

Francisco Goya

The Third of May 1808 or The Shootings, 1814

Fig. 1 Francisco Goya, *The Third of May 1808 in Madrid: Shootings at the Principe Pio Hill*, 1814. Oil on canvas, 266x345 cm. Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado.

The Enlightened liberal artist Goya witnessed **an historical period of unprecedented violence** that marked a dramatic end to any illusions about the betterment of man. The French Revolution's termination in the Reign of Terror, Napoleon's wars of expansion and the resulting bloody Spanish war for independence as well as the horror of the Restoration of Ferdinand VII. This succession of events led Goya to create **a series of deeply-felt works on the theme of war**: the series of prints known as *The Disasters of War* (1808-1814, published 1863) and the two canvases titled *The Second of May 1808 in Madrid* (or *The Charge of the Mamelukes*) and *The Third of May 1808 in Madrid* (or *The Shootings at the Principe Pio Hill*).

The Disasters of War

Like the earlier edition titled *Follies*, ***The Disasters of War*** is a series of **eighty prints**. Each image is accompanied by **a caption of a few words** which don't explain the image as much as they generalise its meaning or clarify the problem, sometimes via an ironic comment.

In terms of the themes represented this print series can be divided into **three groups**: the violence of war itself (1810); the effects of famine in Madrid (after 1812); the reactions to the Restoration of Ferdinand VII to the throne (1815-1819).

Taken together the prints represent **a horrific catalogue of all the violence unleashed in wartime**: scenes of brutality and horror are represented in their crudest existential truth. However, the artist does not express a moral judgement here and does not embody any patriotic ideal; what is important for him is to represent violence as it is manifested in **war which erases all human values**.

From these prints there emerges a view of man as a rational being plagued with a plurality of interior pulsations and incoherences, prey to contradictory desires; he seems moved by unconscious forces beyond his control, such as the violence that surfaces in many different circumstances even when it is completely unjustified.

In the *Disasters*, the men who propagate these horrors are a continuation of the nightmare world peopled by demons that Goya had drawn in the earlier *Follies* series. In the previous prints the artist had drawn an imaginary world which, just ten years later, was transformed into reality: as the world's madness reached the intensity of the painter's rage, a single vision was formed in the *Disasters*.

The Third of May 1808

The event depicted took place during Napoleon's campaign

Fig. 2 Francisco Goya, *The Disasters of War, n. 2 (With or Without Reason)*, 1810-1814. Aquatint, gouache, drypoint, chisel and burnisher on paper, 15,3x20,6 cm. Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado.

across the Iberian peninsula to conquer first Portugal and then Spain. The people of Madrid revolted against the invasion of the foreign troops and, as punishment, the French general Joachim Murat gave the order to round up all the peasants and poor people on the streets of the capital. The arrests took place on May 2, 1808 and at dawn the following day, on the Principe Pio Hill in the Manzenares Valley, the rebels were shot. Six years later Goya proposed to the Council of Regency that he paint the Madrid uprising in two scenes, of which the May the Third canvas is rightly the more famous of the pair.

In his *Disasters* series (numbers 2, 15, 26, 38) Goya had already drawn execution shootings several times; indeed those prints become preparatory layouts for the *May the Third* picture. The prints and the painting have in common both compositional arrangements and iconographical elements, such as the rows of French soldiers, their pointed rifles, heaps of dead bodies, the victims' gestures. In *May the Third* we also see the artist's return to an unmerciful consideration of man's conduct in wartime, here synthesised into a powerfully innovative image.

Contrary to what traditionally happened in historical painting (in David, for example), here there is no room for the greatness of a brave gesture or the exaltation of noble virtues. War, as Goya describes it, is deprived of any ideal content or patriotic pathos; rather it is an event that is capable of obliterating all values and ideals. This consideration is underscored by the French soldiers who kill in the name of the French Revolution's three noble ideals: fraternity, liberty, justice.

The *print n. 2* of the *Disasters* series shows a scene that is similar, iconographically, to the *May the Third* painting. Its caption reads, "*With or Without Reason*" suggesting that in wartime one kills with or without a motive, in an indifferent way, in the absence of any reason at all.

For the first time we see **war stripped of all splendour and seduction**. The *Third of May* is the representation of widespread massacre, not of a heroic spectacle.

The composition has a frieze-like structure, rigidly horizontal and thus concentrating the action within well-defined limits. The figures are placed like links in a chain across the entire width of the canvas; the row of victims and the row of executioners are arranged in diagonal parallel lines facing each other. Spread out in front of the observer, they occupy such a narrow space that they all seem to be in the same line. Along this horizontal field Goya uses the painting's people and elements to suggest a number of vertical axes that draw a regular grid pattern. (Notice, for instance, how the side of the lantern is precisely the extension of the bell-tower.) In its taste for geometrical clarity, Goya's compositional concept seems to be Neoclassical. (Indeed the arrangement of the French soldiers even recalls David's *Oath of the Horatii*.) However the overall order and equalising rhythm avoids schematic rigidity and denies the classical model's precise outlines or logical clarity.

The accidental perspective has its vanishing point on the right, beyond the canvas. The composition's dramatic quality is therefore given by **the juxtaposition of two groups: the condemned prisoners and the soldiers**. Forming a dynamic set the victims turn their faces towards us while their hands and bodies have been reduced to a few rapid strokes



that express fear, horror, and death. On the contrary the ranks of riflemen are portrayed as a row of rigidly lined-up mannequins, turning their backs to us, all uniforms the same, not an individual face to be seen.

In the pervasive dark tones the two groups are lit by a lantern placed on the ground; its yellow band of projected light brings out the most emotionally important elements of the scene, such as the condemned man's white shirt. By illuminating the prisoners' faces from below it also intensifies their expressions.

The background has been reduced to a minimum and is formed by a hill of earth and by the grim outline of Madrid, both confined to horizontal bands. Apart from these elements it is the compact blackness of night that dominates the surface.

The wide and detailed range of feelings animates the scene, from fear to desperation to incredulity, down to acceptance of martyrdom as exemplified by the man who opens his arms in a crucifixion gesture. Almost an independent source of light, his white shirt becomes a symbol of the martyr's purity. The noteworthy likening of the victim to Christ does not suggest, however, that he will obtain salvation in God's kingdom and that, in another realm, justice will be rendered for the wrongs undergone in this world. In fact **the drama remains obscure and incomprehensible**, nor can it be justified by any high reasoning. The strong chromatic contrasts and the opposition of light/shadow, immobility/movement, indifference/terror all combine to express with anguish **the event's intense dramatic nature**.

Here it seems that no superior ethical reason can justify death. On the contrary we find only the horror manifested in the image of the slain rebels on the ground, as their blood almost laps the soldiers' feet. The moment of destiny as it is shared by victims and executioners is indeed terrible and absurd.

The image is built up from **a palette of mostly dark colours** in which the ranges of black and green predominate. The other colour grouping uses lively and intense ochres and browns. Of course **the white shirt** worn by the man with the outspread arms creates a strong tonal contrast with everything else.

In conclusion we can say that Goya sets aside realistic detail in favour of a figurative expressionism; this is highlighted by the altered arrangement of space and the figures it contains, in the hasty and brutal application of paint, in the emotional intensity of the faces and gestures.