‘I Saw This’- Painting Conflict

Tom de Freston

Strife Journal, Issue 1 Hilary Term 2013, (March 2013), pp. 35-39

Strife Journal, Issue 1 Hilary Term 2013 (February 2013) 35-39

'I saw this' - Painting Conflict.
Tom de Freston

“Yo lo vi” (I saw this) is the phrase beneath one of Goya’s ‘Disasters of War’ etchings (1810-20). It is a collection of 82 copper plates showing the worst scenes from the Spanish uprising against Napoleon and the subsequent Peninsular War. We see a decapitated head hanging as a trophy on a tree, a man wielding an axe treating a human head like a block of wood, the use of rape as a weapon of war and the corpses of the dead being buried. In the etching labelled “Yo lo vi” we see a mother and child fleeing, the child looking back out of the frame, undoubtedly witnessing the horror from which they flee. It is a child’s eyes telling us “I saw this” which hits home more than any other image.

“Yo lo vi” is effectively what I am saying when, with one click of a button I send a photograph of myself, stood in front of Goya’s ‘2nd and 3rd of May' paintings (1808) in the Prado, from my phone to facebook/twitter. It is me declaring, I am here, ticking off the must-see pictures and further polluting a bloated digital landscape with more white noise. Is this it? I ask myself. Are these paintings just disposable experiences, consumed as hastily and vacuously as the mass of imagery that suffocates our modern existence?

These paintings are not the ‘Mona Lisa’, a kitsch celebratory painting as empty as its reality TV descendants. You can view the 'Mona Lisa' through the screen of another’s I-phone in the Louvre, or in a thousand pieces in the gift shop. You can see it, tick it and move on. However, despite your best intentions Goya’s May paintings do not let you do that. They refuse your shallow glance, and force you to really “see this”.

In the '3rd of May' we see an individual stare into the face of death, one clawing his eyes, like a child trying to block out a nightmare, another we see looking beyond his copper plate, desperately seeking something beyond his nothingness. A row of anonymous soldiers punctuate the picture diagonally, repetitive beasts extending into the distance, eyesight firmly aligned down the barrel of a gun. The picture is a game of two halves, those with intent to kill, and the figure who will be killed. Paused in this moment we bounce back and forth between the two lines like a blood-filled game of tennis.

In the '2nd of May' we see the moment in flux. A dead figure sliding off a horse like a slab of meat down a butchers block, knives held at arms-length, ready to strike, like a still from Alfred Hitchcok’s 'Psycho', a muscular, dynamic vortex of energy, horses and limbs circling around the descending figure. An orgy of violence and an ‘ecstasy of fumbling’. Outside of the picture frame an image expands beyond itself through a process of visual echoes. We see a horse immersed in conflict, reminiscent of Pablo Picasso’s 'Guernica', with its distorted angst-ridden horse. The role of horses in war imagery cannot be ignored. Horses are symbols of power, iconographic metaphors of the state. Military leaders and monarchs have always been depicted on horses, with perhaps no more ludicrous example than Jacques-Louis David’s painting of ‘Napoleon crossing the Alps’ (1800/1). The image depicts Napoleon in all his finery at total ease with his task of controlling a magnificent bucking horse. It is an unintentionally comical metaphor of the great leader in total control of the state. Paul Delaroche would later depict the same scene in 1850 with a far greater degree of historical accuracy, Napoleon riding clumsily through the hills on top of a donkey. For the scene of state control depicted by David we can read the

opposite from that in Goya's painting, the symbol of a power structure being attacked, the falling horse a far more eloquent and poetic image due to its relation to the pomposity of prior images such as David's.

In 'The 3rd of May' we can't help but see Edouard Manet's 'Execution of Maximillian' (1867-69), a work which quotes 'The 3rd of May' directly. The composition is very similar, with a row of anonymous soldiers cutting across the piece. But this time the trigger has been pulled. Attention rests on the one soldier whose face we see; he is casually reloading his gun as if the process of taking another humans life was no more morally complex than moving parts in a factory production line.

We are also reminded of Yue Minjun's 'The Execution' (1995), a lesser known quotation of Goya's 'The 3rd of May'. In Minjun's worlds everyone is the same, both the soldiers and the victims flaunting distorted laughing faces. The soldier to the far right reloads an imaginary gun; were it not for the reference we might read it as an air guitar. Either way the nod to both as phallic symbols, and thus to masturbation, is clear. The gun is a phallus which ejaculates bullets, and so war today is pornographic.

Consider Guy Debord's 'Society of the Spectacle' (1967), a Marxist diatribe on commodification's corrosive influence on our connection to reality. In regards to war his thinking has direct relevance to the Vietnam war and the public consumption of it. For the first time moving images of a war involving US citizens were being fast-tracked into the sitting rooms of an American audience. This increased awareness and access could be argued to create a greater connection between audience and victim in the theatre of war. However, a Debordian view would argue that the exactly the opposite takes place. The continuous repetition of imagery is so excessive that we experience empathy fatigue. From the safety of a sitting room we can consume this imagery, offering up a socially responsible veneer of pity without the need, desire or ability to truly connect. 'Everything that was directly lived is now merely represented in the distance', the role of the image has subordinated lived experience, the spectacle obfuscated reality, and we are left, the spectators drugged by spectacular images.[1]

If such a thesis is to be believed, even in part, then this condition can only have worsened. Jean Baudrillard's 'Simulcra and Simulation' is a Poststructuralist account of this evolution, musing on the neo-platonic notion that society has been replaced by a representation. It is a semantic deconstruction in which signs and symbols have become destabilised, signifier separated from the signified. Language, mass media, the technological revolution (in particular the internet) have taken us further along a path in which, paradoxically, our increased connectivity has resulted in alienation. It is the primary existential crisis of contemporary existence. Baudrillard uses an analogy from 'On Exactitude' by Jorge Luis Borges, in which a map of an empire is made that is so detailed that it covers the entire empire itself. Representation consumes reality.

Is this where we find ourselves? Is this what war is today for the consumer? Over the last few years twenty-four hour news, blog sites, twitter accounts and facebook feeds have been loaded with stories and images from across the world: Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, the Congo, Pakistan, Egypt, Palestine, Israel and Mali. But do we engage with images of conflict, pain and suffering? Or are they a mere series of incomprehensible notes in the cacophony of contemporary existence? Is this what we mean when we talk of the

pornography of modern conflict? Certainly the distinction between the two, pornography and war, and the role of the internet in both should not be ignored. They both contain a similar process, in which an excess of imagery must lead to some form of abstraction.

Consider Prince Harry's recent remarks. The prince was in charge of firing an Apache's Hellfire's air-to-surface missiles. He said of his job:"It's a joy for me because I'm one of those people who loves playing PlayStation and Xbox, so with my thumbs I like to think I'm probably quite useful."[2] There is inversion here, as computer games become more real it seems that the reality of war itself has become less and less real. This is not a criticism of Prince harry himself but of the process, one in which drone strikes and collateral damage are two further examples of how the weapons and language of war dangerously enact a process of divorcing action from reality. This semantic distinction is not just a philosophical point; this process of alienating the action from its consequence is morally dangerous as it removes awareness and responsibility. It is this distancing which aligns war to pornography.

The changing ways in which we engage with imagery, particularly imagery of conflict, hugely impact upon our perception of past imagery. Debord and Baudrillard are obtuse and polemic at points, but within their literature we find thoughtful and important critique of how we engage with the world around us.

So, when we stand in front of Goya's '3rd of May' and '2nd of May' paintings in the Prado we are not in a bubble, neither are we are transported back to 1808. We are individuals living some two hundred years later, considering an image of war and suffering and consuming under the influence of contemporary society, culture and media. Hence we take in the paintings in front of us, prior to giving it historical context; a hierarchy of viewing which is normally ignored.

The two Goya paintings are History Paintings, pictorial accounts of actual historical events. Napoleon I of France had crowned himself Emperor of the French Republic in 1804 - a wonderful piece of egotistical stage management, being both the giver and receiver of power. Napoleon then looked to spread and tighten his grip on much of Europe, through war and political manoeuvring. Charles the IV (an ineffectual Spanish Monarch), Manuel de Godoy (the ambitious Spanish Prime Minister) and Ferdinand VII of Spain were some of the victims of Napoleon's powers of persuasion in a game of political chess, eventually resulting in Joseph Bonaparte taking control of the Spanish throne in March 1808 and giving Napoleon control of Spain. Resentment to the new regime led to the May uprisings in Madrid. The '2nd of May' depicts the uprising in Madrid, the '3rd of May' depicts the French reprisal.

Situated in this context we are forced to ask what these paintings tell us about war both historically and today. The '3rd of May' is generally held up as the masterpiece, and quite rightly, in terms of pictorial invention it is one of the key paintings of the 19th Century. It offers one of the last great death cries of History Painting. History Painting had previously depicted iconic, important individuals at key dramatic moments from high literature, the bible or History: Jesus, Napoleon and King Lear. These are the men of power who tend to take centre stage in the blockbuster theatre of narrative painting. Goya changed the script. In the '3rd of May' unknown figures take centre stage. The soldiers are all anonymous killing machines. Even more crucial, all the victims are unknown. The figure lying dead in his own blood, the Christ-like man illuminated by the lantern and all his

accomplices, all nameless. The power of this is incredible, for the character is both an individual but also a symbol for everyone, there is both a specificity and a universality to his plight. It revolutionises the way such images can work and it is a device that Gericault, Courbet and Manet would all use in their key paintings of the 19th Century. The role is more than just a formal one, it has the impact of shifting the moral agenda of storytelling in painting, it declares that the histories and stories of everyman are as important, dramatic and worthy of our time, attention and pathos, as those of the figures of power who had previously dominated most forms of History Painting.

What could be more relevant to the conflicts of today than this. In 2011, The Times made 'The Protestor' the person of the year. In December 2010 Mohamed Bouazizi, a street vendor in Tunisia, set himself on fire in protest at the increasingly draconian restrictions of the state and the abuses of local municipal officers. This sparked an uprising, and it sparked the Arab Spring, a movement that saw the citizens of countries like Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria stand up in protest and eventually revolt against the state. The subsequent reprisals, particularly in Syria, contain the plight of the unknown individual as the central tragedy. An official estimate of 60,000 killed in Syria at the time of writing, inmates routinely raped as sexual abuse is used as a weapon of war, and two million people displaced, forced to leave their homes and become refugees in neighbouring countries.[3] Goya's image, with its emphasis on the plight of the unknown individual, is particular pertinent in this respect. And Syria is not unique, the Congo and Palestine are just two other examples of conflicts in which war attacks and destabilises the identity of entire communities.

Goya's masterpiece is not morally flawless. It perpetuates one of the great myths that war is binary. In the '3rd of May' it is very clear who the enemy and the victims are. The entire painting is split into two clear realms. On the left the victims, on the right the enemy. The light and shadow dramatically cast by the lantern provide a fairly predictable device to remind us of who the good guys and who the bad guys are.

War is almost exclusively depicted in these binary terms. Look at the post 9/11 dialogue of President Bush and Tony Blair, entirely built on an *us* and *them* structure, of good and evil, dangerously sounding as black and white as a crusade. The reality of the subsequent conflicts was anything but simplistic, with the invasions in Iraq and Afghanistan about far more than bringing the perpetrators of 9/11 to justice. Politically and ethically a whole array of views can be held on American and British foreign policy post 9/11, but any of those views that present the situation as anything other than a fragmented web of players is both inaccurate and simplistic. The same is true of the current situation in Syria. It is not heroic rebel fighters versus the evil puppet master Assad. It has descended into something far more dangerous and complex with an array of competing factions, all with different agendas.

For artists and politicians to present us with depictions of war which are simplistic and binary in their format is disingenuous and dangers. For the great tragedy of war is that it enacts entropy on humanity, reducing us to chaos.

This takes us back to 'Guernica', a work that represents the horror of the chaos of war. 'Guernica' might depict a specific event, namely the bombing of the Basque village of Guernica by German and Italian warplanes during the Spanish Civil War. It is a work that transcends specifics, as time and space are unsettled. Except for the light bulb, there are no historical signifiers.

A mother, her head lopped sideways on her boneless neck as she tongues a howl to nothingness, holding her baby in her arms - a secular 'Pietà'. Hands and feet dance rhythmically across the page and the narrative of figures in space is not immediately apparent. A horse spins and screams, a floating head enters through a window and another skyward howling figure descends into a hole. The architecture of the picture, with a sprinkling of domesticated windows, doors and tiles, harks back to the shifting and fragmented space of Picasso's earlier analytical Cubist paintings. This is the reality of war, the safety of domesticity descending through a process of destruction into an almost abstract mess, the illusion of reality and humanity almost totally lost.

One of Picasso's many quoted remarks is: "When I was their age, I could draw like Raphael, but it took me a lifetime to learn to draw like them". This is the power of 'Guernica', it captures some of the energy of children's drawings. On the day of writing (January 14th 2013) The Times newspaper published drawings by child refugees from Syria. Martin Fletcher writes a piece that describes how Safa Faki, a young art graduate from Aleppo, had given children in a camp in Atmeh pens and paper.[4] She gave the children no training or guidance and just told them to draw what you want. The vast majority depict images of war, often featuring crude drawings of houses and families under attack by gun fire, helicopters and fire. The images reminded me of another series of drawings I had seen a few years earlier from the war in Darfur.[5] There is one image that I will never forget. Drawn in a graph paper notebook, reminding me of primary school maths, it depicts a multitude of horses and camels, often with multiple legs, with men sat facing backwards and forwards indiscriminatingly firing bullets across the gridded surface. There is something about the gridding, a symbol of order and control, against the flowing, random composition of a child's drawing which makes it an incredibly powerful image. In another, houses mount up across the vertical of the picture and are then coloured over in a thick red crayon, as if fire is consuming the entire community. Another of the Darfur drawings show a curved path heading towards a village. The villagers, seemingly all children and women, are gathered in a cluster as the soldiers fire a stream of bullets into the group. It takes us back to Goya's '3rd of May', the horror of a group of figures gathered together to be then shot by a group of anonymous soldiers. Yet the image goes a step further, for the victims are as anonymous as the soldiers. Goya makes the victim heroic, by giving him a status. The child from Darfur shows the more brutal reality of war, the fact that most victims are, to the world that witnesses war from the outside, unknown.

What makes these images so powerful is that they are primary source documents, depicting the horrors of war without the neutralising impact of modern media. A child's drawing is surely for all of us, one of the key iconographic signifiers of home. Any parent takes far more pride in the numerous painted hand prints and crayon family portraits that their children do than any paintings they might own by a professional artist. As such, a child's drawing reminds us of family and of home. To see the safety and happiness of such imagery polluted by the stain of blood, a chaos of bullets or the stench of death is to set up a significant juxtaposition, and one which can't fail but to have an emotive impact. They are images which show us that war has polluted a community, ripped apart homes and destroyed families. These are images in which innocent children are screaming out to us "Yo lo vi".

References

1 G Debord & D Nicholson-Smith, *Society of the Spectacle*, Zone Books New York, 1995, , pp. 4–5, <http://zinelibrary.info/files/TheSocietyOfTheSpectacle.pdf> [accessed 5 February 2013].
2 'BBC News Channel - Prince Harry in Afghanistan', in *BBC*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01qkxnv> [accessed 5 February 2013].
3 '60,000 killed in Syrian war, says UN', in *the Guardian*, , 2 January 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/jan/02/60000-killed-syrian-war-un> [accessed 5 February 2013].
4 M Fletcher, 'Art brings solace to the children of war in Syria', in *The Times (London)*, London, 14 January 2013, section News, <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/world/middleeast/article3656511.ece> [accessed 5 February 2013].
5 'In pictures: Child drawings of Darfur', in *BBC*, , 4 March 2009, section In Pictures, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/7923247.stm> [accessed 5 February 2013].