

epistemológicas. Tiene que ver también con la "arjé", el principio presocrático, y sobre todo con la primera formulación del método freudiano, como exploración de los estratos profundos depositados en la psique humana. Exploración no del inconsciente ésta de Foucault, sino de continentes epistemológicos hundidos.

14. Ver su breve referencia a la fenomenología (pp. 336-7), que se prolonga de una manera dudosa e incierta en *La arqueología* . . . ; ¿Uno llega a preguntarse si Foucault ha entendido o ha leído siquiera a Husserl!

15. Lo que resalta bien si se coteja *De la division social du travail*, de Durkheim, con los célebres análisis de Smith y de Marx.

## Painting the News: Picasso's "Guernica"

Edward Baker

*University of Minnesota*

A prefatory observation: My remarks are directed only at the kind of history painting that depicts contemporary or near contemporary events. I am not concerned with paintings such as David's *Oath of the Horatii* that ostensibly paint a more or less distant past or that, more precisely, displace the present in a bid for dignification. I am interested, then, in the pictorial representation of what Lukács aptly called the present as history.

In the 19th century, one important strand of historical painting of contemporary or near contemporary events is occupied with depicting the revolutionary and foundational moments of recently constituted bourgeois national states. Indeed it visually defines for us what actually is contemporary and separates itself from what is not. But it does so in a way that seeks to deflect attention away from the revolutionary nature of the events and toward that which is "national" in the representation of certain events and figures, so that figures tend to become iconic and events creation myths. It is the sort of painting that both presents and occults itself as anecdotal heroism, whose pseudo-epic and trivial qualities make it ideal for reproductions to be hung in schoolrooms and post offices. There is no facetiousness intended in this observation. Rather, the intent is to illuminate anecdotal heroism's mode of social existence, its existence for us.

The fact is that we encounter anecdotal heroism almost exclusively in a reproduced form. Now this is true of nearly all painting, unless we have the good fortune to live near an important museum, or, for that matter, even if we do. But anecdotal-heroic painting differs from Leonardo's *Last Supper*, Goya's *Third of May* or the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. *Washington Crossing the Delaware* belongs as much to the *Musée imaginaire* of Americans as do the above mentioned works, but it does so in a special way that eliminates almost entirely the need to

see the original, a need we still feel, however vestigially, in the case of Leonardo, Goya, and Michelangelo. This, to cite a personal and, I think, representative experience, is because the New York public school authorities did not wish to acquaint me with art greater or lesser when they had a reproduced Washington tacked up on the classroom wall. Had that been their wish, they could just as easily have chosen a Raphael Virgin or a Mondrian abstraction. But what they actually wanted was to stamp upon me the imprint of something possessing far greater import: the condition of my citizenship in the form of a patriotism that would wither and die if not reaffirmed every weekday morning.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the post office. Here, the exemplary nature of anecdotal heroism in mechanically reproduced form is made far more plain than in the classroom, where the harmonic, seamless continuity of child-teacher-hero imposes itself. In the post office, contradiction is introduced. On its walls, row upon row of photographed and fingerprinted miscreants, their faces a mixture of fury and indifference, gaze out at us and remind us that even the most deadening bureaucratic routine cannot transform the exemplarity of Washington, or Jefferson, or Lincoln, or the Founding Fathers signing the Constitution into a merely decorative motif.

The purpose of these observations is not so much to restore the wanted poster to its rightful place in the constellation of bureaucratic art as it is to recall the ideologically integrative function of a certain kind of historical painting. They also serve as an interesting contrast to Picasso's *Guernica*. *Guernica* is virtually the only historical painting of the 20th century which evokes something approaching universal recognition. Yet it seems odd that that this should be so because *Guernica* is the work of a painter whose indifference to historical subjects is well known. Prior to 1937, Picasso, in four decades of artistic activity, had studiously avoided painting history, not simply out of personal preference but rather because that preference was fully confirmed by the all-pervasive anti-historicism of modernism itself.

This is made manifest in the first important modernist historical painting, and perhaps the most important one until *Guernica*, Manet's *Execution of Maximilian*. The *Execution* . . . is, among other things, a spectral, disembodied afterimage of Goya's *Third of May*. Goya, in the *Third of May*, did not paint an execution but rather a succession of them, the culmination of which is witnessed by the viewer. The executions, in turn, are the consequence, indeed of political consequence, of the mass urban uprising depicted in the *Second of May*. The sequence of events if

further prolonged through the painter's choice of his own standpoint, the close-up, neither above nor below but rather on ground level, so that the viewer becomes the bearer, the imaginary protagonist, of the individual and collective victim's outcry against the firing squad's anonymous, rationalized force.

Manet distantiates us both from Goya's standpoint and from the event. His distance, and our own, is not meant to encompass the event but rather to reify, to deprotagonize, its protagonists and he does this by painting not the moment of the execution as it mediates a lived past and a potentially lived future, but rather the empty aftermath of it. The emptiness, however, is actually a rhetorical thrust against something and for something else: against the overblown clutter of the French State's art and for painting as a self-referential object. Because what fills the void created by the removal of both the temporality and the anecdotal material of Manet's professed subject is, perhaps for the first time in the history of European art, painting itself.

Our approach to *Guernica* must, therefore, be colored by the disjuncture of painting and history inherent in modernism, by its refusals of, and subsequent attempts to recuperate, the historical. Anthony Blunt pinpoints the matter in his study of *Guernica*, where he states that "( . . . ) the symbols which Picasso used in *Guernica* were not invented suddenly for that painting but had been evolving—one can almost say maturing—slowly in the artist's mind during the previous years; but, whereas in the earlier phase they had been a means of expressing a private and personal tragedy, under the impulse of the Spanish Civil War Picasso was able to raise them to an altogether higher plane and use them to express his reaction to a cosmic tragedy." (p. 26) Blunt got to the heart of the problem, however unwittingly, in observing that Picasso's symbols were raised from the private to the cosmic. The problem, simply stated, is that the symbols were raised far too high, for there is nothing so unlike a "cosmic tragedy" as the events that took place in that small Basque city on the afternoon of April 26, 1937. If the Condor Legion's bombing of *Guernica* was a tragedy, it was a political tragedy, not a "cosmic" one, and Picasso's shortcomings stem precisely from his inability to grasp fully the nature of his subject and to devise a pictorial language adequate to it, as Max Raphael has argued in his essay on *Guernica* in *The Demands of Art*.

To focus on *Guernica* in this way necessarily raises the question of allegory and its status in contemporary artistic creation in general, and, in particular, for the cubist. Contemporary allegory, it seems to me, is everywhere an admission of defeat, of the

inability to apprehend the world from within, and it is on this terrain where it intersects with cubism. For cubism is an initial attempt of the privatized artist to paint things literally from the inside, and yet it succeeds only in reproducing the abstracting force of an increasingly commodified world. Allegory, as an attempt to break away from abstract immanence, becomes a *representational* expression of the commodity's empty formal universality, a further entrapment of the painter trapped between solipsism and a deanthropomorphized objectivity.

Nonetheless, it would be wrong to absolutize these judgments. In a sense, Picasso does find a way to paint history, although we are not likely to find it if we examine *Guernica* in search of the historical event, the bombing of that Basque city. Rather, it can be found in the form of circulation and reception of the event, that is to say, as news, concretely, as photographed news. News, the news that for the most part Picasso and millions of other people had access to, is history hypostatized in such a way as to transform struggles into "stories", in other words, fragments, which, on the one hand are related to one another to form a universe of fragments, and on the other, are grasped by the consumer in their isolated immediacy. "Stories", then, exhibit the structural characteristics of the subjects for whom they are intended.

Picasso painted *Guernica* in blacks, grays, and whites, the "colors" of photography, and he endowed his canvas with a mural-like monumentality which, once we begin to think in terms of photography and news, reminds us of nothing so much as the newsreel. The newsreel is especially interesting because it combined pseudomonumentality with trivialization in ways that no other news medium of that time or our own could possibly match. We need only remind ourselves that the format of the newsreel was essentially a *mélange* of State occasions, "action" clips of war portrayed as spectacle, and beauty contests of one sort or another, all these things presented as anecdotal equivalents of one another. Picasso's response, although well within the canons of modernism, is a mark of his singular pictorial intelligence. It is simply to denature the seeming naturalness of the equation, to turn the trivialized commensurability of everything against itself. He does this through shock, and forces us to confront the disembodied quality of the news spectacle by overwhelming us with real specters.

In *Guernica*, Picasso did not restore the viewer to history. This he could not do because his own refusal of history is the actual content of the privatization and allegory that govern the painting. These are Picasso's limits, but he himself probed them with every

means of expression at his command. True, he did not paint history in *Guernica*. He did, however, paint his own refusal of the anti-history that we ourselves encounter day in and day out at every turn of the dial.



## Reading the News in Painting: Picasso's *Guernica*

René Jara

*University of Minnesota*

I will begin by stating my premises; or, if you would prefer, my excuses for daring to express opinions in a field where I don't even rank as an amateur.

First. The pictorial object, I think, is given in the simultaneity of seeing and reading. There is no other meaning than the named meaning; the universe of meaning is not different from the world of language: to know the meaning of anything always involves linguistic articulation.

In this manner, the reading of a painting has always a choice of available paths, each of them restrained in different degrees by a number of privileged semantic directions present in the visual makeup of the painting. I think what I want to express is that phenomenologically seeing and reading are two distinct operations, but in the end, what one sees can only be communicated in readable terms.

Second. the semiotical rearrangement of the functional units that integrate the structure of a painting is not a once-and-for-all exercise, rather in every reading the image-function suffers a new arrangement, as exemplified by Baker's reading and my own, even though my intention is to supplement his. That happens because the meaning in art is always only a probability of meaning; it is a perspective, never a definition: the meaning is no more or less than the path leading to it.

Third. A painting represents itself as a surface of topical and dynamic signals that give direction to the eye, forcing the viewer to close a circuit, to stop and focus on a figure, to delay the pace, to overcome some obstacles, or to postpone the accomplishment of viewing the unity of the painting as a structured totality.

Fourth. The twofold nature of the pictorial object, readable and visible, produces a utopian locus in which one realizes both the existence of a point of view—present in the syntagmatic chain of

the *picemes*—and of a perspective brought into play by the analyst. This perspective, defined as a distance and an orientation, located *hic et nunc* in an existential space of behavior, provides a closure to the otherwise indefinite opening of the process leading to meaning.

A rapid analysis of *Guernica*, following the insights furnished by Baker in his paper, "Painting the News," and using my already stated premises, will lead to the mode of reading the news in Picasso's work.

Taking the physical center of *Guernica* as an analytical point of departure, that is the upper part of the mutilated chest of the still alive horse, we may divide the painting in two sections separated by an imaginary vertical line. Both fields will be united by a number of pictorial functions: to the right, the fist of the dismembered soldier presses a broken sword and a flower; and also we see the bottom part of the horse's leg, deceptively normal. In the opposite direction, moving from right to left, the fist of the woman appears bearing a useless lamp with the frustrated intention of illuminating the scene to make it understandable. Useless lamp, and decorative flower result in identical semantic value.

To the extreme right, the man in flames is left in pictorial isolation; with his arms outstretched in desperate agony, he abandons himself to death in a silent scream suggested by his open mouth and wrinkled forehead. In the same line with the man, we see a monstrous foot fleeing the flaming scenery and also a small window that seems to eliminate any possibility of escape; all of it composes a class of semantic units characteristic of despair and fatality.

To the right of center, a woman who appears as an extension of the monstrous foot, rushes to the middle of the canvas dragging her bare bottom with a terrified yet curious expression on her face; she is almost at the point of tripping over the extended leg of the horse. Along the same vertical line, a second woman seems to flow in bewilderment, sticking her head through a window wondering what is happening. If we follow her line of vision, we find her looking through the horse to the bull as if the horse were transparent or immaterial.

The semantic value of the *picemes* on the extreme right are somewhat modified, therefore, by the pictorial functions closer to the center: it is the threat of total destruction that matters now; the proximity of absolute devastation adds a new semantic cluster to the previous individual despair. The flower seems to be in this field for the sake of confirmation.

To the left of center, the image of the horse concentrates the semantic burden of brutality, annihilation, torture, agony, irrationality—both in the vexation and in the suffering—that seems to integrate the events. The horse's figure stepping on the scattered pieces of the dismembered soldier, dwells in and dominates a field of meaning controlled by the destruction. The horse's bellowing, nuclearizing the horror of the event, endures in a white space having an ellipsoidal shape that points directly to the bull's head, cutting in half the dark profile of an apparently mortally wounded bird.

The semic hierarchy of the horse is emphasized by the skull-like electric bulb that even though insufficient to supply the scene with physical light, enhances, by semantic contamination, the part of the body of the animal painted in short rows of even strokes resembling the pattern of newsprint.

The suffering and the agony of the beast, therefore, are translated into news.

The pictorial images will suddenly in our reading become a metaphor of the strategies of an ideology that conceals the whole truth. But let us continue to the extreme left where the first inscription is given through the head of the bull; semi-oriented to the viewer, it proclaims a human beast-like condition, his eyes separated suggesting an uncommitted consciousness of the happening, his body initiating a gesture of withdrawal. Directly under the beast, a screaming mother with a dead child in her arms integrates the symphony of brutal terror that hits its highest note in the apparent protest of the speared horse stepping on the body of the dismembered soldier, who, in a painfully ecstatic and silent utterance, seems to have come to the end of his agony. We notice then that the soldier's hand appears ready to catch the child's head, the infant a metaphor of innocent extermination, and the testicles of the retreating bull, a sign of life, are in the same line, structuring a semantic cluster whose mark is the withdrawal of life. We also may notice that the whitish head of the bull looks like a specter, and seems to come directly out of the mouth of the silent soldier in almost a question-like shape. All the energy and motion of the scene reaches toward the head of the bull. We have realized already that not only the horse's head, but also his bellowing and the materialization of his breath are directed toward the other beast; and we may observe now that an arrow is painted on the tile floor, pointing to a possible but blocked exit obstructed by the animal. This new cluster signals unawareness, blindness, irresponsibility.

The potent bull did not trigger the catastrophe; his innocence though houses a guilty condition: his unawareness. Indifferent to

the agony of the scene, he prepares to wander away from it.

A human witness to the scene is missing. The news is the language of a purposely absent witness. The news becomes the witness. The reader becomes the way of reading.

In this manner the body of the soldier may be ignored; the muffled shout of the mother forgotten; the agony of the burning man obliterated; the anguish of the woman unregistered. A horse has been wounded. Nothing is very meaningful when the suffering of humanity can be targeted on one character: the horse being the artistic device of the results of ideology; and the bull being the evasive and accepting gesture of unconcerned power.

Picasso has painted the news as ideology; he has also painted a utopia in the etymological sense of the word, an utopian place where humanity seems to suffer under the light of an electric bulb. Or bomb; who knows? Every question regarding the event may be answered except why it happened. The how is the catastrophe, an almost preternatural phenomena, that resulted in injury, death, and destruction. The where is Guernica as it may be read in the title of the painting, an ancient Basque city that happened to be the capital: enough to make the news. The when is 1937, the date of the painting. Nonetheless, nothing answers why the catastrophe.

For this reason we cannot call this scene history—there has been no resolution. It is a news story in progress, an on the scene report. But the topic and dynamics of the painting provides the reader with an instrument to read the represented news, already selected by the media, the media approved by the state. The scenery furnishes a focus, a microstructure that allows an entrance to the text of the history.

In the painting the reader's attention is drawn from individual suffering to universal suffering, and back again to the individual figure to underscore the irrationality and devastating character of whatever force was responsible for the catastrophe. If that force was human, it could easily be condemned. History has determined that human force was responsible.

It was the end of April in 1937. The German Condor Brigade bombed to devastation the ancient Basque capital of Guernica on its market day. The political event quickly became a symbol and its presence, its absorption or denial, divided the media. Most important: the propaganda issue involved. The Germans, the Vatican, Franco consistently denied that Guernica had been bombed. He claimed that the town had been dynamited by retreating Republican forces.