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Francisco Goya's *Disasters of War*: The Humanist's Dilemma in  
Artistic Representations of Violence

*I saw this. And that too. This is bad. Thus it happened.* Echoing the overarching dispassionate cry against the rabid acts of murder and war in Francisco Goya's work, the titles of these prints are exemplary of the eighty-two graphic etchings in his series originally entitled *The Fatal Consequences of Spain's Bloody War with Bonaparte, and Other Emphatic Caprichos*. Between the years 1810 and 1820, Goya created *The Disasters of War*, as they are commonly identified, to depict the brutal violence of the Napoleonic invasion and the struggle that followed when King Ferdinand VII restored the Inquisition and famine swept the entire country. As one of the most celebrated Spanish painters of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Goya is considered the last of the Old Masters and the first of the moderns, making that transition during the stark bloodshed of the Peninsular War. His great contribution to art history coincides with his contribution to the human experience by challenging the moral perspectives of viewers as part of this tragic and continuing epic of human suffering. In *The Disasters of War* Goya faces the artistic struggle of communicating a moralistic message about humanity's violent, primal nature during war without alienating his audience from the graphic atrocities that tend to either create an alien entity of the perpetrators or a perversely delectable spectacle of torture.

Prior to the *Disasters of War*, Goya excelled with other forms of art, serving as the Spanish royal court portraitist and later as a satirist of the excesses of society until he matured to the dark realism seen in this series. Francisco Goya encountered the Napoleonic invasion of

Spain in 1810 and the consequent reinstatement of King Ferdinand's repressive rule in 1814—a period of such carnage that he could not avoid straightforwardly addressing it. Napoleon Bonaparte, seeking conquest of the European continent, met a tumultuous Spain that had been divided since the reign of Philip II and put his brother Joseph on the throne. In a state of near anarchy, individual groups of Spanish civilians responded to the French in their own ways, conceiving the first form of guerilla warfare until Napoleon was defeated in 1814. The end of the Peninsular War, sometimes called the Spanish War of Independence, only worsened the state of Spain. Ferdinand VII restored the absolute monarchy to a society in chaos, poverty and famine, and then proceeded to persecute liberalism with the death penalty. No longer could Goya confront his environment with high art, satire or subtle commentary.

Goya... spent twenty years of his life developing and exploiting his powers of visual imagery in the projection of which color and light and dark count for more than line. But his native powers of proprioceptive imagination must always have been great, and in his last thirty years, conditions of his life, his total deafness, his lack of sympathy with and ability to identify himself with the reactionary society in which he lived, forced him into an isolation that made him turn from visual imagery to proprioceptive, from color as a medium to a combination of line and color value. Textures which had counted for such much in his early portraits gave way before masses in which bulk blotted out surface. The great decorator became one of the greatest artists of all time. (Alford)

Removed from the lavish world of luxury that rewarded him for his skill in portraiture, Goya was forced to face the dark world of war and his own psychological and humanistic quandaries that haunt his works for the rest of his life, and arguably cause him to be regarded as one of the greatest artists of all time. By creating etchings that could be printed and reproduced, Goya may

have anticipated that his work and its moral message could be spread more widely, although not during his lifetime. Out of necessity for lack of better materials, Goya was the first to use the “lavis” technique in Spain, a process where acid is brushed directly onto the copper plate without varnish (Vega). The fact that he used poorer materials disproves some theories that the collection was done in different segments; his works done after the war are produced on higher quality materials and it is unlikely that he would return to this unreliable way of working (Vega). Under pressure from both the Spanish and French government, Goya fled to Bordeaux, France in 1823, leaving the series of etchings in Spain with his son. Thirty-five years after Goya’s 1828 death, the etchings were given to the Academy of San Fernando and published with a shorter title, *Los Desastres de la Guerra*, “The Disasters of War.”

The collection is most widely recognized as Goya’s condemnation of war and humanity’s inhumanity in it, but the significance of the series lies in the alleged lack of meaning attributed to death and violence. Violence is depicted scene after scene, unrelentingly, without any implication of morality or judgment and notably, Goya never references specific events, figures or sides. The anonymity shows Goya’s “universal spirit” against the barbarity of man, rather than any one person or country, and the only heroes depicted are the everyday individuals victimized by the soldiers and defending their country (Vega). Even then, the citizens are depicted reciprocating acts of murder and atrocity akin to their enemies, and Goya remains impartial as to who the real monsters are and is only certain of the fact that these acts are appalling.

Goya the artist acts as our guide through the events: in the first plate of the series an old man has dropped to his knees in tattered clothes, surrounded by darkness. Arms spread in a biblical gesture of desperation and supplication, the could-be self-image presents the artist as one who cannot draw himself away from these images that he bears witness to, true to his captioning

of this print, *Gloomy presentiments of things to come* (Licht 176). He embodies the “Everyman,” who has lived and suffered “with neither hope nor fear but acceptance” in the black cave around him that seems to echo some note of finality or reluctant admission of humanity’s guilt (Alford). In this more symbolic image, Goya prepares his viewers as if it is the opening credits for the following cinematic progression of image after image (Hofman 214). Comparable to photography or photojournalism, it seems that Goya made primary sketches of these scenes at the time of their occurrence, probably when he visited Saragossa, his native city, but also through his travels through the countryside when the conflict spread throughout the whole of Spain (Vega). Debate over the dating of the series would then question the contemporaneity of his work while the conflict was ongoing and whether he was still in Spain or already relocated to France when he created them. Assuming that they were all created during the period of 1810-1820, the authenticity of the images as actual occurrences that Goya witnessed is accepted and comparable to photojournalism. Despite the assumption of photography as being truthful and factual by nature, it is not inherently because the photographer has to choose the subject, select the shot and can alter it during the developing process, and in equal measure Goya does the same by his framing of each scene (Sontag). While they may not be specific accounts of how a person looked or what they did, the prints still importantly claim that things like this did happen. The works “breathe his all-consuming hatred of war’s savage and senseless destruction. He drew because he felt compelled to record the insane world in which he lived, and he nurtured a faint hope that the day might come when others could see these drawings” (Edwards 194). The *Desastres* are so straightforwardly graphic “because art is the only defense of the only sustenance left to an artist in the face of what Goya witnessed,” and depicting reality in its unaltered state was all that could be done (Licht 174).

The *Disasters* are designed to awaken, shock and stir a moral sentiment within the viewer, but the gratuitous dismemberment and mutilation of the human body garners an abnormal attention that simultaneously repels and attracts—it seems as though one should look away but finds it difficult to do so.

*Los Desastres de la guerra* provide insight into ‘the cruelty within all human nature, the desire for dignity and the betrayal of a people's sense of its own humanity.’ The work is properly described as humanist, therefore, to the precise extent that it compels the viewer to take up a moral stance against war. But as anyone who has looked closely at *Los Desastres* will attest, the unstinting portrayal of rape, genocide, torture and ritual mutilation, the abject at its most insistent, is at odds with the transcendental aspirations of humanism. (Shaw)

While the audience is supposed to take in these images with a moral response by observing these acts as abominations, the images still present a perverse pleasure or enjoyment. The prevailing humanist, anti-war sentiment is overpowered by the relentless stream of images that tells the viewer to keep looking, almost making one complicit in these acts. Photography has made it even more possible to see these surreally explicit images, as with the fascination with the victims of torture and brutality in the cases of Auschwitz, the Vietnam War and Abu Ghraib—a fascination that similarly aligns when Goya “photographs” the events of the Peninsular War (Lingis). Viewing these images is embraced as facing reality and gaining awareness, perhaps with humanistic intentions, but they take on the allure of sensationalism. People flock to forbidden images, particularly of the human body, either for pornographic or gruesome content; Goya’s work includes both in a constant stream of the human form in agony, often naked, being stripped or even castrated. Sigmund Freud has claimed that war is tainted with sex, sex with fear,

and fear with apprehension, all feelings that people seek for relief and catharsis by viewing them (Ramkalawon). The obscene nature, instead of pushing us away, draws us in, as perhaps it enthralled Goya while witnessing the events. The eroticism of dismemberment and castration is also argued to come from the pleasure derived from the symbolic opening up of the body, a representation of wholeness and unity, as Lennard Davis argues in his essay on physical disability and normative images of the human figure within the Western world (Shaw). We can then read Goya's emphasis on aggression and abjection as a projection of the fear of unbinding one's own body onto the body of the enemy, even while Goya's defeated titles attempt to give it negation and meaninglessness like plate 69, *Nothing. It speaks for itself* (Shaw).

Jake and Dinos Chapman have fashioned many works based on Goya's *Disasters* by desecrating the original prints and bastardizing the collection in variations since the 1990's (Lingis). The English artist-brother duo foster an obsession with Goya that they continually return to with their style of shock value and near immaturity in a large collection of works for the past couple decades—supplanting penises, replacing the freshly massacred with rotting, insect-infested plastic corpses, rearranging the letters for a play on words, *Disasters of Yoga*, imbuing Nazi symbolism, shrinking the scenes down to toy-sized miniatures, replacing victims with puppy dogs and clowns, among others. Their fascination with Goya denies the humanistic view of the artist as the moralist and champion of the human spirit, and instead the Chapmans read the secret pleasure that Goya “barely concealed in his set of etchings of the horrors of war drawn with such artistic perfection” (qtd. in Lingis). In plate 39, *Great Deeds! Against the Dead!*, there does appear to be a careful composition of angles that lines up these trophies of a killing spree in a more imaginative arrangement than reality, and by “creating an effigy out of such a terrible deed, the artist himself becomes an accomplice” (Hofman 222). Plate 39 is considered the

pinnacle of these disturbing images and of the utter lawlessness that men resort to, depicting three varyingly dismembered corpses pinned to a tree. The macabre trio contains classical tones that art critic Robert Hughes claims would have been admired for aesthetics if only done in marble (Turner). When the Chapmans recreated this scene in a life-size tableau of mannequins, they use the aesthetic to assault the provocative beauty of brutality present in the original, attempting to shock and jolt the viewer as it seems Goya intended to as well. The plasticized, sanitized mannequins return the print to its original scale, but strip it of its goriness, leaving the viewer in a state of ambivalence between disgust and debauchery in front of these streamlined bodies crafted in a careful quasi-neoclassical manner.

The moral sentiment then enters when the audience is compelled to feel disgust and repugnance, proving their own integrity that separates them from the perpetrators of such violence (Lingis). Rather than understanding that these acts are done by ordinary, anonymous individuals, an “other” is created. Opposite the idea of Goya as a humanist who intended to impart his accursed knowledge of war and violence, this alienation distances the viewer from the universality of violence that everyone is capable of. Allegedly, when his servant asked him, “Why do you paint these barbarities that men commit?” Goya replied, “To tell men forever that they should not be barbarians” (qtd. in Anwer). But unable to relate or identify with these monstrous figures in the etchings, the audience cannot admit their own guilt, nor learn a lesson when they dismiss it as acts that other people commit.

While the Chapmans in their postmodern doubting of reality and Goya in his frontal condemnation of war both try to deny the humanistic presence of morality, judgment, and meaning itself, they in turn create meaning. Goya’s prints published in 1863 became the “turning point in the history of moral feelings and of sorrow—as deep, as original, as demanding”

(Sontag). Previously, art always assigned outward meaning to death and violence, but Goya neglects to give weight or sentiment to the endless stream of corpses and instead leaves the dead and the atrocities relatively unaltered for the viewer. The height of humanistic thought considered the human form and mind to be of the highest value, bearing the closest resemblance to God's own image, and previous art maintains an elegiac grace and respect for the dead who always die for a purpose. Violence could before be excused as just punishment for those who committed sins or broke the law, when human justice was seen as the most legitimate power that existed, and the righteous dead could be commemorated with spiritual or ennobling tones (Licht 200). *Disasters* denies any such grace or beauty to the human form, all corpses crumpled, disfigured, mutilated beyond recognition, again giving the prints an air of authenticity that Goya did bear witness to these horrors. Surrealism of the 20th century echoes Goya's mutilations: Dali's *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans: Premonition of Civil War* in 1936 mirrors the sickening confusion between organic shapes of the human body and the twisting of inanimate objects, the body torn apart and unable to be pieced back together with any logic (Licht 197). With art as his defense against the terrible, Goya differs from his contemporaries and his predecessors; instead of the artist being in control of his world, creating it as he paints, Goya is the one being shaped by the world, forced into portraying what he encounters, which is mainly mankind turning away from the godliness they had always been thought to embody (Licht 182).

Similar to the allegorical first image, the last thirteen plates take on a nightmarish landscape of beasts, transfigured forms and a need for interpretation. They differ greatly from the strictly realistic depiction of events that Goya would have us believe are his eyewitness accounts, and for it, there is the doubt that they were created at a different time than the others. At any rate, the allegorical images function differently than the others and create a disjunction when the



obvious animal imagery begins to dictate that this is not reality, and instead denotes the need to turn to a mode of analysis to decipher them. It has been guessed that Goya avoids references to specific sensitive politics and figures because of his proximity to authority, and another way he does so is with the coded allegory, meant to be translatable only to a few of Goya's peers (Vega). With wolves as the government, parrots as prelates in prayer, eagles as Napoleon, white horses as the church, as some have interpreted the animal imagery, Goya disrupts the real world tragedies he has worked to promote with confusing layers that, by nature, must imply meaning in the act of reading the allegory (Wight). If the photographic style of the rest of the series is meant to present the viewer with the stunning, gory truth, this change in style seems to convolute that straightforward honesty with the artist's stylistic choices of representation that inherently contain his beliefs.

The concluding plates, 79-82, retreat from the reportage into parable, acting as a "coda" for the whole collection, leaving multiple alternative endings, uncommitted to any certainty or optimism (Hofman 288). Plate 79, entitled *Truth has died*, depicts a woman lying, breasts bared, across the ground, emitting rays of light onto the crowd assembled behind her. They first appear to be Catholics gathering around a saint, but upon inspection, their expressions are that of repulsion and fear. Plate 80 asks *Will she rise again?*, as she continues to lie shrouded by light reflected onto the now animal-like crowd who batters her with weapons. In a turn against the hopeful question of the last, plate 81 depicts a massive monster with naked corpses spewing out of his mouth—*Cruel Monster!*, Goya proclaims. In a final act of indecision, plate 82 presents the woman, Truth, on her feet, turning to an old peasant with the fruits of labor and a tame sheep behind them, claiming *This is the truth*.

In these last images, it seems especially so that Goya is “an artist confronting a twofold dilemma, how to depict man’s inhumanity to man, and the deeper internal struggle within man himself,” as the Chapman brothers said of him (Ramkalawon). While he must have a moralistic sentiment in mind, Goya grapples with the struggle of depicting that to others without alienating his viewers from the inhumanity, or humanity, that they are part of despite their inklings of virtue, and with presenting the naturally obscene and gruesome in a manner that does reality and its victims justice without sensationalizing or exploiting it for the pleasure of the image. The paradoxical desire of communicating morality without distancing the viewer from the culprit and portraying violence without promoting it is an ongoing struggle, as the Chapman Brothers perpetuate in their strange modern mix of Goya, and it seems this dilemma will always prevail in the face of the utter horror of war— but perhaps Goya’s ability to portray these very issues of artistic representation is one of the greatest humanistic accomplishments he could have achieved, encouraging exhaustive examination of the cruelties mankind commits and how they are perceived by their audiences.



Plate 1: *Tristes presentimientos de lo que ha de acontecer.*

Gloomy presentiments of things to come. Goya.



Plate 39: *Grande hazaña! Con muertos!* Great Deeds Against the Dead. Goya.



*Great Deeds Against the Dead.* Chapman Brothers.



Plate 79: *Murio la verdad*. Truth is dead. Goya.



Plate 80: *Si resucitará?* Will she rise again?  
Goya.



Plate 81: *Fiero Monstruo*. Horrible Monster.  
Goya.



Plate 82: *Esto es lo verdadero*. This is the  
truth. Goya.

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