

Multisensuality in the Satirical Prints of the Georgian Era in England

Natalia Giza 

University of the National Education Commission, Kraków
nataliagiza@op.pl

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Abstract

The article discusses the concept of multisensuality in the satirical prints of the Georgian era in England, focusing on how the sensory perception enhances the visual humor. Drawing upon historical and cultural contexts, this study investigates how English caricaturists employed various sensory elements, such as sight, sound, smell, taste and touch to convey satire and provoke emotional responses among viewers. Ten satirical prints by five different authors were chosen for the analysis.

Keywords: multisensuality, satirical prints, caricatures, Georgian England, James Gillray

1. Introduction

The Georgian era in England traditionally refers to the period of time between 1714 and 1830. The country was experiencing significant political, social and cultural changes mainly due to the American and French Revolutions, Napoleonic Wars and Industrial Revolution. Economic growth had its positive effects but also resulted in social problems, among which were widespread poverty, high crime rate and alcoholism. Huge discrepancies between the upper and lower classes deepened. Also, the lavish lifestyle of the Hanoverian kings who ruled England at that time did not set an example. Satirical prints by James Gillray, Thomas Rowlandson or Charles Williams are one of the most powerful commentaries of the political and social situation in Great Britain in the 18th/19th century. They were influential enough to shape public opinion by satiriz-

ing the prominent figures and events of the Georgian era. They served as: „a political safety valve that helps through its humor to release escalating tensions and ease anxieties, thus allowing debate to continue.” (Taylor, 2017, p. 2). However, some of them were commissioned, thus being skillfully used as a propaganda tool. (Patten, 1983, p. 332).

Because a lot of attention has been given to the visual and narrative aspects of those prints, the focus now is going to be put on their multisensuality. The article examines how the caricaturists combined visual humor and sensory perception to engage the senses of their audience.

The term „multisensuality” refers to the incorporation of sensory elements, such as smell, sight, taste, touch and sound within a work of art to create emotional responses and enhance its communicative power. By stimulating several senses simultaneously, artists make the experience more immersive and engaging for the viewers. In the context of Georgian caricatures, the analysis of multisensory elements adds an additional layer of complexity of the message that the authors tried to convey. The theoretical groundwork for this research is interdisciplinary. Semiotics helps to analyze the visual signs and symbols within a given cultural context. In case of caricatures, a variety of visual elements such as symbolism, juxtaposition or exaggeration are used to convey the satirical meaning. The analysis of those visual elements and their intended meaning shows how caricaturists constructed messages that engage multiple senses and provoke emotional responses. Aesthetic theories are vital in understanding the emotional responses triggered by multisensory aspects of caricatures. Artistic techniques like color, line, composition or texture when combined with multisensory elements enhance the viewer’s experience and evoke emotional reactions. The sublime or the grotesque provide valuable insight into the ways in which visual arts provoke pleasure, discomfort, or a combination of both, amplifying the impact of the social and political messages the author planned to convey. Additionally, the field of sensory perception, which examines how the senses process and interpret stimuli, helps to understand how the incorporation of multiple sensory cues influences the viewers’ interpretation. The senses of sight, sound, taste, and smell are all potential channels used by caricaturists to engage their audience. The dominant sense—sight—plays a central role in conveying visual humor through expressive facial expressions, exaggerated features or distorted proportions. Sound is evoked through speech bubbles, onomatopoeic cues or visual elements indicating auditory experiences, which strengthen the satirical effect. The integration of touch, taste and smell can be found in the tactile details of objects or characters, references to culinary experiences, or depictions of odorous substances, which, in the context of the satirical prints of the Georgian era, have not been analyzed in this way yet.

In this article I will try to highlight specific multisensory dimensions of British Georgian satirical prints by examining the visual elements, sound-related cues, gustatory and olfactory references present in the selected caricatures. 10 satirical prints by 5 different artists were chosen for this analysis. The most prolific and recognizable caricaturist of the Georgian era is indisputably James Gillray (1756-1815), but Thomas Rowlandson (1756-1827), William Hogarth (1697-1764), George Cruikshank (1792-1878) and Charles Williams (died 1830) also deserve recognition. In their works they masterfully satirized the challenges faced by Great Britain in the context of the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars (Gillray „Temperance Enjoying a Frugal Meal” 1792, Gillray „The Plumb-Pudding in Danger” 1805), the lavish lifestyle of the Royal Family (Gillray „Monstrous Craws, at a New Coalition Feast” 1787, Gillray „Voluptuary under the Horrors of Digestion” 1792, Gillray „Midas, Transmutting All into Gold Paper” 1797), vices and follies of the British aristocracy (Rowlandson „Exhibition Stare Case” 1811 and „Breaking up of the Blue Stocking Club” 1815, Cruikshank „Inconveniences of a Crowded Drawing Room” 1818) and the social problems like poverty and alcoholism (Hogarth, „The Beer Street” and „The Gin Lane” 1751, Gillray „The Cow-Pock-or-the Wonderful Effects of the New Inoculation!” 1802).

2. The Prince of Whales and the sense of sight

In case of visual arts the sense of sight is obviously the one that matters the most. Caricatures of Georgian Britain use a wide variety of visual elements and techniques to convey their satirical messages. Exaggeration and distortion are among the most frequently used to underline specific features and characteristics which were to be mocked. James Gillray’s „Voluptuary under the Horrors of Digestion” portrays in an exaggerated manner all the vices of the oldest son of King George III—George, Prince of Wales. The huge, bloated stomach of the Prince is the central part of the picture. Its round shape is further enhanced by circular decorations in the room: the carpet with a circular pattern, the portrait in a circular frame and a circular crest next to it. The Prince is depicted in a relaxed pose, that, combined with his tight and barely-holding-together clothes emphasize his blown-out-of-proportion belly. He is holding a fork to his mouth, as if he just finished eating. Next to him, on the table are bones of substantial pieces of meat, almost all already devoured by the Prince. Alcohol bottles are on the table, and below them. On the wall, behind him, there is a parody of his crest—a crossed fork and knife on a plate. Through exaggeration the Prince of Whales, as he was often called, is heavily criticized for his obsession with food, drink and gambling. (Donald, 1996, pp. 100-101).



Pic.1. James Gillray, *Voluptuary under the Horrors of Digestion* (1792)

Symbolism and metaphor are also crucial when discussing visual elements of graphic prints. Symbolic objects, gestures or settings in Georgian caricatures convey extra meanings and commentaries for those who can decipher them. In the above mentioned „Voluptuary” the Prince’s addiction to gambling is symbolized by a pair of dice on the floor. In another of Gillray’s works „Plumb Pudding in Danger” William Pitt, who is carving the globe and dividing it between himself and Napoleon, is holding a trident in his hand (instead of a fork), which symbolizes British naval claims to control the Atlantic. In „Temperance Enjoying a Frugal Meal” a vase with flowers inside of the fireplace means nothing less than the avarice of the King George and his wife Charlotte. Additionally, perspective, framing and composition also add to the visual impact. In Rowlandson’s „Exhibition Stare Case” the people are climbing up or falling down a steep staircase which diagonally crosses the entire picture thus enhancing the symbolic meaning of the statue of Venus in the background. The arrangement of elements, position of characters and their implied movements also matter. Rowlandson’s composition is dynamic, people are moving and their faces are expressive in stark contrast with the marble goddess looking in an unimpressed manner at the scene. Skillfully depicted suggestive facial expressions and body language help create engaging sensory experiences for the viewers. Wide grins,

shy glances, exaggerated frowns or contorted postures are all visual cues invoking surprise, laughter or even discomfort in the audience. Four women are tumbling down the steps with their skirts flying and exposing their tender parts to the horror of some observers, and delight of others. Their imperfect naked bodies draw more attention than ideally shaped Venus, which in itself is ironic because the people came there for the art exhibition organized by the Royal Academy. Embarrassed faces and grotesque poses of the fallen ladies reinforce the comedic effect, resonating with the audience on a deeper level. Characters depicted in the picture seem to be moving: pushing, climbing, tumbling, waving, pointing, which helps to evoke the sense of dynamism.



Pic.2. Thomas Rowlandson, *Exhibition stare case* (1811?)

3. Fighting women and the sense of hearing

The most common element traditionally analyzed when discussing sound effects in visual arts are speech bubbles. They visually represent dialogue and enable the transmission of spoken words or sounds within an image. Apart from the content, the placement of speech bubbles also helps to understand the intended messages or intentions of the characters. Usually, speech bubbles contain a minimal number of words, very often with an indirect, or even symbolic meaning, supplementing the visual elements. Understanding them is crucial in understanding the whole satire. Since the symbolic meaning of Georgian satirical prints have already been thoroughly researched, all speech bubbles have also been analyzed. As a result, the caricatures chosen for this article do not contain speech bubbles, which helps to focus on other sound-related cues. To depict sound in a painting, artists resort to onomatopoeic representations such as bangs, crashes, laughter, but there are also less obvious implications enabling viewers to „hear” the presented actions or events. Gillray’s „Monstrous Craws at a New Coalition Feast” from 1787 criticizes the insatiable appetite of the Royal Family for consuming the national wealth.



Pic. 3. James Gillray, *Monstrous Craws at a New Coalition Feast* (1787)

The three characters portrayed at the entrance to the Treasury are King George III, Queen Charlotte and their son Prince of Wales. All of them have craws attached to their necks which they are trying to fill with the golden coins from the bowl before them labelled „John Bull’s Blood”. Prince George, whose crown is at the same time a fool’s cap, is in the middle and his craw is almost empty when compared to those of his parents. He seems to be unsatisfied with his share and is glancing at his mother, as if he would like to have her portion too.

This print satirizes extravagant lifestyle and constant debts of the Prince, but also criticizes the Royal Couple for constantly increasing his allowances and delivering him from his financial predicaments. (Rempel 1995) All three characters are greedily devouring the coins-food with the use of spoons and ladles and they way their mouths and utensils are positioned makes the viewer almost „hear” the way they slurp.



Pic. 4. Thomas Rowlandson, *Breaking Up of the Blue Stocking Club* (1815)

Another sound-invoking image is „Breaking Up of the Blue Stocking Club” from 1815 by Thomas Rowlandson. Group scenes are usually easier to analyze in the context of auditory cues, as people moving, talking or non-verbally interacting still generate sounds. In his work Rowlandson presented a group of ten women in the middle of „an argument”. The preceding debate must have been a heated one because the participants have already jumped into action and are now literally fighting one another. Apart from the obvious sounds that usually accompany a fight, such as screaming, shouting, hitting with a punch, smacking or slapping, there are other elements which stimulate the sense of hearing. There are three cats present in the room. One of them is being trodden upon by the lady wrestling with her opponent across the table. Meows, hisses and screeches must have added to the turmoil. The armchair has been upset, which makes us expect a thud of a heavy object hitting the ground. The tray is about to fall down from the table and most of the china has just fallen to the floor so the shatter of the porcelain being broken and clatter of metal cutlery can also be „heard”. One more sound-suggesting element is water. In one corner there is an upturned

vase from which water is slowly pouring out on the floor. In the opposite corner, there is hot water being deliberately poured out by one fighting lady on to the other. The auditory chaos is intensified by the swishing of the wind, which can be deduced from the flying curtains and a swinging lamp. The whole picture is a satirical representation of female savants who in the middle of the 18th century started gathering in salons to exchange ideas and discuss literature. By the beginning of the 19th century those learned women started to be mocked and heavily criticized for abandoning their traditional gender roles and duties and invading the space reserved for male intellectuals. To depreciate the importance and seriousness of their meetings they were ascribed typical female vices, such as talkativeness, jealousy, vanity, etc., which unavoidably take over when women are left with no male supervision, what in effect leads to a descent into chaos portrayed by Rowlandson.

One more group scene deserves mentioning here—„Inconveniences of a Crowded Drawing Room” from 1818 by George Cruikshank. The caricature ridicules royal receptions organized by Queen Charlotte, in this instance, at Buckingham Palace. They were usually attended by crowds of people, many of whom should not have been invited and did not know how to behave. Apart from the obvious buzz of conversations, in the foreground there is one more sound inducing element—a dress that has just been torn. The room is so tightly packed and the train of the dress is so absurdly long (for the given circumstances) that a careless man stepped on it and made it tear. This unpleasant sound must have been heard and it highlights the visual result (ruined dress). Combined they create a meaningful crack on the seemingly ideal surface of elegant and cultured gatherings of the country’s elite.

The final satirical print, from the ones chosen for this article, which contains auditory cues is by James Gillray: „Midas Transmuting All into Paper” from 1797. The central figure is mythical King Midas who could turn everything he touched into gold. However, in the picture, Midas is shown as transforming everything into paper. It is a biting commentary on the financial policies of the British government at that time, particularly the issuing of excessive amounts of paper currency and the resulting inflation in a plan of diminishing the national debt. Gillray criticizes the government’s relentless pursuit of wealth and their disregard for the welfare of the nation. Even though the figure of King Midas is static, his head is turned to the side and he is spitting out banknotes. His blown cheeks suggest the force he needs to put into doing it and help us „hear” the sound that is usually produced while spitting, enhancing the derogatory tone of the caricature.



Fig. 5. James Gillray, *Midas Transmuting All into Paper* (1797)

4. The smell of alcohol and the taste of water

The sense of smell is very often overlooked when analyzing visual arts. However, the incorporation of olfactory elements, such as the depiction of fragrances, smoke, or unpleasant odors adds an extra layer to the understanding of the message the author is trying to convey. In Gillray's „Voluptuary” the sense of smell is stimulated by the remains of food left on the table, but also, and even more powerfully, by the chamberpot overflowing with excrement. The placement of an undeniably smell-producing chamberpot right behind the feasting Prince serves as a meaningful commentary on how low he had fallen as a result of his self indulgence and hedonism.

The most obvious way to analyze olfactory and gustatory cues in pictures is food. We know what it smells and tastes like and can almost automatically „sense” it while seeing it. In another caricature by James Gillray „Temperance Enjoying a Frugal Meal” from 1792 the author satirizes the frugality of the Royal Couple, and especially of Queen Charlotte. Many contemporary critics believed

she did not live up to the standards expected of a queen. For some, her thriftiness was a negative trait and a failure to represent the luxury and opulence associated with the monarchy. Nearly every detail of the picture reinforces the miserliness of the Royal Couple. The royal chair is protected against wear by a plain covering and the royal rug is covered by a simple mat. The King is using the tablecloth as a napkin to protect his patched breeches. The fireplace has winter flowers inside, which means that even though it is cold in the royal chamber, warm fire is an unnecessary expense. Even the ornamental figure seems to have his hands in a muff because of the cold. Also, the number of candles in the candelabra providing light in the room has been reduced to one. Symbolically, the figure of Munificence which is a part of the candelabra design is holding empty cornucopias. The King and Queen are in the middle of a meal, which consists of nothing more special than soft-boiled eggs and salad greens. Instead of wine they are drinking Aqua Regis, i.e. water. The predominant smell induced by this image is mustiness of a cold room. This, combined with the smell of boiled eggs reinforces the intended message. Also, in the „Plumb-Pudding in Danger” Napoleon and William Pitt are carving up the globe between them as if they were sharing a Christmas pudding. There is steam coming out of this peculiar „dish” suggesting it is hot and giving off smell.



Pic. 6. James Gillray, *Temperance Enjoying a Frugal Meal* (1792)

Another element suggesting smell is associated with group scenes. In the „Inconveniences of a Crowded Drawing Room” the place is so full of people dressed up in their party outfits that we can sense the stuffiness and people’s sweat mixed up with their perfume. In „Breaking Up of the Blue Stocking Club” we can also „smell” the sweat of the fighting ladies, but there is also spilled tea, red wine and blood, which add to the sensory chaos.



Pic. 7. William Hogarth, The Beer Street and The Gin Lane (1751)

A mixture of olfactory cues can also be deduced from the two famous prints by William Hogarth issued in 1751—„The Beer Street” and „The Gin Lane”. They were created in support of the Gin Act and are meant to be analyzed alongside each other. The first one highlights the positive effects of drinking beer and is in contrast with the second one presenting the evils of drinking gin. In the 18th century alcoholism became a serious problem in Great Britain. „The Gin Lane” is a powerful and vivid depiction of the social and moral decay caused by the excessive consumption of gin. It shows inhabitants of a slum district in London. The only businesses that flourish are connected with the gin industry: gin sellers, distillers, the pawnbroker and the undertaker. The central character is a woman in the foreground, who obviously drunk, has let her baby slip from her arms and fall to its death at the entrance to the gin cellar below. She is half-naked and the syphilitic wounds on her legs suggest her earning money as a prostitute. In the background there is another mother calming her baby down with a sip of gin. There are also two teenage girls both enjoying a drink. (Hallett, 1999, pp. 123-125) Alcohol is everywhere so the smell of it is predominant. To make the sensation even worse, it is mixed with the odor of dead bodies—a hangman, a woman being loaded into a coffin, a toddler impaled on a spike

and a skeletal ex-soldier who had probably pawned most of his clothes to afford the gin in his basket. These two olfactory elements reinforce the sense of despair and degradation of a community drowning in alcohol. „The Beer Street” is the opposite of everything that is happening in „The Gin Lane”. People here are elegant and well-fed. Most of them are having a break from work to refresh themselves with a pint of ale. The only business that is in trouble is the pawn-broker. The smell of beer is mixed with the smell of food strengthening the impression of prosperity and well-being.



Pic. 8. George Cruikshank, *Inconveniences of a Crowded Drawing Room* (1818)

5. Rubbing bellies and getting vaccinated. The sense of touch

Analyzing the role of touch in satirical prints is challenging and involves examining of the visual elements and techniques employed by artists to convey tactile sensations and their symbolic implications. The visual cues representing touch or tactile sensations include depictions of physical contact between characters, objects that invite touch, or textures that are visually emphasized. Also gestures and interactions are important and often greatly contribute to the satirical message. In „Inconveniences of a Crowded Drawing Room” people are inevitably touching one another, but the most conspicuous example is the central couple in the doorway. An enormously obese man is stuck against an equally obese woman, their absurdly protruding bellies rubbing against one another. The way they are positioned and trying not to touch, even though their

stomachs are pressed against one another, brings to mind a certain degree of impropriety or even obscenity. Cruikshank satirized the inelegance of a crowded drawing room and the touching bellies stuck in the doorway are definitely against the decorum. Also, the author was trying to ridicule the absurd fashion of his times (Donald 1996, 85-93) and as a result we are presented with a splendid mixture of a variety of textures—from fluffy feathers, silky dresses to gold lace. They all create an image of luxury, but also add to the sensory chaos. When it comes to the tactile cues, there is one element which stands out in this picture—the door wing. People and objects in the room have round edges, which makes them seem soft to the touch, and only the door wing is rectangular and evidently hard, as if to enhance the way we perceive the crowd. Softness versus hardness is also visible in the „Monstrous Craws”, where round, loosely hanging craws and plump rosy cheeks contrast sharply with the heaps of metal coins which are being devoured. Also, in the „Plumb-pudding in Danger” the steaming globe-pudding looks as if it was just taken out from the oven—fresh, hot and soft. It easily gives way to the cold and sharp steel slicing it.



Fig. 9. James Gillray, *The Plumb-Pudding in Danger* (1805)

The „Exhibition Stare-Case” is another print in which bodies unwillingly, but inevitably touch—as a result of the fall. Round shapes of female tights and bottoms, exposed bare because of their flying skirts suggest softness and tenderness. One of the fallen ladies is lying on a man, and the other one is being helped by another man clumsily trying to lift her up and at the same time staring at

her nakedness. As in the „Crowded Drawing Room” women and men accidentally touching denotes something inappropriate and against decorum. Gender played an important role in shaping acceptable forms of touch in 18th century. Men were traditionally permitted greater freedom in initiating physical contact, while women were expected to adhere to more restrained and modest norms. Touch between men was often seen as a display of camaraderie, while touch between men and women was subject to stricter social codes. In the „Breaking Up” it is only women’s bodies touching while fighting, but still, even though not against the rules, their touch makes the viewer uncomfortable. Almost bare, round bosoms overflow the dresses as a result of sudden and violent movements. Female bodies are close together, but once a focus is put on the gestures, most of the women are pulling one another’s hair. Apart from the obvious reason to inflict pain, the idea of ruining one’s hairstyle (so elaborate in the 18th century) or even hair brings about references to the deliberate attack on someone’s womanhood. Members of the Bluestocking Club tried to prove that the fair sex can be more than a decoration, that it is their intelligence and talents that matter, not their beauty. But by ending their discussion with an argument whose crowning moment was pulling other women’s hair they only proved they do possess the vices men accused them of. Forceful and painful touch of a woman may be read as a symbol of her transgressing her traditional gender role.



Pic. 10. James Gillray, *The cow-pock, or-The wonderful effects of the new inoculation!* (1802)

The most unusual satirical print that deserves mentioning in this section is „The cow-pock,-or-The wonderful effects of the new inoculation!” from 1802 by James Gillray. It was the caricaturist’s commentary on the controversy surrounding the English physician Edward Jenner’s invention. Jenner was successful in making his patients immune to the deadly disease of smallpox by inoculating them with cowpox—a relatively harmless virus attacking cattle. His breakthrough discovery paved the way for the prevention of smallpox, and eventually annihilation of that infectious disease in Europe. However, initially it had to face severe criticism. Objections were made on medical and religious grounds, condemning the vaccination procedure as dangerous and unsanitary since it involved the mixing of the animal substance with a human body. Other physicians warned their patients that the vaccination might result in strange mutations like cow hair growing on arms and legs, or having one’s face distorted to resemble that of an ox. (Moseley 1800, 183; Moseley 1807, 17) Gillray’s picture shows people gathered in a vaccine institution in which doctor Jenner is administering his vaccines. In the centre there is a frightened young woman whose right arm is being cut open by the doctor. A small, ragged boy is helping by holding up a bucket of „Vaccine Pock hot from ye Cow”. The doctor’s touch here has no negative connotations. It is simply a part of the procedure, and an expression of authority. So is the gesture of a doctor’s assistant controlling the people who are waiting to get inside. He has put his hand on the head of the next patient and is forcefully ladling the „opening mixture” (laxative) into his mouth. It is a meaningful expression of authority and power. However, the sense of touch is even more important in case of a group of people to the right, whose treatment evidently had serious side effects—there are miniature cows sprouting out of their bodies. One cow is coming out of the mouth of a pregnant woman, and another one is jumping out from under her dress. A farmer with a pitchfork is looking at a cow bursting from a swelling on his arm, and feeling another one coming out of his bottom. The man in the corner is desperately raising his hands up, once he realized there are horns sprouting out from his forehead. Other patients have small cows breaking through swellings on a cheek, nose and eye. Their gestures emphasize how confused and desperate they are.

6. Conclusions

The satirical prints of the Georgian era in England are a remarkable example of how the employing of multi-sensory elements helps to create impactful and engaging social commentaries. The skillful integration of visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile and gustatory cues makes these artworks transcend the boundaries of a traditional visual satire, inviting viewers to a multisensory experience. The analysis of visual elements demonstrated the ingenuity of artists in using composition or symbolism to convey intricate social commentaries. The exploration of auditory cues highlighted the power of sound effects

in reinforcing the satirical intent of the prints. Eventually, the discussion on the olfactory, gustatory and tactile elements uncovered the deeper layers of meaning and emotional impact included in the artworks through the representation of smell, taste and touch. The satirical prints chosen for this article demonstrate diverse ways in which artists harnessed multi-sensuality to convey complex narratives, social and cultural critiques, or political commentaries. From Hogarth's „Gin Lane” depicting the devastating consequences of alcoholism through olfactory imagery, to Gillray's playful yet biting use of smell and touch in the „Plumb-Pudding in Danger”, each caricature proves the transformative power of multi-sensory elements in the art of satire. The satirical prints of the Georgian era were not only visual entertainments, but also invitations to a deeper exploration of the human condition and the society of their time. They served as mirrors reflecting the joys and follies of the rapidly changing world, challenging the viewers to reflect on their own role in shaping the society.

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Natalia Giza, PhD is Assistant Professor in the Department of History and Culture of the English Speaking Countries of the UKEN University. Her research is centered on social history and often revolves around the history of women. Currently working on a project on the royal children in the 18th century Britain.