.

21 Arendt, *On Revolution,* 47–48.

revolution is caused by the wretched masses and their public call for social justice, typically referred to as the 'social question.' His perception of the day's events would thus have accorded with exactly one aspect of the old image of the celestial bodies—the impossibility of stopping them in their course.

Liancourt reduces the revolving motion of the planets to their unyieldingness, which, in turn, prompts him to call the goings-on in Paris a 'revolution.' But this reduction of the meaning of 'revolution' to one of its aspects meant not only that the old astronomical image had become obsolete, but that a new image had already been found: the revolutionary masses in the streets, which Liancourt would have perceived to be an almost literally unstoppable force, driven by hunger and desolate misery, being pushed and pushing their way into sites both public and restricted, such as streets, squares, palaces, the Bastille. 'Revolution' now evokes an image of violent force beyond any one person's control—a "law unto itself," as Arendt puts it.[24] No longer implying an everlasting order, it is now used to describe the very overthrow of order, a dive into uncharted waters.

22 Interestingly enough, there is a modern German translation that works too well for its own good, namely *Staatsumwälzung.* Coined in Joachim Heinrich Campe's Parisian letters of 1789–1790, it captures both the old and the new meaning of revolution, depending on what syllable you stress: *Um*wälzung or Um*wäl*zung. Campe's proposal was promptly criticized by an anonymous reviewer in *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung,* who complained that it carried "over too much from the secondary notion of a bodily and regular movement, as e.g. the earth around its axis [our translation]." It could be said that the problem with Campe's proposal was that it functions too much like the *hasente* and too little like un-unseeability. See Joachim Heinrich Campe, *Briefe aus Paris während der Revolution geschrieben* (Schulbuchhandlung, 1790), xii, 68–72, and 121–39. His proposal can be found in Joachim Heinrich Campe: *Proben einiger Versuche von deutscher Sprachbereicherung* (Schulbuchhandlung, 1791), 39, its review in *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung,* 1792, vol. 1, 336; cf. Harald Kleinschmidt, "Klimatheorie, Statistik, Revolutionsbegriff: Die Transformation der Wahrnehmung der Vergangenheit in Europa zwischen dem 17. und dem 19. Jahrhundert," *Historische Zeitschrift* 138, no. 3 (2019): 630.

23 Arendt, *On Revolution,* 48.

24 Arendt, *On Revolution,* 48.

Whether you like it or not: traces of Liancourt's experience are still present whenever the word revolution is used in politics today.[25] For it was at this point in time that the word took on its "definite shape."[26] Therefore, "[w]hen we think of revolution, we *almost automatically* still think in terms of this imagery, born in these years [emphasis added]."[27] The "inundation" of the Bastille is the revolution's ultimate icon.[28] The metaphorical register of natural forces, Arendt argues, captures the widespread feeling of chaos and the loss of control, the seemingly irresistible forces that are at play in revolutionary situations.

But note how at every step of her argument, Arendt aims to undermine the intimate connection between a seeming irresistibility perceived by Liancourt in the bodily needs of the poor and the experience of revolution. On the level of textual strategy, this starts already with the brilliantly convoluted sentence structure by which Arendt virtually forces Liancourt's view onto her readers. But at the same time, she emphasizes and over-emphasizes the fact that this is merely one man's perspective. What emerges from Arendt's account is not an objective state of affairs but a way of seeing: Liancourt's paradigmatic way of seeing. Arendt makes the readers of *On Revolution* see what they would have seen had they stood in Liancourt's shoes.

25 See Karl Griewank, *Der neuzeitliche Revolutionsbegriff* (Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1992), 187. This is of course not meant to imply that the modern meaning originated in Liancourt, as there are many precursors to him, such as Paul Ulric Dubuisson, *Abrégé de la Révolution de l'Amérique angloise* (Cellot & Jombert, 1778), who highlights the suddenness and irrevocability of the American events; see also Christopher Hill, *A Nation of Change and Novelty: Radical Politics, Religion and Literature in Seventeenth-Century England* (Routledge, 1990), 82–101. It is just that the anecdote encapsulates this shift with a unique historiographical efficaciousness.

26 Arendt, *On Revolution,* 44.

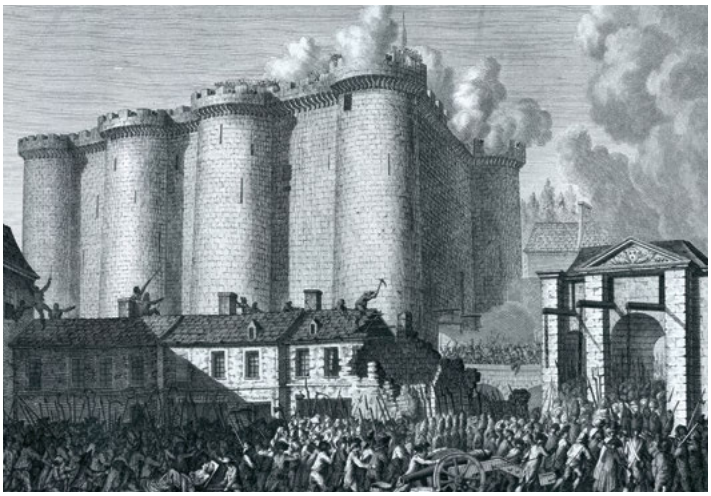
27 Arendt, *On Revolution,* 48.

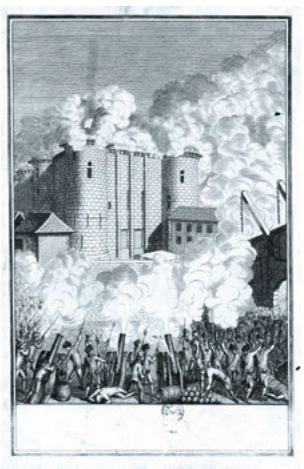
28 This is a contemporary term, used for instance by Nicolas Chamfort in a description of Jean-Louis Prieur's drawing of the fall of the Bastille, as documented in Claudette Hould, ed., *La révolution par l'écriture* (Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2005), 178: "[Le peuple] inonde cette cour d'où la mousqueterie l'écart un moment."

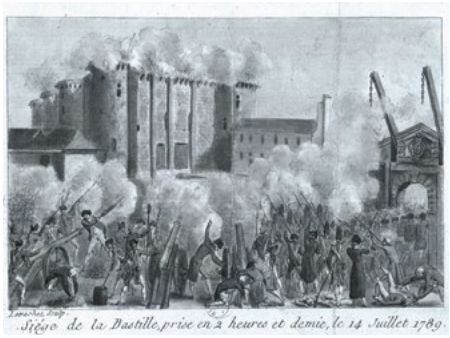
Yet the very setup and framing of Arendt's story favors an unsettling of Liancourt's perception. Her story starts not with what are commonly referred to as the 'big, decisive events' of July 14 but with a more delicate scene that, though legendary in its own right, certainly never gained the importance of the storming of the Bastille—which, in this intentionally understated telling, boils down to "the liberation of a few prisoners."[29] She does not foreground spectacular confrontations but tells a subtler tale, that of a conversation about these battles, which by definition is much harder to 'see.'

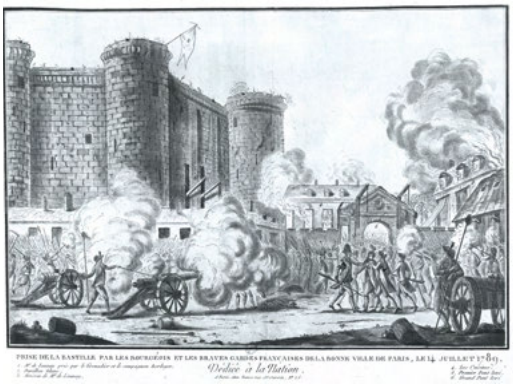
29 Arendt, *On Revolution*, 47.

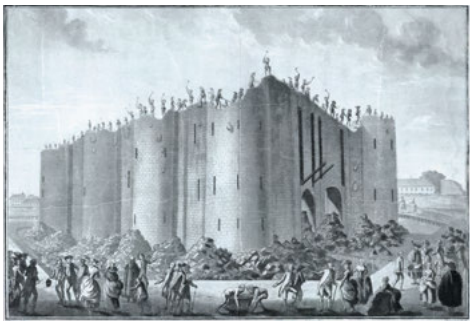
To appreciate what is at stake in this distinction, consider the following images.

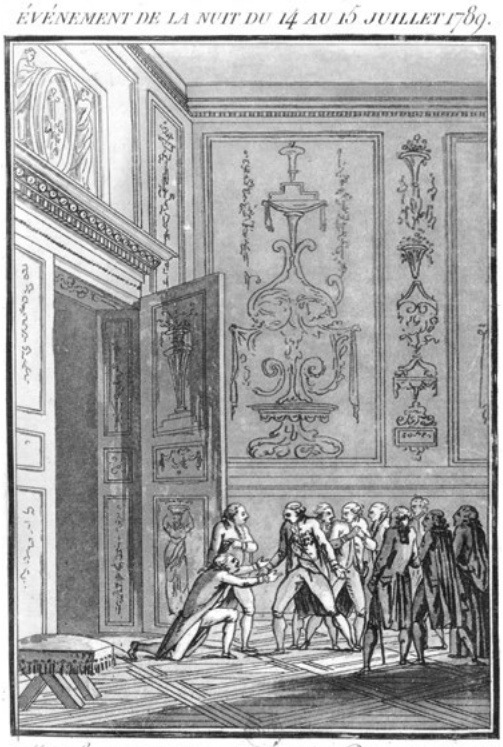





Siége de la Bastille, prise en 2 heures et demie, le 14 Juillet 1789.







In terms of iconicity—when literally 'seen'—the supreme spectacle of the Bastille overshadows the rather unassuming scene inside the king's chamber. It is thus not a coincidence that only one contemporary image of the chamber scene exists, and that even Jean-François Janinet, arguably one of the finest and certainly one of the most influential printmakers of the time, was incapable of fully rendering the crucial part of this scene, the un-unseeable shift in the meaning of 'revolution,' and perhaps had no desire to do so.[30]

Arendt tries to show that the iconicity of the Bastille and its later historiographic dominance do not tell the whole story.[31] In her extensive report of a report, she concerns herself not only with events and facts, but with how these events were seen and partially overlooked. From the perspective of the king, only a few prisoners were liberated—so why all the fuss? But from Liancourt's perspective, the storming of the Bastille was to become the epochal break that fused irresistibility and the new meaning of revolution to the violent image of the wretched masses. Put into the language of Berger's treatment of *Wheatfield with Crows,* for Liancourt and many

30 Janinet's potential unwillingness is pointed out in Philippe Carbonnières, *Les gravures historiques de Janinet* (Musée Carnavalet, 2011), 93–101, who notes that "without a doubt, Janinet judged the real scene to be too trivial to be represented [our translation]," as the king would hardly have been powdered as he rose from his sleep. The moderate Janinet, known for his unvarnished depictions of the revolution's cruelty and violence, remarked in 1789 that "this victory [i.e. the storming of the Bastille] [is] the most astonishing ever won since the world began [our translation]." Accordingly, print no. 18 in his series on the French Revolution, "Prise de la Bastille" (fig. 19), is the only one that is oversized. For the significance of prints in the French Revolution, see Richard Taws, *Politics of the Provisional: Art and Ephemera in Revolutionary France* (Penn State University Press, 2015), 17, as well as Anne Betrand, ed., *La révolution par la gravure* (Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2002) and Claudette Hould and Alain Chevalier, eds., *La révolution par le dessin* (Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2008).

31 For an overview of today's historiography of 18th-century revolutions, see David Motadel, "Global Revolution," in *Revolutionary World: Global Upheaval in the Modern Age,* ed. David Motadel (Cambridge University Press, 2021). For a historic overview of the Bastille's iconicity, see Hans-Jürgen Lusebrink and Rolf Reichardt, *Die 'Bastille': Zur Symbolgeschichte von Herrschaft und Freiheit* (Fischer, 1990).

of his contemporaries, the sub-image to 'revolution' took on a seemingly un-unseeable connection with the populace on the march.

It is for this reason that Arendt is primarily concerned with the differing ways in which contemporaries were compelled to perceive the events of this day—how they *appeared* to them. While it might still feel like revolution is firmly tied to this imagery, we only make these associations *almost* automatically. Arendt's struggle in this text is to untether the attribution of the experience of the irresistibility of revolution from the image of the rising masses.

Pathos of Freedom

This brings us to our central claim about the relationship between un-unseeability and modern revolutions. Our own sensitivity towards the phenomenon of un-unseeability today—the reason that we can find it anywhere from art to marketing to meme culture—is still connected to the effective appeal it unfolded in political history since the revolutions of the 18th century: the American, the French, and the Haitian Revolution. It is here that the phenomenon of un-unseeability, maybe for the first time and characteristically hidden in plain sight, made itself felt as a widespread and immediately relevant effect of politics.

At the center of this alternative story lies the widespread experience of un-unseeability, which appears to occur, at least in politics, suddenly during the revolutions of the 18th century.[32] This is a typical feature of revolutionary

32 But Arendt, *On Revolution,* 46, also notes that the revolutionaries were "old-fashioned in terms of their own time," especially when compared to the sciences and philosophy, where discoveries were typically described in the language of an un-unseeable "absolute novelty." Arendt's examples here include Galileo, Descartes, and Hobbes. In this regard, un-unseeability also resembles what Thomas Kuhn has called 'paradigm change,' though Kuhn likens this more generally to *gestalt*-switches than to un-unseeability, as described in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (University of Chicago Press, 2009), 150: "Practicing in different worlds, the two groups of scientists see different things when they look from the same point in the same direction. Again, that is not to say they can see anything they please… Just because it is a transition between incommensurables, the transition between competing paradigms

situations, whose agents are "driven by events."[33] All of a sudden the same things just don't look the same anymore. This manifests itself to the historian in the "bizarre *certainty* of the arguments" and opinions observable during revolutions. The certainty with which they are uttered seems to stand in a direct relation to the speed at which they change. Today's revolutionary is tomorrow's reactionary; yesterday's view that 'the king should be imprisoned' is a sign of compromise and weakness today, when 'the king must die.' Arendt calls this experience of new things—that events outpace beliefs, opinions, and orientations—the "strange pathos of novelty so characteristic of the modern age," arguing that it first emerged in science and philosophy. However, when it became "common knowledge"[35] and

> reached this realm [i.e. politics], in which events concern the many and not the few, it not only assumed a more radical expression, but became endowed with a reality peculiar to the political realm alone. It was only in the course of the eighteenth-century revolutions that men began to be aware that a new beginning could be a political phenomenon, that it could be the result of what men had done and what they could consciously set out to do.[36]

cannot be made a step at a time, forced by logic and neutral experience. Like the *gestalt*-switch, it must occur all at once (though not necessarily in an instant) or not at all." Two incidental facts are worth mentioning: Kuhn was in direct dialogue with Stanley Cavell when they were colleagues at Berkeley, see Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell* (University of Chicago Press, 2017), 10. Furthermore, Kuhn's *Structure* was published a year prior to Arendt's *On Revolution,* in 1962, though she finished the manuscript in 1960 and 1961 (See "Acknowledgments" in Arendt, *On Revolution).*

33 C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (Penguin, [1938] 2001), 158.

34 T. J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (Thames and Hudson, 1973), 10.

35 The German reads "Allgemeingut," which in this context is best translated as 'common knowledge' but also means 'common property,' see Hannah Arendt, *Über die Revolution* (Piper, [1965] 2016), 56.

36 Arendt, *On Revolution,* 46.

The un-unseeability in the meaning of 'revolution' rhymes well with the strong sense of a loss of control.[37] It is prior to any attribution of revolutionary force to what revolutionaries and spectators alike described as 'the people,' 'the mob,' or 'the masses.' In revolutionary situations, 'new' things that require new opinions and beliefs happen at an unheard-of frequency. Political un-unseeability is mushrooming, popping up in unexpected places, seemingly without causal relations yet highly effective—decades happen in weeks.[38]

The French Revolution came about not only because of unprecedented violence unleashed in the streets, but because the old structure of authority, based on the belief in an everlasting and irresistible recurrence of a pre-established, stratified order, was no longer convincing and thus ceased to be operative.[39] The breakdown of the old order was less about a lack of firepower than a lack of firing: soldiers dropped their weapons and stopped following orders.

37 See Jason Frank, *The Democratic Sublime: On Aesthetics and Popular Assembly* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 179: "As revolutionary leaders lost control of the collective demands of the crowds they themselves had incited, Arendt claims, it *seemed to them* that revolutionary actors were no longer capable of initiating or taking control of events, but were quickly overwhelmed by larger historical forces [emphasis added]."

38 The saying that 'there are decades where nothing happens and weeks where decades happen' is most often misattributed to Lenin. For the history of this misattribution, see Caroline Wazer, "Lenin Said, 'There Are Decades Where Nothing Happens' and 'Weeks Where Decades Happen'?," *Snopes,* July 24, 2024, https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/lenin-decades-quote/.

39 The German version of *On Revolution* is, once again, more extensive here, see Arendt, *Über die Revolution,* 59: "But Liancourt saw more. He saw with his very own eyes how the old order collapsed under this onslaught. The soldiers had not fired, the instruments of authority had ceased to function. This was the end that had been a long time coming. Revolutions break out and are irresistible once it has become clear that power lies in the streets [our translation]."

[27]
To this day (December 3, 2024) the decisive moment—will soldiers open fire on their own people? Depicted here: the parliamentarian Ahn Gwi-ryeong on her way to enter the South Korean National Assembly after it had been shut down in President Yoon Suk-yeol's attempted coup d'état.

What we are dealing with in revolutionary upheaval is not only or even primarily a greater amount of trauma-inducing violence, but shifts in the ways of perception that undermine established authority altogether. The same orders just don't sound the same anymore.

From the perspective of revolution as a catalyst of un-unseeability, Arendt's invocation and critique of the social question during the French Revolution appear in a new light. Arendt does not have to be understood as siding with freedom *against* the social question.[40] Rather, she criticizes this very opposition by implying that the emerging publicity of the social question itself could only come about as the consequence of a newfound freedom implied in the experience of revolutionary un-unseeability. The very appearance of the social question as more pressing and relevant than political freedom is not a cause but an effect of the mob-like sub-image that became predominant in the use of the word 'revolution' in 1789. What Arendt says of conservatism is true of the social question as well: it "owe[s] its existence to a reaction to the French Revolution and is meaningful only for the history of the nineteenth[,] twentieth," and twenty-first centuries.[41]

40 See for instance Dana Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political* (Princeton University Press, 1996), 29–30.

41 Arendt, *On Revolution,* 44. See also Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), 219: "Originally, the term *le peuple,* which became current at the end of the eighteenth century, designated simply those who had no property. As we mentioned before, such a class of completely destitute people was not known prior to the modern age." Ayten Gündoğdu, *Rightlessness in an Age of Rights: Hannah Arendt and the Contemporary Struggles of Migrants* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 67–75, also foregrounds passages in Arendt in which the social question is treated as a politicizable issue.

What is at stake, then, in Arendt's rejection of identifying the French Revolution or politics with the needs of the poor is not her disavowal of the social question as such, but an answer to the question of how it could become a political issue at all.

42 See Arendt, *On Revolution*, 35.

43 Arendt, *On Revolution*, 48.

Political Paradigm Shifts

We can now tackle one further aspect that precedes the question of how something as extensive as the social question could become a political issue, namely: what does it mean, at that point in history, for a political issue to appear as such without any new 'thing' needing to come into play? To repeat, un-unseeability is not simply an instance of aspect dawning, for there is no going back behind it. Nor is it an illusion that distorts one's perception, because the new state of perceptual affairs that un-unseeability brings about is real. Nor is it a traumatic reaction to the ensuing violence, since its effect is not brought about by involuntary memory alone, much in the same way that revolution is not brought about by violence alone.[42]

Instead, when un-unseeability became politically relevant, it changed the meaning of politics itself. Politics was no longer a sphere, it became a potential *medium* of reality. This medium concerned the question of what actions, attitudes, and events people perceive to be relevant and immediately effective. Politics became that highlighting force which makes persons, matters, and spaces 'stand out' as relevant to 'everyone' in comparison to other concerns that are ignored or not considered generally relevant. The new meaning of politics-as-medium could hardly be exhausted by addressing it in terms of strict binaries such as visible/invisible—who gets to enter and to act in a territorially delimited sphere and who does not. On the contrary, its workings now concerned degrees of visibility or hiddenness.

The emergence of un-unseeability in politics was experienced as the arrival of unprecedented and irrevocable 'newness.' Amongst these novelties was the admission into politics of the poor, "appearing for the first time in broad daylight," along with their demands—the social question.[43] When the sphere of politics had opened up to the crowds of Paris, their influx made it expand until it burst like an overblown balloon. The formerly highly restricted 'sphere'

of politics became so enlarged that it started to disintegrate. Politics itself was no longer an affair of the few but—at least potentially—of all. Much in the same way that waves of people sloshed and spilled into the location where power was concentrated, power now sloshed and spilled out of that location in a way that, potentially (and only potentially), it became ubiquitously accessible.

Politics became mediatized. During the French Revolution, spaces that were never thought of as relevant in any way attained political self-awareness. People in these spaces acted under the impression that they could effectively influence and shape their reality. These spaces now included not only the royal court or the meeting places of liberal aristocrats and reformed clerics but also newly established spaces of assembly where the poor of Paris came together, such as barricades and baker's queues.[44] It is almost impossible to overstate the degree to which these new spatial arrangements seemed significant and positively alien to contemporaries. Just consider the fascination displayed by one of the most influential historians of the French Revolution, Thomas Carlyle.

> If we look now at Paris, one thing is too evident: that the Baker's shops have got their Queues, or Tails; their long strings of purchasers, arranged in tail, so that the first come be the first served, were the shop once open! … In time, we shall see it perfected by practice to the rank almost of an art; and the art, or quasi-art, of standing in tail become one of the characteristics of the Parisian People, distinguishing them from all other Peoples whatsoever.[45]

44 Both the barricade and the baker's queue gave rise to highly complex metaphorical and representational dimensions. For the former, see T. J. Clark, *The Absolute Bourgeois: Artists and Politics in France 1848–1851* (Thames and Hudson, 1973), 9–30, and Frank, *Democratic Sublime,* 123–52. For the latter, see Jean-Claude Boulogne, "Faire la queue: une allusion historique," *Canal Académies,* October 27, 2008, https://www.canalacademies.com/emissions/un-jour-dans-lhistoire/les-allusions-historiques/faire-la-queue, and René Scherer, "la queue de robespierre (sur le langage de la terreur)," *L'homme et la société* 63/64 (1982): 46–47.

45 Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution: A History in 3 Volumes, Volume I: The Bastille* (Chapman and Hall, 1837), 232.

Carlyle is quick to point out that this "talent" of "spontaneously standing in queue, which distinguishes … the French People from all Peoples, ancient and modern," proves that that the people out in the street, while often terrifyingly violent, should not be considered "dull masses." The French 'mob,' to Carlyle one of "the liveliest phenomena of our world," constituted itself in spaces where people came together and discussed their interests. Dispersed queues of women waiting for bread, aggravated by "laggard men [who] will not act," could turn into a forceful and decisive march on Versailles—seemingly by no *one*'s order but rather by everyone's accord.[46] Remarkably, it is not a person but a space that engenders these actions.

That politics became mediatized does not mean that the place of power just moved to a different location. It did not simply wander from the palace to "the street."[47] Power was no longer connected to a physical location or the physical body of the king; instead, it became a potential of spaces—understood virtually, not bound to specific physical locations. What Carlyle's account brings to the fore is the novel political potential of bakers' queues, generally, as a space of appearance.

But formal institutions such as the National Assembly explicitly understood themselves as virtual spaces, too. This is well exemplified in the 'Tennis Court Oath,' which, on June 20, 1789, established the National Assembly. Locked out of their designated meeting location in Versailles' *Salle des Menus-Plaisir,* the representatives of the Third Estate followed a proposition of Dr. Guillotin, later famed as the

46 Carlyle, *French Revolution,* 250–52. It is pointed out in Joan B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Cornell University Press, 1988), 109, that this march was not solely about bread. As "marchers asserted their right as women to participate in public affairs," this was also a struggle about the inclusion of women in the bourgeois public sphere. This struggle was all the more pressing since a considerable amount of the driving ideas of the French Revolution were masculinist in character, such as Rousseau's doctrine of "separate spheres," which formally introduced the domestic-public dichotomy along gendered lines, see Frank Turner, *European Intellectual History from Rousseau to Nietzsche* (Yale University Press, 2014), 208–25.

47 Arendt, *Über die Revolution,* 59, see also Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970), 49.

inventor of the *guillotine,* to gather in a nearby indoor court, where they swore "not to separate and *to reassemble wherever necessary* until the Constitution is established [emphasis added]."[48] Accordingly, the National Assembly henceforth was neither bound to a specific physical location nor reducible to its members, which might change over time. The potential continuity of such spaces of appearance depends upon their recognizability, which may be formalized. When they are actualized, they must look like spaces of this type and participants' behaviors must be widely considered typical for such a space. (Think of the conditions under which you would and would not say that people are queueing up in front of a shop or the conditions under which you would and would not take seriously an assembly that proclaims itself to be the National Assembly.)

Accordingly, politics was no longer extraneous to the concerns of ordinary people. It became the medium through which they—at least potentially—could actualize their newfound freedom in everyday or mundane contexts.[49] People in these spaces experienced themselves and their doings as efficacious and relevant, even when they and their observers *argued* that they were driven by misery. This was an important part of what 'freedom' came to mean. Freedom in this sense is not synonymous with 'volition,' the ability to 'do as one pleases,' or "liberation," the purely negative license for people to engage, as Arendt puts it, in a "more or less free range

48 Philippe Bordes, *Le Serment du Jeu de Paume de Jacques-Louis David* (Réunion des musées nationaux, 1983), 14. The painter of the best-known image of the tennis court oath, Jacques-Louis David, rose to fame in 1785 through his *Oath of the Horatii.* It remains up to speculation in how far the earlier image inspired the events that are depicted in the later one, but the deputies seem to have raised their right arms to take the oath, just like David's Horaces.

49 It is worth emphasizing that it is more than an abstract theoretical claim to say that politics is a medium—it is a historically specific judgment. Politics was not always a medium or a sphere. Even today, politics is often discussed as if it concerned a 'sphere,' as when politics is reduced to established political institutions, such as parliament. This overlooks that parliaments may under specific circumstances not deserve the name of 'political' places, for instance when they are unable to agree on legislation or when the relevant debates of the day take place outside it.

of non-political activities which a given body politic will permit and guarantee to those who constitute it."[50] Instead, it refers to the shared spirit or conviction that human beings can work together to create their own laws and decisively shape and influence the reality they face. Freedom meant that actors could conceive of themselves as able to plan and to constitute un-unseeable new beginnings.[51]

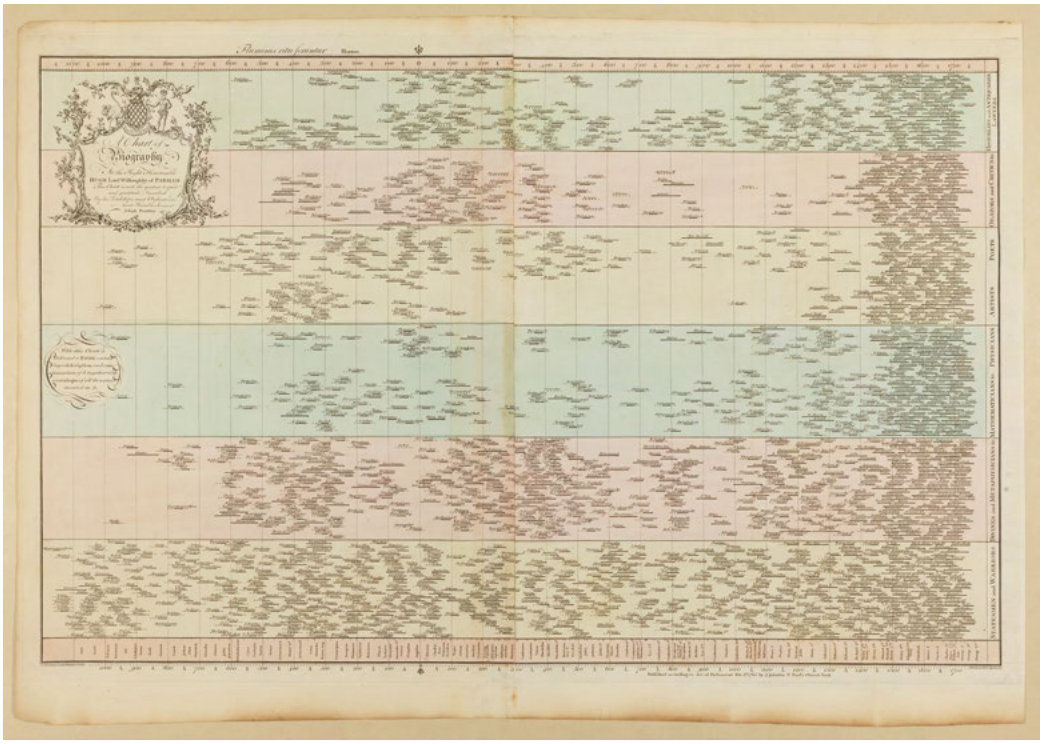
The insight into the ability of humans to act together to constitute such un-unseeable new beginnings implied changes not only in political spatiality but also in the general understanding of political time. Its unfolding becomes conceivable as primarily linear once un-unseeability becomes a political phenomenon. Though itself of ancient origin, the idea of a linear account of time, coupled with the possibility of the acceleration of history through an intensification of events,[52] gained new potency when Joseph Priestley, in his

50 Arendt, *On Revolution,* 30.

51 This is also what Arendt has in mind, see Arendt, *On Revolution,* 29: "Crucial, then, to any understanding of revolutions in the modern age is that the idea of freedom and the experience of a new beginning should coincide."

52 Incidentally, the language of 'necessity' implied by the historiographic dominance of the French Revolution has done lasting harm to the European revolutionary tradition, since it tended to create a belief in the necessity of the course of history which could, at best, be sped up or slowed down by political actors. This was noted by Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld,* 58: "[Lenin] was a maverick among Marxists in his belief that political movements could speed up the course of history." Contrasting the French and the American Revolution, Arendt considers the historiographic dominance of the latter a part of the gigantic "tragedy" that is the French Revolution, see Arendt, *On Revolution,* 132, cf. 66, 125. But this is not primarily because she takes it to have failed. As a form of drama, tragedy broadly refers to a conflict between a protagonist and a superior force or a situation that does not allow for perspicuity. The protagonist's mistaken judgment, which Aristotle calls *hamartia* ('to miss the mark,' as a javelin thrower might), leads to pity and fear in the viewer. But in the case of the tragedy of the French Revolution, pity and fear intensify precisely because the protagonists bring about the very problem they try to deal with by mistakenly believing the social question to be based in necessity. The dominance of the French Revolution in revolutionary historiography also induced such a tragic dimension, misperceived as necessity, in the way later revolutions played out. In this sense, the French Revolution, especially in its violent episodes, is deeply traumatic. But less so in the Freudian sense we used above, where trauma is operative mostly in laboratory conditions of the imagination (in dreams, or on the analyst's couch), and more as outlined in Jean Laplanche, *Die allgemeine Verführungstheorie und andere Aufsätze* (edition diskord, 1988), 204–07,

wildly popular *A Chart of Biography* (1765), popularized a pathbreaking visual conception of history: the timeline. This made it possible to see, "'at one view,'" history as a constant stream that gained speed in special periods when the arts and sciences flourished—such as Priestley's own time, which he took to be singularly productive.[53] Yet for Priestley himself, "the timeline was a 'most excellent mechanical help to the knowledge of history,' not an image of history itself."[54]



[28]

in reference to the concept of afterwardsness (*Nachträglichkeit*), which describes a prior event being re-interpreted in light of a later one. All heirs to the French Revolution find themselves compelled to repeat its script, which in turn means that the 'original' script itself is constantly re-interpreted and rewritten. We are indebted to Lisa Pfeifer for acquainting us with these passages in Freud and Laplanche and for helping us understand the differences between them.

However, with the break in order that revolution signifies, the mediatization of politics, and the experience of new beginnings as constituted in human action, history itself was increasingly understood in the image of a linear timeline, and more radically so than Priestley's graphic innovation implied.[55] Immediately after the fall of the Bastille, Revolutionaries even started calling 1789 'year I of Liberty' in pamphlets and treatises, letting the stream of time begin anew. Though institutionalized by the National Convention in 1792, this practice started spontaneously. It offered a unique opportunity to mark as epochal the break from what people had already started calling the 'ancien régime.'[56] Developments in this linear movement were generally no longer understood as expressions of a pre-given order of things, but as comprised of un-unseeable and irrevocable events. The break in order and the "perception of sudden change in all areas of life"[57] signified by 'revolution' entails the potential of new beginnings, which is to say: the potential of experiencing a kind of irrevocability that is identical to how un-unseeability temporally marks a point of no return.[58] But at the same time, it must be noted that this break can only happen against the background of whatever is already established. There is no break without a background of continuity against which it happens. It is always the *same* things that no longer look the same.

53 Daniel Rosenberg and Anthony Grafton, *Cartographies of Time* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2010), 118–26. Priestley's chart rewards closer examination and is available digitally at "The Chart of Biography," University of Oregon, accessed March 1, 2025, https://pages.uoregon.edu/infographics/dev/timeline/pages/index.html.

54 Rosenberg and Grafton, *Cartographies of Time,* 20.

55 Cf. Rosenberg and Grafton, *Cartographies of Time*, 126.

56 While the recurring days and months of a calendar "merely organize the regularity of everyday life, it is only the enumeration of years, whose counting is open towards the future, that offers the permanent possibility of innovation." See Reinhart Koselleck, "Anmerkungen zum Revolutionskalender und zur 'Neuen Zeit,'" in *Die Französische Revolution als Bruch des gesellschaftlichen Bewußtseins,* eds. Reinhart Koselleck and Rolf Reichardt (De Gruyter, 1988), 64.

57 Rolf Reichardt, "Révolution, révolutionnaire," in *Handbuch politisch-sozialer Grundbegriffe in Frankreich 1680–1820, Heft 22: Opinion publique, Révolution, Contre-révolution,* eds. Jörg Leonhard, Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink, and Rolf Reichardt (De Gruyter, 2021), 99.

Let us, in closing, return to the general phenomenon of un-unseeability. You can now see that throughout our chapter, as we ventured deeper and deeper into politics-as-medium, the imaginatively shared perception of a thing—the Toblerone logo, *Wheatfield with Crows,* the word 'revolution,' a revolutionary world—became increasingly more essential to the thing. And the deeper we progressed into politics-as-medium, the more the description of a thing became inextricable from the thing that is being described. This is the specific "density of reality" which Arendt claims to be present *only* in politics.[59] It comes out in the assumption of relevance and immediate effectivity that claims to something being 'political' entail. In simpler terms: of the two claims that a) 'this revolution' is irresistible, b) 'this image' is a painter's last and thus presumably gloomy, only one claim becomes more threateningly real as more and more people take it to be true.

If you now think back to how Berger emphasized un-unseeability as a potential effect of perception by comparing a non-subtitled to a subtitled version of *Wheatfield with Crows,* you come to realize what it means for un-unseeability to have entered and embraced politics-as-medium. The difference between Berger's and Arendt's un-unseeabilities boils down to the different stakes involved in missing out on them. In the former case, you risk having a slightly narrow-minded perspective on a painting of some art-historical significance. In the latter, you risk contributing to being trapped in a world of violence and chaos.

58 According to Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (Columbia University Press, 2004), 49: "Since then, revolution obviously no longer returned to given conditions or possibilities, but has, since 1789, led forward into an unknown future. The nature of this future is so obscure that its recognition and mastery have become the constant task of politics."

59 'Density of reality' is our translation of what is called *Wirklichkeitsdichte* in Arendt, *Über die Revolution,* 57, which in Arendt, *On Revolution,* 46, is called "a reality peculiar to the political realm alone."