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Daumier and The Popular Image of Astronomy

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Abstract. Honoré Daumier (1808–1879) is best known for his illustrations of Paris life during the mid-nineteenth century. Among his many thousands of prints, a small number deal with astronomical topics of the day. This paper will examine the astronomical images of Daumier from a social and historical perspective, emphasizing their role as a mirror of public perceptions of astronomy. As was typical of Daumier's art, these prints frame the topic of astronomy by exploring the popular understanding of current events. They are thus a unique window into the public perception of such events as the Great Comet of 1857, as well as the activities of astronomers as professional men of science. Daumier's images portray the popular understanding of astronomy as both limited and rife with misunderstanding. Through humor and a penetrating understanding of human nature, Daumier casts light upon the conflict of science and superstition in mid-nineteenth century France.

As with many fields of specialized knowledge, astronomy appeals to the popular imagination through a mix of fact and fiction. There are, of course, serious publications that attempt to distill the facts of current astronomy for a wide audience while preserving an accurate grasp of the facts, and publications 'for the rest of us' that promise to explain it all at a level that everyone can understand, the ultimate democratization of an often difficult subject. And there is Hollywood's search for drama and hype (accurate or otherwise), which, matched by television, give movement and sound to the still pictures of the books and journals, often at the expense of fact and even credibility. What these mass and print media sources share is a strong visual appeal, as astronomy lends itself to pictures that stir the imagination and satisfy an innate aesthetic response in the viewer.

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The popular image of astronomy is thus often exactly that, visual and illustrative, imaginative and, at its best, informative. To a certain extent, our expectations have been shaped by the conditions of living in a visually-rich culture, and we are the products of over a century of image-saturated media. It is through the image, as much as the word, that we have come to know the world around us.

This leads me to the topic at hand, an earlier kind of popular image of astronomy. Before photographs of the sky were widely available to the masses, a very different approach to the subject of astronomy could be seen in the emerging illustrated papers and journals of the mid-nineteenth century. For the duration of my paper, I would like to focus upon one prominent artist who helped guide that emerging visual culture, and whose images relating the events of contemporary astronomy to the middle class reading audience of his day are interesting for what they tell us about public reaction and perception to those events.

Honore Daumier (1808–1879) is best known for his illustrations of Paris life during the mid-nineteenth century. Among his many thousands of prints, only a small number deal with astronomical topics of the day. From a social and historical perspective, these images serve as a mirror of public perceptions of astronomy. As was typical of Daumier's art, the prints frame the topic of astronomy by exploring the popular understanding of current events. They are thus a unique window into the public perception of such events, as well as the activities of astronomers as professional men of science. Daumier's images portray the common person's understanding of astronomy as both limited and rife with misunderstanding. But Daumier was also a realist when it came to his audience, using humor and a penetrating understanding of human nature, rather than outright critique, to cast light upon the conflict of science and superstition in mid-nineteenth century France.

The primary outlet for Daumier's images was the journal *Le Charivari*. The journal was aimed at middle class Parisians who were developing a taste for inexpensive images to accompany topical news stories. Daumier's pictures were often featured on the page three 'insert', to be collected and even sold separately as if they were fine art prints. Topics covered politics, of course, and the targets of middle class suspicion: lawyers, doctors, and clerics. Bourgeois life was also a major topic for Daumier: city life, travel and vacations, education and the life of children, and the relations between middle and working classes.

There are a number of prints in which Daumier uses the sky as a way of commenting upon other issues. They are not astronomical in the strict

sense, but use astronomical phenomena to make a point about either politics or the affairs of the common man. In the former category are prints such as an attack on the political policies of the Catholic Church in post-1848 France, where the clerics are trying to extinguish the sun with a candle snuffer, itself a symbol of stupidity. On the other hand are images of Parisians gazing at the moon with a mixture of romance, longing, and nostalgia. These latter images might be seen as little more than the lingua franca of celestial symbolism, the moon being the most common of astronomical sights and the one that lends itself most readily to association to lovers' trysts and nighttime rendezvous. But a print such as 'La Vue' also suggests that Daumier realized the effects of urban life on what had, in a not so distant past, been a close connection between the rhythms of daily life and the cycles of the sun, moon, and stars. The wistful bourgeois who glimpse the moon between the buildings of Paris have begun to lose touch with the natural world even as the man-made world of the city grows around them.



Honoré Daumier, *Les Cinq Sens: La Vue*, 1839. Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, San Francisco, California, USA, Bruno and Sadie Adriani Collection.

But these are generic images of the sky, meant to be evocative but not specific. What of the events that are specific, linked to the historical moment? Daumier represented two types of astronomical phenomena in his prints that would have been both readily visible to his Parisian audience, and predicted in advance so that the events could be deemed news-worthy ahead of the actual occurrence. These were solar eclipses and comets. There was another astronomical event that was news-worthy, but invisible, that made it into Daumier's prints, as well, which we will see in a moment.

On October 9, 1847, the central path of an annular solar eclipse swept across northern France, including Paris. It would be the only solar eclipse of any kind whose path of totality would pass over or near Paris in the nineteenth century. A print by Daumier appeared in the November 18 issue of *Le Charivari*, showing two men gazing (rather dangerously, without visual protection) at the sun, with one noting that the eclipse has begun, the other complaining that he sees nothing yet. Had this been a total eclipse, the event would undoubtedly have provoked a more earnest response from both artist and public, but the likelihood that the event went unnoticed by many is suggested in the single, rather casual image that Daumier presents, unlike the stir that was caused by comets, as we shall see. There are other images that refer to solar eclipses in Daumier's career, most notably in 1857 and 1858, but none of these eclipse events would have been visible to the Paris public except as a partial eclipse.

The invisible astronomical event that Daumier refers to in a print published in the December 4, 1846 issue of *Le Charivari* was the announcement of the discovery of a new planet by Johann Galle and Heinrich d'Arrest based on predictions by Urbain Jean Joseph Le Verrier. 'Le Verrier's planet' was, of course, Neptune, seen by Galle and d'Arrest on September 23, 1846, and publicly announced at the beginning of October that year. Daumier shows a Parisian couple gazing upwards in, as the name of the print indicates, a 'Fruitless Search for Le Verrier's Planet'. Having heard the announcement of the discovery of Neptune, they are led to believe that, like a comet or other major astronomical object, the planet would be obvious and clearly visible. This print suggests, among other things, that the public was well aware of the current events in science and astronomy, they read the papers, they followed the discoveries and announcements with curiosity and interest. Daumier's middle class audience may have had the wrong idea about the visibility of Neptune, but they were far from uninformed.

But it was the appearance of bright comets in the night skies over Paris that caused the greatest public reaction, and which were the subject of the majority of Daumier's astronomically-themed prints. A series of bright comets appeared through the mid-nineteenth century, to the delight of astronomers and the consternation of a superstitious public. The traditional association of comets as omens of disaster or evil continued to influence the way the public perceived these appearances. Yet, there was also something reassuring in the fact that astronomers were now making predications about the appearance, or reappearance, of comets, based on telescopic observation and mathematical predictions of orbits, even if those predictions were sometimes misinterpreted or even wrong. This clash of science and superstition was at the heart of many of Daumier's astronomical images. He is careful not to completely ridicule the superstitious among his audience, and indeed feels free to exploit those traditional associations for expressive purposes. This is apparent in one of his first references to an actual comet. The Great March Comet of 1843 was used by Daumier in a print published March 31 of that year to 'explain' the failure of Victor Hugo's play *Les Burgraves* that month. Daumier's image would prove prescient, for the failure of *Les Burgraves* and the death of Hugo's eldest daughter that year would mark a turning point in the writer's career and end his involvement with theater.

But the connection of the genius with the appearance of a comet would play out in a different way in a later image by Daumier. The appearance of Comet Klinkerfues in 1853 is the inspiration for a print published on September 8 that year. In this case, however, a proud father indicates the comet to his laurel-wreathed son, saying that comets portend memorable events, and that it foretells his academic triumphs. This same comet was the subject of two other prints, published on August 29 and September 3, respectively. The first has the comet tapping an astronomer on the shoulder to indicate that he is searching the wrong part of the sky. In the second, a bourgeois couple, whom Daumier calls 'Parisian Astronomers', gaze from their bedroom window at the comet.

It was, however, the prediction of a cometary disaster in 1857 that Daumier responded to with the largest number of images. A series of 10 prints were published in *Le Charivari* in March of that year which reflected the concerns of the public that a comet would wreak havoc upon the Earth. Daumier's view was typically skeptical, poking fun at the 'precautions' taken by Parisians in anticipation of both the comet and a total solar eclipse (the eclipse was not visible in Europe, however). Pickpockets ply their trade with the phrase 'Do you see the comet there?'

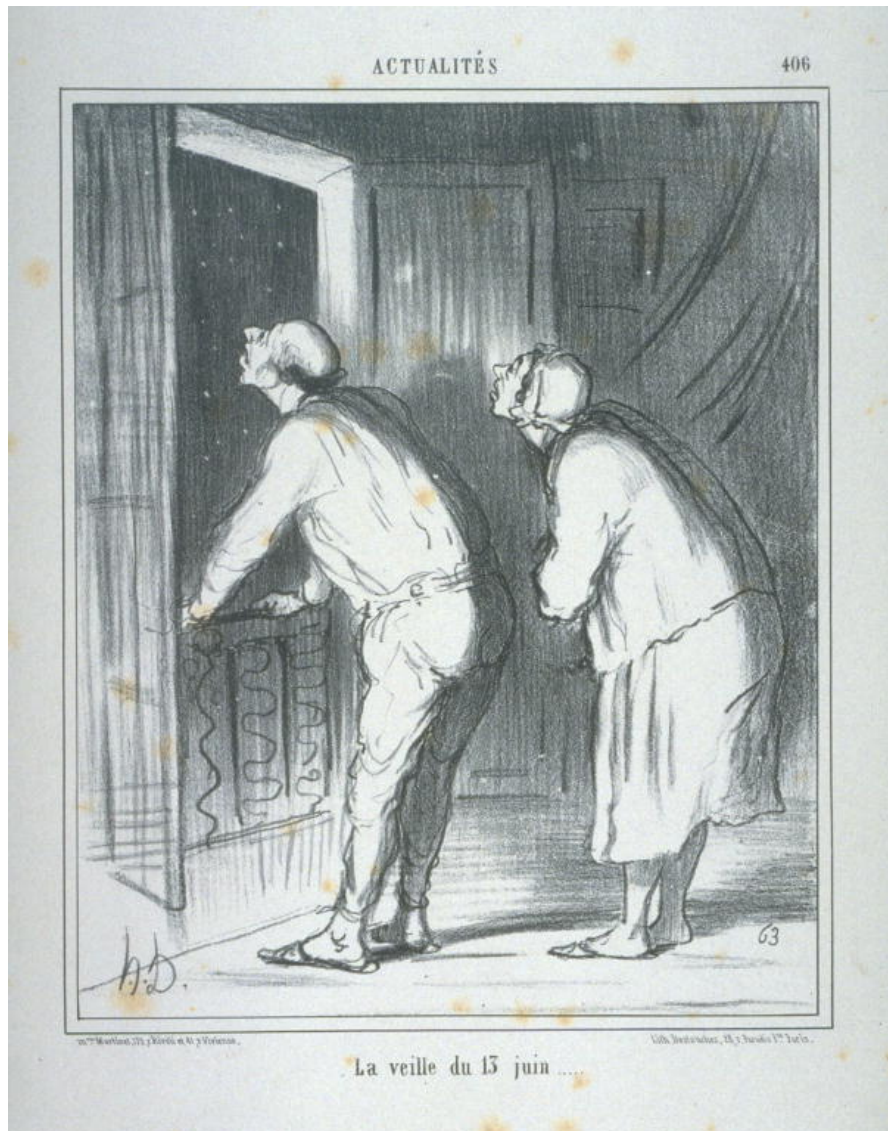
Parisians throw themselves into the river Seine to avoid the 'heat' of the comet, and they carry candles in the daytime in anticipation of the darkness of the eclipse. Anxious faces peer out the window to catch a glimpse of the fatal comet, in parody of the romantic couples who previously gazed out those same windows at the familiar moon.



Honoré Daumier, *Caricatures du Jour: Victor Hugo*, 1843. Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, San Francisco, California, USA, Bruno and Sadie Adriani Collection.



Honoré Daumier, *La Comète de 1857: La voyez-vous la comète?*, 1857. Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, San Francisco, California, USA, Bruno and Sadie Adriani Collection.



Honoré Daumier, *Actualités: La veille du 13 juin*, 1857. Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, San Francisco, California, USA, Bruno and Sadie Adriani Collection.

The mixture of science and superstition is interesting, in that the person most connected (at least in Daumier's mind) to the public's awareness of both events was Jacques Babinet (1794–1872). Babinet was an immensely popular lecturer and physicist, well known through his efforts to bring to the public an awareness of contemporary science through his talks. That Babinet did not actually predict a cometary collision in 1857 did not seem to sink in to the Parisian audience. Benjamin Pierce, of Harvard's Perkins Observatory, for instance, wrote:

What Babinet, who is an excellent popular lecturer, a good physicist, but no geometer or astronomer, may have written about a possible comet or collision with a comet (or what some unknown German may have done of the same kind) is wholly unknown to me. But neither of them, supposing the German to be of equal scientific position with Babinet, can have predicted in June any such collision, for I am positive that there are not the data for such a computation, and Babinet is at least of too respectable abilities to involve himself in such an absurdity.

This explains in part the odd image of a 'German Astronomer' releasing the comet from a cage as a 'canard' upon the public in one of Daumier's prints from the series. I would also note that Daumier shows the 'German Astronomer' in astrologer's robes, while Babinet the French savant is dressed in a contemporary suit. Edwin C. Krupp's recent *Sky and Telescope* article about astronomers' starry robes casts this iconography in a broader context of astrology and astronomy.

If this series on the non-existent comet of 1857 represents the 'hype' of the mid-nineteenth century, then it is a critical hype. Daumier looks at the human side of the events surrounding the comet panic, and at the same time suggests that we are all fallible when mass opinion sways us. An image of Babinet looking in the wrong direction for the very real Comet Donati in 1858 is Daumier's way of saying that even the scientists are in error sometimes, and that simple common sense is usually the best remedy. Daumier could poke fun, in another image, at a satisfied astronomer who says to a colleague the comet he has discovered can be expected to collide with earth in forty-five years, but he still accords a certain respect to the profession. At the same time, he is sympathetic to the couple, who wake up on June 14, 1857, the day after the predicted comet collision, and find to their great relief that they are still alive. If all of this seems strangely modern, with its mixture of mass hysteria,

skepticism, science and superstition, we can credit Honoré Daumier with his insight into some of the unchanging features of human nature.¹

¹ Robert Burnham, *Great comets* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Loys Delteil, *Le peintre-graveur illustré* (Amsterdam and New York: B. M. Israël & Da Capo Press, 1968); Fred Espenak, *Fifty Year Canon of Solar Eclipses: 1986-2035* (Boston MA: Sky Publishing, 1987); Bruce Laughton, *Honoré Daumier* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1996); Henri Loyrette et al., *Daumier, 1808-1879*. Galeries nationales du Grand Palais, Paris (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1999).